Warheads

by ExecutiveShrimp

Summary

Post-war fic 2x1 Duo and Heero try to become more than comrades in their attempt to be normal young men. They settle down but find that peacetime is difficult to adjust to and with only each other to rely on, it is a struggle, especially for Heero.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Warheads

Part I - No Standard Solution Available

Snow fell around me. The ash was smothered and the skies grew silent. I looked around and realized I had never seen earth like this: peaceful and quiet. I never expected to see her like this.

The moon disappeared behind the clouds, dawn was only an hour or two away. What had happened to yesterday? What had happened to last night? Where did all the time go? More importantly, could we ever earn it all back?

The snow just kept falling, oblivious to my questions. The world could not be bothered with us anymore, I thought bitterly, just faces in the crowd from now on. I was eager to disappear, but at the same time, dreaded the true meaning of it.

"Duo," a kind and familiar face appeared before my eyes, "aren't you cold?", the skin of Quatre's forehead folded with concern. He himself was wearing a thick blue parka, I didn't know where he had gotten it, but apparently he had more of them to offer. One was thrust into my arms. "Put this on." He mothered. Before he walked away to find the others and force them into the warm coats - truly forcefully if he had to, no doubt - he asked me if I was alright. His forehead wrinkled deeper.

"I'm fine." I sounded exasperated and wistful. I didn't sound like myself. For some reason, I didn't mind.

Quatre nodded, he understood that amongst us pilots, even an innocent question like "Are you alright?" was prying. Butting into business that wasn't of your concern. He always tried though. He walked away, calling out WuFei's name in the dark.

The area started filling up with curious people. They stared wide-eyed at the ruins of what was once a prominent building on their block. Marimeia's destroyed fortress.

Suddenly uncomfortable being alone, I jogged after Quatre before his silhouette disappeared. He smiled at me when he felt my hand land on his shoulder and gestured for me to put on the parka. I did, because I knew better than to fights Quatre's logic, let alone his motherly concern for all of us. The coat was too big for my thin frame, like Quatre I looked like a child in his father's coat, but it was warm inside.

"Trowa!" The little blond abruptly belted.

Up ahead a figure stilled in the grey mist and turned towards us. I saw the figure raise his hand in what appeared to be an awkward wave. As we closed the distance between us, Trowa's face became recognizable. The unfamiliar look of exhaustion on his usually stoic face conflicted with the relief that gleamed in his eyes. Relief that the war had finally come to an end and relief that he was finally able to let the emotions shimmer through to the outside world.

I looked away, feeling like an intruder, when Trowa and Quatre greeted each other with a tight hug. I felt like I was encroaching on an intimate moment. I don't know why I was reading so much behind a simple hug, that looked nothing if platonic. We could hug each other, right? Didn't years of fighting alongside of each other turn our necessary comradeship into something deeper, more meaningful and ultimately, more comforting as well as normal? I guess I had gotten too used to my
awkward interactions with Heero.

When they parted I greeted Trowa with one of my brig stupid grins.

He just nodded.

"Have you seen WuFei?" Quatre asked the chestnut haired boy.

Trowa, quiet as always, just shook his head.

"I saw his Gundam a few blocks from here before I landed." I inserted, even though I was not asked. "Why?"

Quatre gave me a strange look. "Because the war is over. I want to say goodbye."

"Oh." Was my ever clever retort. I didn't know that the end of the war would be the end of us. The end of the G-boys, as I had joked to their apparent dismay on several awkward occasions, hiding out in leaky, creaky safehouses. I realized I would miss the leaky, creaky safehouses. Nailing boards in front of the windows, sharing the warmth of a little electrical heater, watching Quatre pick dustbunnies off his quilt, watching Trowa study the process of paint chipping, watching WuFei do vigorous sit-ups and push-ups and finally, watching Heero strip and then reassemble his weapon repetitively.

When I forced myself back into the present a man I didn't know had joined our little tea party and was beckoning "master Winner" to come with him, before the streets would get too crowded with onlookers.

"Your limousine is waiting, sir." He pressed.

Quatre nodded, then turned to me. "I wish you the best."

A lump formed in my throat, I realized this was a goodbye. I didn't know what to wish him, I wished for him to stay and Trowa too, help me find WuFei and Heero amongst the wreckage that we made of this suburban area. But he was leaving and no pathetic plea could make him stay.

So I said: "Yeah. You too, Quat." I wanted to say that I was going to miss him, but I didn't, because maybe that would be out of line. I figured we had gotten close in our shared grief an alike hardships, but I seemed to have interpreted us - the G-boys - all wrong. There was no unison to speak of, if there ever was, Quatre shattered it as he walked off with the elder man, even though - empathic as he was - he must have sensed my sadness at his departure. The fact that all the effort I had put into befriending them over the course of hard time proved to be in vain, was a hard pill to swallow. These people were the only friends I had.

With a bitter taste in my mouth I watched him go, remembering fondly one evening when we had shared a blanket and he picked the dustbunnies off my side as well.

What the fuck, I said to myself, what kind of sentimental fag have I turned into?

Trowa, to my surprise, moved to follow Quatra towards the waiting black limousine. Two steps away from me he turned and like I expected him to, he did not say anything, but the look in his eyes consolidated me, if only a little. This is a goodbye, not a farewell. I nodded in return, then he turned and walked away.

Shivering within my parka I dug my hands deep inside the pockets, frowning as a card pricked into my palm. I took hold of it and pulled it out. The business card of an upscale hotel. On the back of
it, scribbled in a distinctly anal, decidedly Quatre-like handwriting: Two-bedroom suite. Reservations under the name George Town.

I smiled, partly because of the not so subtle hint to the little town Quatre and I stayed at, after the attack on the train, but mostly because I knew who he intended that second bedroom for. But at that thought my heart instantly sank. I had no idea where he was. He had probably left already. Vanishing, like he always did.

I started walking around as more and more people gathered outside. They held candles as the block suffered a power failure, within the ruins of the fortress I saw sparks of snapped electrical wires, no doubt the cause of the black out.

I folded the collar of the coat upright and duck my head in between my shoulders. I couldn't risk some Earthian recognizing me from the whole media attention my face had gotten during the first war.

The scene around me was reminiscent of a memorial, I wondered what they were remembering. Everyone was quiet, simply staring at the stars or the flickering flames in their hands.

Loved ones, I figured, they are remembering lost loved ones. Many to remember.

As I gingerly moved through the frozen bodies I was paying so much attention to the people standing still that I missed the one person approaching me. By the time that I did, it was too late and we bumped into each other.

The pink clad figure reeled back from the force of the collision and outstretched hands blindly groped at thin air to preserve a delicate balance on high heels.

Recognizing the face, though contorted in shock, I grabbed one of the flailing hands and kept her to her feet. "Miss Relena." I greeted formally, trying to ease the awkwardness of the moment.

She seemed uncomfortable the instance she aimed her blue eyes at my face. Her eyes moved around as she searched her memory for my name. "Deo, right?" Though tentative, her voice held a hint of victory.

"Duo."

She looked away. "That's a strange name." She spoke softly.

I frowned at her logic. "As is Deo."

She nodded, but I felt that we weren't actually in agreement. "That is true." She seemed highly uncomfortable in my presence, refusing to make eye contact. That did not surprise me. During this war and the previous, we never had the opportunity to meet. All she knew of me was hearsay and I knew for a fact people rarely had nice things to say about me.

Of her I knew very little. Only that which Heero had divulged, both voluntary and involuntary. All I knew was that she wore pink too often for it to be coincidental, she had an unnatural interest in the boy that had attempted to end her life and she had the habit of popping up in situations where she was most unwelcome. Of course I should not be prejudiced based on what I could wring out of Heero and Trowa. Though admittedly the whole "former queen of the world" reference that was often used by the media didn't sit well with me. As a street rat I had a congenital aversion to such titles.

"Is the girl going to be okay?"
She gave me a confused look.

"I heard over the intercom that she was shot. Quatre." I clarified, though I wasn't sure if she knew him.

"She's going to be fine. I just wish Heero had stayed." She looked around, maybe she was still looking for him.

I opted for a fake chuckle and a joke. "He is not the kind of guy to mingle."

Relena shook her head and pursed her lips a little, I got the feeling she didn't think very highly of me and my every word annoyed her as she kept looking around herself. "No, I meant waiting for the second ambulance. It was on it's way..." She finished with a mumble.

My body tensed at her words. "Is he hurt?" I squatted down a little to come eye to eye with her.

The sudden fixation of her eyes on mine made me uncomfortable too. "You didn't hear that over the intercom?" Her tone was bitter.

I straightened up to try to spot his face in the crowd, but no one even resembled him. "I'll help you look for him."

She glared at me and put her hands on her hips. "I don't need your help." She snapped.

I snorted and pushed past her. "Fine." I didn't have time for her prissy-antics, "Then I'll look for him by myself." I cast a glance over my shoulder and saw her leave in the opposite direction, surely just to be contrary, as she was heading further into the crowd, where I knew Heero would not wander.

The city lights blinked back to life, but the neighborhood remained mostly black. I scoured the dark edges of the buildings and the few alleyways. The rustle of my parka sounded loud and obnoxious in the quiet of the night. My braid tapping against the back of it in sync with my step made for an odd rhythm of rustle and tap.

I squinted my eyes and willed for my vision to see through the dark as I peered around another corner into an alley. The open space between two tall apartment complexes was separated in two by a chain link fence halfway, on the far side, where the alley led back to the road, there was a single streetlight that illuminated plenty trash cans and one lonely silhouette, sitting against the wall. I did not need to see a face to know who it was.

The small, lithe boy had his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms resting on his knees and his head, in turn, resting heavily in his arms, his face away from sight.

"Heero?"

A messy haired head jerked up. Dark orbs glared distrustingly at me.

"Sorry buddy," I said carefree and added a whimsical wave as I walked up to him, "Didn't mean to scare ya."

Heero snorted. He relaxed his muscles and straightened his legs a little. He seemed to deflate before my eyes, getting smaller and smaller. I immediately noticed the stain in his tank top, over his abdomen, but wisely kept my mouth shut. I knew I needed to work myself up to that, it always took some coaxing for Heero to let someone take care of his wounds.
"I heard you coming. Not a very stealthy approach."

"No need for that in my spare time."

The term "spare time" caused a physical reaction in him. His body tensed up and he drew his legs back up, wrapping his arms around them.

"That girl is looking for you." I mentioned cautiously.

His only response was a slight movement of his eyes, perhaps the beginnings of a roll that he stopped short.

"Quatre was looking for all of too, but he left." I smoothed the coarse wrinkles of the oversized parka. "Gave me this ridiculous thing." I chuckled at myself. Heero did not share in my humor, as he rarely - read: never - did. I decided to join him on the cold, wet floor. The stuffed shoulder of the parka touched his bare shoulder. I noticed a little bruise, but it was his bloodied tank top that had me concerned.

I know it was wrong of me to think so, but I was happy I still had Heero who needed me to look after him. I shouldn't think those despicable thoughts, I should want him to be as independent as he thinks he is, but I enjoyed the comforting feeling of being needed - meaningful to someone's life. And surely I returned the favor to him, though I doubted he concerned himself with such frivolous things.

"Hey Heero," I started.

"Hn."

"Let's get out of here." With a grunt I rose to my feet and stretched my hand down towards him.

He looked at my hand for a little while, his eyes empty, his face blank, every facial muscle relaxed to allow for a perfectly neutral expression, but tension and strength radiated from his incredible eyes. Oh, how I wished he would never stop looking at me.

He did not accept my hand, just stubbornly and effortfully rose to his feet by his own strength. He wiped some of the dirt off the damp bottom of his jeans, but that only made his hands filthy. As he looked at them, dirt clinging to his slim fingers and coarse palms, the muscles around his eyes and mouth tightened.

I ignored his displeased stare and grabbed his hand, dragging him along with me. I could have sworn the stain in the front of his shirt had gotten bigger, growing as did my concern.

Deliberately guiding us through the shadows I distanced us from the crowd. Behind me I heard Heero breathing through his nose. Normally, he breathed so quietly not even a trained ear at his nose could hear. I spent many nights in shared dorm rooms and dingy safehouse bedrooms fixating my eyes on his chest, waiting to see the rise and fall in the dark. I just had to be sure he was okay, that he didn't promptly lost the will to live. I needed him. I needed this strange boy, who I knew very little about, who hardly spoke to me. There was no logic behind it, just dire need.

The hotel where Quatre had made reservations was close by, just a five minute walk, but I was careful not to walk too quickly and stress Heero's injury, of which the nature was yet unknown to me. I offered him the coat as a cold breeze reminded me that he was scarcely clad. He rejected my offer, but I insisted. He only accepted when I pointed out that he needed to cover his wound, or he would draw attention.
Rule number two: be inconspicuous. Heero lived by those rules the scientist had drilled into us and I knew how to use that to my advantage. For his own good of course.

Rule number one: the mission has priority.

We entered a lavish lobby. A lot of marble, bronze and rich wood, lit overhead by a crystal chandelier. To my surprise I spotted the older man that had whisked off Trowa and Quatre, earlier that evening. He was pushing a trolley with luggage towards the elevators. They were obviously staying in the same hotel. That made my heart rejoice, though secretly. I did not like this dependency to them that I had developed. But they were the only four people in the world that understood. This war, the pressure, the fear...

I turned towards Heero, stoic as ever and ordered him to wait for me in the lounge as I arranged our room. He ended up following me to the front desk anyway.

"Good evening." A pretty girl greeted. "Happy end of the war!" She chirped.

You need to work on that 'holiday greeting', I thought, but just said: "Yeah, you too. I have reservations."

Her fingers ghosted over her keyboard. "Your name, sir?"

"George Town." If it had been anyone but Heero, that may have evoked a sarcastic snort, but Heero did not respond.

She typed in my name and confirmed the reservation. "Thank you for choosing Tullip Hotel, sir Town. Here is your key," she handed me something that had more resemblance to a credit card than a key, "you will be staying in suite 102-"

0102, I thought and smiled. For someone involved in a war, it certainly had the appearance that Quatre had too much time on his hands.

"...it overlooks the park... of course..." She frowned, "the view has been changed a little this evening..." She shook her head and regained her professionalism, "The number of the front desk is 1, room service is 2, if you would like to."

She continued but I tuned her out. I didn't interrupt her and patiently waited for her to finish. She finally did, after asking us if we had any luggage, with a friendly: "Enjoy your stay."

I practically dragged Heero upstairs with me.

Suite 102 was spacious and luxurious, with a full sized living room, kitchen and diner table, a large, classic bathroom and a small hallway leading to two identical bedrooms.

Through the large living room window I saw what she meant when she referred to the changed view. The park had turned into a mobile suit parking place. Rows and rows of identical LEO's, some more damaged than other's. Heero came to stand by me, looking at the suits. Who knew what he was thinking.

I turned my attention away from the aftermath of war and to him. Without any words I peeled the parka off his shoulders and studied the brown stain shortly before carefully tucking his shirt out of his jeans and pulling it up.

Heero made no resistance, after our shared missions, he had gotten used to me tending to his wounds. I was happy that he trusted me to this extent.
I found a short, but deep cut just under the left side of his ribcage, I assessed the damaged and judged that no major organs had been involved, but the impact, of what was probably a metal shard, had broken the lowest rib.

I called room service and asked for a medical kit, scolding myself for leaving my own in Deathscythe's cockpit, as I had been too preoccupied finding a suitable hiding place for the gundanium suit. Before they brought it upstairs I ushered Heero into the bathroom, firmly ordering him to sit on the edge of the bath. When I opened the door for them, I assured them it was just a minor cut.

"Kitchen accident!" I said and laughed it off. I locked the door behind them and hurried into the bathroom. The wound was still bleeding and needed to be dressed tightly.

Heero looked down at my fingers as I worked, making sure I made no mistakes, no doubt.

"Is that too tight?" I asked once I had finished.

"No."

I suddenly became hyperaware of the fact Heero was only half dressed and I was kneeling before him. Our eye contact instantly had an intimate charge of electricity, that jolted through me and caused a spasm-like shiver. I chuckled nervously and rose to my feet.

"It's been a long day. Let's get some rack."

Heero was just silent as he followed me to the bedrooms.

"Goodnight." I said in the hallway, where our paths would part.

He nodded and then went into one of the rooms, softly closing the door behind him.

With a sigh I entered the other room, throwing myself at the double bed. After five minutes of just lying there, I finally gathered the energy to strip, scolding myself once more for leaving my duffel bag with clean change of clothes in the cockpit. I'd forget my own braid if it wasn't growing out of the back of my head.

Tired, mentally and physically, I crawled under the covers, inhaling the delicious scent of clean sheets. I lay in the bed, just breathing, looking at thin air. Trying to think of peace, as a concept, as a reality, but no thoughts came to me. My mind drew a blank. Enter: Peace. ... ERROR, not found.

I tried to imagine what my life would be like. I couldn't live on like I had since the first war, mooching off Hilde, working a scrap yard. If that was the life I had been fighting for all this time, I should have seriously reconsidered my options back when I was just a teenage street rat and a black car with tinted windows slowed down next to me on L2.

"Thanks, but no thanks!" That's what I should have said when the back window rolled down and a stranger with an obscenely large nose revealed himself and asked: "Hey kid, want to be a hero?"

The hero of a massacre, that's what he made of me. I turned, suddenly uncomfortable.

Life after war, I mused, pushing the what-if's aside.

No standard solution available...

No standard solution available...
No standard solution available...

"Duo?"

I jerked upright. In the dim light of the moon I saw Heero, like me in just his underwear, leaning against the closed door of the bedroom. I didn't even hear him sneak in.

I looked at him and noticed how uncertain he seemed. Childlike. It was endearing, but Heero would adamantly argue that he was definitely not endearing.

"Yeah?" I finally croaked.

Before he spoke any further he walked around the bed, to the empty side, folded back the covers and slipped inside. Once he had settled, on his back, eyes peering at the ceiling, with the covers drawn up to his chest, he asked: "Is this okay?"

I smiled, though he wasn't looking at me, so he wouldn't see. "Sure."

I genuinely hoped Heero would be part of my non-standard solution.
Part II - April first

Warheads

Today was a special day, I reminded myself, gazing out the window. An important day.

Outside, dawn was barely breaking. The sun seemed to struggle in her rise this morning. I waited for her first rays to reach over the surrounding buildings and warm my face. It was going to be a beautiful day, clear blue skies, a slight breeze and a comfortable 75 degrees. Not particularly hot for this time of the year, here in Florida, but perfectly to my liking. Some days it would just get too hot, too damp. Sometimes the air just felt thick and heavy and when you breathed you experienced the paradox of being suffocated by the air. But Florida was the place we had to be, for Heero, as he had accepted Une's offer to work as a Preventer. He managed to visibly surprise her with his request for a quiet office position.

I looked at my watch, it was nearing six am, he would be getting up soon. He had insisted on working, even today, though I told him it would be okay if he took the day off, I could have made plans. But he refused and any further insisting from me was silenced with his trademark glare.

I turned my face away from the window as I barely heard the click of the bedroom door. He stepped out, fully dressed in his black and moss green uniform, the black tie tight around his neck, but his jacket hung loosely over his shoulders. I smiled at him when he spotted me at the window, halfway through my morning ritual of coffee and deep thoughts. "Good morning, birthday boy."

His gaze hardened at my upbeat greeting. He had been skeptical of this whole "birthday-business" from the beginning, now he seemed ready to bolt. "It's not my birthday." He argued.

"Yes it is."

He didn't argue further, he had no evidence to back him up. After all, he had no idea what the real date of his birth was and his contrived ID only supported my claim.

I think back to a certain day, two months ago, when Heero and I sat shoulder to shoulder behind our laptops, set up on the dinner table in the Tullip hotel. I was applying for citizenship for the two of us through a back door in a government database. As I did so, Heero busied himself creating a paper trail to verify our existence, should our pasts ever be subject to scrutiny. I felt exited, it was like we were etching ourselves into this world, no longer ghostly figures moving through the shadows, but real people, out in the light.

Once I had finished setting up my own ID I started work on Heero's. Name, sex and age were easy, the first two I entered truthfully, the third we had decided on eighteen, an age that made a lot of things easier, but wasn't a stretch. The fourth question had me bite my lip.

"Heero?"

"Hn."

"When's your birthday?"

His fingers stilled over the keyboard and his eyes narrowed. He was thinking about it. Finally, he answered, looking at me: "I don't know."
I felt sorry for him, but didn't let it show. "Okay, no biggie. Even better, you get to pick your birthday! We need a day to celebrate" I exclaimed, smiling widely, hoping it would reflect on him.

That seemed to conflict with his practicality. "Why? It wouldn't be my real birthday."

"Well, no, but we don't have to celebrate the specific day, we choose a day to celebrate the fact that you were born that year, doesn't matter which day of the year that was. You know, Jesus wasn't really born December twenty-fifth, but that's still when we celebrate Christmas."(1)

Though obviously not excited by the idea of a birthday party, he nodded his agreement and curtly suggested: "Okay. You pick a date."

"Yeah? Sure?"

"Hn." Was his elaborate response.

I looked back at my own laptop, the machine not nearly as cherished and well kept as Heero's, humming loudly. I seriously started thinking about it. My own birthday was in fall, which made me sad when I was little, because it never failed to rain on my birthday. Of course, those were scheduled weather simulations that were the same each year. I just always wished that my birthday had been in the spring, like Solo's, my old street rat friend, my protector, my keeper. The most important person in my life at that time.

Now, that person was Heero. I looked at him, he paid me no heed. I returned my fingers to the numbers on the keyboard and typed 04-01-180AC. Not Solo's birthday, I didn't want to replace his memory with Heero, but the perfect spring day, at least, that was always the case on L2. I liked the date. For some people a lame excuse to pull lame pranks, for me an excuse to smother Heero.

"Do you want to go out for dinner tonight?" I asked as I watched him pour his coffee.

His face scrunched up. He didn't like going out for dinner, or at least he thought he didn't. I seriously questioned if he had ever given it a try, but for some reason he had an aversion to it. Probably had to do with being surrounded by people. Or maybe the costs. Heero turned out to be quite frugal, though the Preventers paid him well for his services as a master hacker.

"Do you want to rent a movie?" My suggestion fell to deaf ears, he just sipped his coffee.

I smiled. Dinner was already in the fridge; chicken. I was a lousy cook but I could manage a simple meal of chicken, fried rice and stir fried vegetables. The cake was in the fridge, in frosting I had written: "Happy birth year!". I had also already rented a movie, Avatar; a pre-colonial CGI masterpiece that set the bar for every movie since. Of course, not many movies were made since, every penny had been sunk into the colonies and then, when the beginnings of the first war started brewing over fifteen years ago...

Once done with his coffee he grabbed the bagel with cheese that I got him every morning, from the little bakery down the street - which didn't even open until seven, but they start work early in the morning and the lady comes out to the door every day at five thirty to hand me two fresh bagels, free of charge. I wondered if Heero figured the bagel just magically appeared on our small dinner table every morning, for he never thanked me for my early morning efforts. It didn't bother me. Not much, at least.

"Don't be home too late. We have to celebrate." I called before he could rush out of the front door.

"Hn." He responded, with the bagel in his mouth, but seriously, would he have said anything else if his mouth hadn't been full?
Once he had left I took a shower and readied myself to leave as well. I had classes all day and wouldn't be home much earlier than Heero.

My decision to enroll back in school surprised me as much as it did others. But it was a decision that suddenly came to me one night.

Heero had already created high school diploma's for us in the International Earth Sphere database. But that night I tossed and turned in my bed. My stomach was churning. I didn't know about most of the stuff they taught in high school, professor G had been too preoccupied teaching me other things, more relevant to the war. The next morning I reversed Heero's work. Instead I inputted that I had completed each year, with exception of the last and was forced to put a hold on my education due to the war. I created old, digital report cards with grades that seemed plausible and a week later, when Heero had agreed to Une's offer and we caught a plane to the Reformed United States of America, I set up an appointment with the principal of a local high school.

I remember how nervous I was, going over to the school, an old, colonial style building that loomed over me in a threatening way. I was afraid I would be exposed as the uneducated ex street rat / ex terrorist that I was, but the principal was most friendly. She voiced her concerns about my grades in history - I had given myself a D, considering I knew nearly nothing of Earth's history - but after a short talk she kindly welcomed me to the school. She said she was glad to see young men like myself, who had dropped out during the war, return to school. She did insist that I started in the eleventh grade, as a junior, one year short of the final exams year, because we were already halfway through the school year. I didn't object to that, even though, as I was believed to be eighteen, I would be older than my classmates. She assured it would not cause me any trouble administratively.

The payments were all arranged illegally, we had no savings and Heero hadn't even gotten his first paycheck yet. The heavy books cost an additional fortune.

Overall I found Heero's curiosity in the matter endearing. He could not understand why I choose to go back to school and informed me that he had memorized the content of all the schoolbooks under J's training. I hadn't and told him so, that just confused him more. I knew next to nothing of Heero's time with J, as he knew next to nothing of my time with G. A lot would be revealed of that in the future, but I knew not yet. It would take time. For both of us.

Even though he did not understand, he was respectful of my decision. When I studied he quietly rummaged around in the living room and for the most part left me in private in our small second bedroom that we had made into an office.

Most of the rest of the apartment was still empty aside from a few necessary pieces of furniture. My preoccupation with school and his many late hours at the head quarters further stagnated any progress in making this little apartment a home. The walls were white, which I hated and the kitchen cabinets had been painted an obnoxious shade of pink by the previous owner, which I hated even more. In our small kitchen we had cramped a two seat dinner table with futuristic chairs that I had Heero steal - "permanently borrow" is how I phrased it for him - from the Preventers cafeteria.

In the living room there was only a couch, which we bought with a splash of illegally wired money and a TV, from the same, unspoken of, funds.

The second bedroom was the most completed room in the house. An good investment of time and some money as we spend most of our free time in there. We had bought two large, identical desks and placed them facing each other. The comfortable desk chairs were also permanently borrowed from the HQ and we had a large, oak bookcase that we had yet to fill. Only a single shelf was in use, carrying the weight of my schoolbooks and notepads.
Because of our dire need for a home office, we had to share the master bedroom, which was smaller than the second bedroom-turned-office. It was the "master" because of the en-suite bathroom, that was exactly the way the previous owner had left it, but I was fine with that.

The "master" bedroom was just big enough for two single beds, separated by a small nightstand and by the foot of Heero's bed, there was a large closet that we shared. We didn't have a lot of clothes.

We were precariously balanced at the edge of domestication. Trying desperately to take hold of the fringes of a normal life, as normal boys, in a normal world.

But who was to say what "normal" meant? We - me, Heero and the other pilots - were so messed up we could hardly distinct right from wrong, let alone normal from abnormal. We've been living a crazy life for so long, nothing seems less normal to me than this quiet, anonymous life in this humble downtown apartment. I felt out of sync with myself as I busied myself with schoolwork, or interior design. Those weren't the kinds of thoughts I usually occupied myself with. I could still visualize all the technical schemes of my Gundam and weight-to-power ratio's for a long list of explosives.

I flung my bag over my shoulder, got the cake out of the fridge before I left and then headed to school.

The yard was crowded as it was that first day. Being only two months ago, I remembered it well: the nervousness, the possibility of total alienation. What do I have in common with these kids? I had asked myself. They knew little of the tragedy and hardship of war and nothing of the day-to-day, hand-to-mouth life the poorer colonists live.

My first class was an optional course on colonial literature. J.J. Howling, one of the mandatory books for the course, had been a resident of L2 during my street rat phase. He was shot. I knew what happened, I was there. I knew the boy that pulled the trigger. We really weren't interested in him... just his grocery bag, which he refused to give. He called us mongrels and dogs. He shouldn't have. I thought I would hate him forever for making that boy do what he did, but after reading his book, I couldn't. His words were too beautiful. All I felt after the last chapter, was guilt. I wondered if anyone in that class had a book cause such an emotional change in their lives. I was prejudiced against the Earthians, on L2 we had always heard Earthians only cared about themselves.

When I had entered the classroom I thought maybe those prejudices were deserved. There were only six people in the classroom that could seat forty.

The teacher, a heavyset woman with small eyes, welcomed me to her class and told me I could pick any seat.

After the lesson, which she had ended short of the bell, she approached me with a kind smile. "Principal Murphy told me you dropped out during the war."

I nodded.

"It must have been hard. Especially for the colonies. You are from L2, right?"

Again nothing but a meek nod.

"I'm glad to have you in my class." She touched her hand to my shoulder gently. "Next time you should sit next to someone. Make some friends."

Next time I sat down next to a tanned girl with honey blond hair and sparkling, friendly eyes. She
was very attractive. A pair of short, cut off jeans revealed her long, slim legs and her buttoned
down shirt allowed for a peek at a black, lacy bra, but her sneakers and a pair of big, nerdy glasses
made her seem approachable.

"Hey cutie pie," She greeted. Her heavy southern accent caught me off guard. "I'm Sookie Shaw."
She grabbed my hand where it was resting on my leg and shook it. "What's yer name?"

I smiled awkwardly at the typical Earthian - loudmouthed, confident and trusting - and introduced
myself as smoothly and coolly as I possibly could after that.

"Nice to meet ya, Duo M-Maxwell." She mocked my stumble.

I smiled at the memory. I shared few classes with Sookie, but she managed to butt into my school
life expertly in spite of that.

"Hey Maxwell!" I heard someone shout from across the school yard.

With cheeks tinted red as many heads turned, I headed towards Sookie, who had climbed on top of
a picnic table to call me through the crowd.

"Wanna go to the beach with us? Great surfing today." She drawled.

"No, I can't. It's Heero's birthday." I explained.

Sookie squealed in excitement. "I LOVE birthday parties!"

I didn't want to tell her that she wasn't invited - no one was - I didn't want to disappoint her, but I
had to, because I knew her presence would make Heero uncomfortable. Hell, she still found ways
to make me uncomfortable.

"Oh. I understand." She said as I explained to her that we were just going to have dinner and watch
a movie. "Sounds boring anyway."

"Yeah." I didn't know what to say. We just weren't the partying types. Moreover, Heero had no
friends to invite and it seemed wrong to invite my friends to his birthday. I knew he wouldn't like
that.

Her disappointment was soon forgotten as she slipped back into the pre-school-day conversation
she was having with the others. Two of which I recognized from the Colonial Lit. class, but I really
only socialized with Sookie, because she was the only one who bothered to butt into my life, again
and again. The other three were unknown faces, but one of them was wearing a football jacket. I
didn't know how to behave around jocks, feeling like an outcast all my life and easily asserting that
role the times I used school as a cover during the war.

During class I couldn't focus. I was fussing over the details of Heero's "birth year" celebration. I
wanted it to be perfect. I wanted him to feel even just a spark of the excitement "normal" people
felt when their birthday came 'round. I hadn't gone out to buy him a present. It has been in my jeans
pocket since the end of the war, always keeping it with me, to be sure Heero wouldn't find it during
one of his many prompt cleaning sprees. Not cute cleaning sprees in a domestic kind of way, but a
military way of clearing every surface and organizing every drawer, to ensure the highest
efficiency of the living quarters.

During English I dug my hand into my jeans pocket and fingered the heavy item. I was startled by a
"Pssst!". I whipped my head around and looked at Sookie, who was sitting at the table next to
mine. She nodded towards my hand, buried deep inside my pocket, the shape of the present was
visible through the denim, as it drew taut over my leg when I was seated.

"What's that?" She insisted, talking with a quiet hiss so the lecturing teacher at the board wouldn't hear.

"Nothing." My innocence was so poorly faked it made me grimace. She didn't notice it all this time and now she did, on the last day I had to carry it with me? Annoying.

She smiled. "It's Heero's present, isn't it?"

I frowned at her. "That's the first thing you think of?" I whispered back.

"No," She admitted, "The first thing I thought was that you were a perv, touching yourself." She finished with a wink.

My jaw dropped.

"What is it?" She pushed.

"I'm not telling you."

"Why not?"

"It's none of your business!" I hissed, warily glancing at the teacher. He seemed oblivious.

"Tell me. Or-"

"Fine! I'll show you." I interrupted. The last time she made the "Or else" threat she stopped during the middle of an exercise during P.E and proclaimed that she saw me peeking into the girl's locker-room earlier.

I wrapped my fingers around it and pulled it out, showing it to her under the table.

She could not hide her disappointment and confusion. "What is it?"

I thought for a moment, I didn't really know what to tell her and how much to tell her. "It's a bolt." I finally decided, which was the truth, if not the least elaborate.

She scrunched her face up. "You're a freak, Duo."

I stuffed the heavy duty bolt back into my jeans pocket. Of course she did not understand the meaning of this highly unorthodox gift, but her negative reaction didn't ease my mind. I had worried that Heero would not be able to appreciate the sentiment. But there wasn't anything else I could think of to give him.

When the classes were finally over, the last of which Colonial Lit., I dashed home like a mad man. I heard Sookie call after me, but I pretended not to hear her. It was already five o'clock. Heero's workday officially ended at five thirty, though he usually stayed well after that, if he had abided by my request to come home early, he could walk through our front door in less than an hour. By that time I wanted a hot dinner to be waiting for him.

In our tiny kitchen I made due with the few pots and pans we had. Frowning at the mismatched plates as I set the table.

Candles? I asked myself. I shook my head. Don't be stupid, Duo. No candles.
Every once in a while my gaze would dart down to my watch. I counted down the minutes. I was excited without cause. In all probability this would be an evening like any other. Heero had no intentions to make it special and would surely do his best to thwart my efforts.

I turned down the stove to a minimal flame. Dinner was ready, now I had to wait for the guest of honor. I took the cake out of the refrigerator where it had been defrosting during the day and placed it on the counter, covering it with tin foil.

It was six twenty-five when the lock turned.

I moved to the door, to greet him.

He stared at me incredulously. "What are you doing?" He asked in that monotone of his.

I must have looked like a total idiot, standing in the middle of the room, with my red, polka dot oven-mittens on, grinning like crazy. "Hey buddy. Happy birth year." I knew I should have shaken his hand or something, but I didn't know how receptive Heero would be to that kind of physical contact.

"Hn." He walked into the kitchen and sat himself down in one of the chairs. It wasn't unusual for dinner to be waiting for him, seeing as he regularly came home late at night.

I served us both dinner after ditching the ridiculous mittens. I started to feel like a fool. No smile could be brought to his face and that just left me looking totally moronic, acting all excited about something that couldn't even slightly stir someone else's interest.

"Enjoy." I said, but he was already digging in. He seemed to have been starving, he probably skipped lunch again. I told him not to do that anymore.

You are not his mother, Duo, I reminded myself and followed his lead, quietly eating.

After dinner he helped me clear the table. When he started to run hot water for the dishes, I told him he could leave it, I would do them tomorrow, because tonight was supposed to be special. I ushered him to the living room where I sat him down on the couch. I held up the DVD case for him to see.

"Have you seen it?" I always asked him this when we were about to watch a movie. So far the answer has always been a shake of his head. "Cool." Was my usual response. I popped the disc into the DVD-player and sat down next to him, maneuvering through the menu with the glitchy remote.

It wasn't until half way through the movie that I noticed I wasn't even watching, too worried about what Heero was thinking and if he was enjoying himself. I realized I was putting too much pressure on both of us, but I couldn't help it.

I secretly glanced over at Heero. He sat rigidly, his body tense, his eyes fixed on the screen. His mouth looked tight as he fought the illogic of the film. He was intently focused on the movie, like he would be tested on it afterwards. He might never be able to enjoy the experience of watching a movie, I concluded, watching his obvious struggle. He didn't look like he was having fun. I wasn't making this evening special for him, just extremely uncomfortable.

You shouldn't force him like this, I scolded myself. I just wanted to share a moment with him that we could always fondly remember, but I needed to adjust my expectations - even though I thought they weren't that high to begin with.

He might never be capable of creating fond memories.
That thought was a strike to my heart, but it was a possibility that I shouldn't leave out of consideration.

I grabbed the remote and pressed "pause".

Heero stared at the stilled image for a moment or two before turning to face me with a blank expression, but his eyes were big and innocently questioning.

"You don't have to watch this movie with me." I told him, putting on my bravest face. "You can do something else if you want to."

"I have work." He quietly confessed.

I smiled. It was a sad smile but I'm sure he couldn't tell. I assured him that it was okay and that he could work if he wanted to. He just nodded and then left for our little office. As he closed the door behind him, I put the movie on again. Though the images moved and flashed for another hour, I didn't see. I just felt sad and deflated. I had too much pity for myself to be bothered with the cause of an imaginary alien species.

After the movie I retired to the bedroom, exhausted, but once I was in my bed, I found that I couldn't sleep, not without Heero safely there next to me, so I waited for him to finish.

He didn't enter the bedroom until past midnight. He shamelessly undressed in my presence as he always did. I don't think Heero has enough of an understanding of shame to feel it. At the very least he didn't have a body that required him to be shameful.

I looked away, but it was hard to. I never want to leave him out of my sight. Whenever I do, I worry about him and find myself asking questions like "What is he doing right now?"

Dressed in a sleep shirt and underwear, he got into bed.

"Duo?"

I looked over.

The rest of his question was asked by his hand, resting on the light switch.

"Yeah." The room went dark at my answer.

I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and once they had, I turned on my side so I could look at the dark figure in the bed next to mine. Heero was lying on his side as well, but with his back turned towards me. I studied the way his dark hair draped over the white pillow case and appreciated the lettering on the back of his grey shirt.

TAMPA HIGH.

With a shared closet it was inevitable that some of our clothes would get mixed up. Apparently he didn't mind wearing my T-shirt.

"Duo?"

The sudden sound of his voice startled me. "Yeah?"

He turned on his back, looking thoughtful, his deep frown clearly visible. "This what birthdays are usually like?"
I sighed. "No." I didn't know what to tell him, I didn't want to hurt him by making it seem like it was his fault he didn't have a normal birthday. "Usually there's a party, with a lot of friends and family."

"I liked it better this way."

I smiled, hopeful. "Just you and me?"

"Hn." He agreed.

"You know, at birthdays, there is cake too and presents."

The corner of his mouth twitched a little. "Cake?"

He was so cute when he was trying so damn hard not to sound interested. "Yeah. And presents." I repeated.

He finally looked at me, his eyes unreadable in the dark.

I got out of bed and grabbed his arm, pulling him out too. "C'mon." I urged.

He obediently followed my lead.

In the kitchen I ordered him to sit and I unwrapped the cake before bringing it to him. There was only one clean plate left, the rest still filthy in the sink. I grabbed two forks and hoped he wouldn't mind sharing. I sat down next to him and cut off a large piece of cake and put it on the plate in between us.

"Here."

He gingerly took the fork that I handed to him.

With two young, healthy boys working their way through it, the piece of cake was quickly gone, so I sliced us another. As Heero dug into that one, I went back to the bedroom to fish into the pair of jeans that I had worn that day. When I walked back I saw he had stopped eating and was eyeing me with slight curiosity. I held my hands behind my back and grinned at him. He pretended not to care and brought another forkful of cake and frosting to his lips. I sat down again and without any further ado brought my right hand up to his face and opened it, revealing the large bolt in my hand. I knew there was no need for me to explain where I got this.

He took the heavy, slightly wrangled piece of gundanium from my hand and looked at it.

"After Wing crashed that night," I started. "I knew it was totaled and that every remaining piece of it would be destroyed, like it never existed. I figured, you might like a reminder that it did exist." I opened my left hand, in which I held a second bolt, but this one was black and unscathed. "I have one of Deathscythe, too." I studied his face. I could tell that he did not understand. His logic was saying: "I don't need a reminder, how could I ever forget?" But I knew that someday, down the road, he would get it and he would be grateful that I saved that bolt for him. And I will wait for that 'someday' and reminisce with him.

"Thank you." He contemplated for a moment and then made an addition that warmed my heart. "I enjoyed this birthday."

My smile must have looked goofy, but I could not pretend to be anything other than deliriously happy, with this seemingly insignificant progress. "More cake?" I pushed the plate his way a little.
He nodded, took hold of his fork once more and ate most of what was left of the second piece. I just watched him as he moved with his relentless military precision and efficiency, not a single crumb was wasted.

Though knowing I would wake up a fucking zombie in the morning, I stayed up with my friend and waited for him to eat his fill of birthday cake.

Next year I will make him smile.
I woke three hours after going to bed. I could still taste the cake in my mouth. I glanced to my side, at the clock that was on my half of our shared night stand. As usual, it was four thirty in the morning. An inner working never failed to wake me at this hour, after which my body refused more sleep. I had learned early on that there was no reason to fight this reaction, I just had to get out of bed and hope I would make it through the day.

Because of my early morning ritual I normally would have gone to bed at an hour closer to eleven pm than one thirty am, but some things were more important than sleep.

I looked at one of those said "things", Heero, still quietly sleeping in his bed. As I watched him I was hit with the realization he might be the only other thing. He came in first place for me. And second and third. Things like sleep and food and water didn't even make it to the top ten, which was all: Heero. Heero. Heero. My feelings were starting to border on obsessions, but I had no reference to compare it with. No measure to judge what was healthy and what was not.

Sitting upright in bed, with my legs thrown over the side, I looked around myself for a while, waiting for my body to regain it's energy, for my mind to fully wake up and for my eyes to stop burning with sleep. I dressed quickly and in the pouring rain, without an umbrella, made my way over to the little bakery. I knocked on the glass pane of the front door, pressing my nose to it to peer through.

Through the raindrops rolling down I saw a figure wave and then bring my presence to the attention to another figure, who quickly made it's way towards me. The door opened with the ring of a store bell.

"Duo!" The elderly lady exclaimed, pulling me inside by my sweatshirt. "You are getting soaked out there! You could get yourself ill."

I shrugged. With "Ill" she meant a cold and I knew that having a cold wasn't truly being ill. I survived the streets of L2 with colds, I fought wars with colds... I could certainly go to school with a cold.

I looked at her sweet face and curly white hair. She asked me if I wanted something to drink, to warm myself up, but I declined with a polite "No, thank you, ma'am". Then I was handed the cardboard box with two bagels.

"You are such a good boy." She told me.

I didn't say anything. She had called me a "good boy" from the start, but never learned the truth about me. If she did, she would think twice about calling me that. America's preoccupation with it's own reformation during the first war worked in my advantage. The news report of my capture, blatantly showing my face, wasn't broadcasted here.

I gratefully accepted breakfast, by way of habit offered to pay, to which she said: "No! Don't be ridiculous!" Then I left, back through the rain, but I was already wet, so it didn't matter anymore.

Heero was still sleeping soundly when I got back. I peeled the cold wet clothes off my body and
snuck into our bedroom for a fresh set and through to our bathroom to towel dry my hair and quickly change into the clothes as my body started to shiver. Fully dressed, I snuck back out to the kitchen and generously smeared peanut butter on my bagel and then butter and a slice of cheese on Heero's. With my bagel and a cup of coffee I took my position by the bay window of our living room, alternating sips and bites watching the rain clouds pass by and clear the skies for the sun.

At a quarter past six - later than usual - the bedroom door opened and Heero stepped out, fully dressed and freshly shower. He normally showered in the evening, taking little time to soap up his body and wash his hair. Though it's only a ten minute process for him - whereas it takes me at least thirty minutes, including drying my hair - I hadn't given him the opportunity to shower last night.

"Good morning."

Heero hn'd his reply. He went straight to the coffee machine to pour himself a cup - I always made enough for the two of us - he downed it swiftly, then he reached out to the plate set out on the dinner table. He held the bagel between his teeth as he filled one hand with his keys and a jacket and needed the other to open the front door.

"Bye!" I called after him.

The door was shut. I flinched at the sound, in spite of the fact that it was soft, barely audible, as everything Heero does. I sighed but I wasn't defeated. Last night had given me hope, I had gotten through to him, in a shorter amount of time than I had initially expected. It's been only two months after all. I was happy with his slow progress, God knew I wasn't speeding away from him in my own quest to be a "regular guy".

I decided to skip P.E to get two more hours of sleep, catching up on what I hadn't gotten last night, then I also showered, put on the same set of clothes that I briefly wore before and went out to school. In the schoolyard I had another uncomfortable encounter with my outspoken friend.

Sookie approached me out of no where, magically appearing at my side and taking hold of my arm, but I knew she must have walked over from the gym, across the yard. Without any greeting of any form she yelled, close to my ear: "Duo, you are the man!"

I eyed her suspiciously, wondering what she had been up to.

"Remember when I told everyone last week that ya looked into the locker room?"

"Told?" I blurted. "Lied, you mean!"

She waved it off. "Yeah yeah, anyway, ya should have been there this morning! I swear, normally, these girls don't put on their make-up and do their hair 'till after P.E, but this morning the locker room looked like a play-boy photo shoot! There was lingerie and fake eye lashes everywhere!"

I frowned, I don't think I was following her. "Why?" and soon added "Ow!" As she smacked me on top of my head.

"Silly, because they thought you'd be peeking in again!"

I groaned my dismay. Everyone now apparently thought that I was a total pervert, so much for blending in.

"Duo, ya don't get it, do ya? They are like in love with ya!" She outstretched one of her long, darkly tanned arms to a group of girls by the main entrance of the school. As they saw her point, they all looked away and in spite of the distance we could hear them giggle. "Yer a rockstar." She
said, breaking away from me and heading towards one of the side entrances of the school. "See ya
in English!" She yelled and then jogged off.

I went through the main entrance, passing the group of girl. They were all staring at me and
whispering amongst themselves. Oh God, I thought. I was extremely uncomfortable with the
attention. I was used to some girls taking a liking to me, it had happened before, mostly caused by
the novelty of a guy with a long braid. It usually wore off when one of the girl finally walked up to
me with the courage to ask exactly why I kept it so long and was scared off by my warning tone as
I would answer: "None of your business". Then all the girls would just think of me as some sort of
psycho, whispering things in the hallway like: "That's why he always wears black...". I knew I just
had to wait for one of them to come up to me and ask, but I dreaded that moment, because this
situation wasn't like those times when I went undercover as a student. I didn't have the luxury of
leaving the school in a matter of days. I would still be here for over a year and during that time I
would have to live with the whispers.

I hurried inside and up a flight of stairs to the biology lab, just in time for the bell.

During a boring lecture of the teacher on microscopic life it was happening again. The incessant
thinking about Heero. What's he doing? How's he doing? Who's he with? Who did he wish he was
with? And finally, I wondered if he asked himself these things about me too.

I shouldn't think stupid thoughts.

When the bell announced lunch break, everyone quickly gathered their books and stormed out of
the classroom, even the teacher was quick to leave. I was in no hurry, lunch break was sufficiently
long and I wasn't all that excited about being in one room with so many people, making so much
noise, it's a logistical nightmare in case of an emergency. I put my bag on the table and slid my
books inside, neatly arranging them, evenly distributing the weight, organizing them according to
size, the biggest one in the back because that would be most comfortable against my back.

"You aren't hungry?"

Surprised I looked up from where I had practically stuck my head in my schoolbag. I found myself
staring at Aiden. I only knew her name because her reputation of the most popular girl in school
preceded her. Sookie had a strong dislike for the girl, but I wondered if she ever gave her any
reason to. We had biology, history, math and art class together, during all of which she seemed nice
enough.

Her perceived nicety was not the reason for her popularity though, that had more to do with the
way her behind looked in that pair of tight, low riding jeans and how her breasts got all the boys
attention in that revealing bellybutton shirt, covered only marginally with a caramel leather jacket.

"Uh..." Yes, that was truly the smartest thing I could come up with at the moment. I was never
much of a smooth-talker.

She chuckled. "You're Duo, right?"

I groaned inwardly. It seemed my reputation had preceded me as well. Albeit a fake reputation. "I
didn't peek into the girl's locker room." I said honestly.

She smiled at me, her red lips parting for white teeth. "I know. Sookie says a lot of stuff like that.
Are you guys friends?" She seemed surprised at the notion.

"Uh, yeah."
"Why is your hair so long?" She asked out of the blue.

I swallowed. This was it. I didn't want to alienate myself, so I went with: "Why is yours?"

She smiled again at my answer. "No reason, I guess." She innocently twirled a few strands of her long black hair around her finger.

I smiled back. "Same here." I stood up and flung my bag over my shoulder, only now noticing how tall she was, nearly as tall as I was.

"Wanna sit with me at lunch?"

"I usually sit with Sookie. But you could join us."

She didn't like that idea. "No, that's fine. Maybe some other time. Bye." She stepped out of the classroom with a exaggerated sway to her hips as she walked.

"What was that all about?" I asked myself.

In the cafeteria I met up with Sookie at "our table". As usual we were joined by more people, but it were never exactly the same individuals, always a slight change to the combination, but it didn't seem to matter to Sookie, who apparently knew everyone.

I didn't tell her about my "close encounter" with Aiden Pippa. I say "close encounter" because that's what Sookie would say. She theorizes all popular girls are from outer space, by which she means other planets, not the colonies. The childish concept of all popular girls being aliens confused me, Sookie certainly didn't seem unpopular herself, she had people surrounding her all the time, including that one recurring guy with his football jacket. I didn't tell her because I didn't want to get myself in the middle of what seemed like a typical girl feud with a lot of history. During the entire two months that I've been here, as far as I knew, Sookie and Aiden didn't even pass each other in the hallway, yet they managed to hate each other. I wasn't going to inject myself into that. My knowledge of and experience with girl wasn't adequate, by far, to handle the situation should it get out of a control - like a full blown catfight. I didn't know if things like that actually occurred or if that's just a theme of choice for many American made high school movies. I didn't want to know.

After school I had dinner alone, when the clock struck eight and Heero still hadn't gotten home. I made myself comfortable on the couch and turned the TV on. I didn't realized I had fallen asleep till I was awoken by three high tones. I cracked my eyes slightly open and peered through my eyelashes. I saw Heero open the microwave door before it could beep a fourth time.

"I tried not to wake you." He said - strangely unapologetically - as he must have felt my gaze on him.

I closed my eyes and stretched my limbs, groaning as some joints popped free of their immobilized state. "It's fine. Time to wake up anyway, or I would have been up all night." When I opened my eyes again I saw him sitting at the dinner table by himself and I immediately rose to join him. I just went to quietly sit by his side, doing nothing but watching him eat the dinner I had prepared for him hours earlier and had placed in the microwave.

"How was work?" I asked as we started on the dishes together. The ones from last night I had already cleaned, as well as the pans and my own plate. "Anything juicy?" I joked.

Heero washed and I dried.

"You're not authorized." He dutifully informed.
"I know... I didn't mean work work, I meant... you know... work..." I wasn't even making sense to myself, so how could I expect Heero to understand?

He didn't, he asked me about the difference between the two, the frown in his forehead indicating that he really wanted to know, contrary to the questions he asked when his face was neutral. Then he would just be asking because in the back of his head, a dying voice somewhere told him it is polite to show interest, but through all the filters set up by the soldier, it came out of his mouth sounding far from the intentions the tiny voice had had.

"Well, work work is what you are actually getting paid for to do... The hacking is the work work. The work is just... being there and how you felt and who you talked with." I looked at him and realized I had lost him at "felt".

Not willing to admit confusion - and consequently: defeat - he nodded, pretending to understand. But his silence revealed the truth. He still couldn't tell me how work had been, because he didn't understand yet. He also didn't understand that now it would be polite to ask me about my day. The tiny voice was muffled, inaudible.

I know you so well, I secretly said, looking at him, but I don't know know you. I don't know where you've been and I don't know why you think the way that you think. It was frustrating. Sometimes I could read his struggles through his eyes so well, like nothing separated me and him but a pane of glass and sometimes it was like the shutters were drawn and all I saw were vertical shadows obscuring a truth he didn't want me to see.

"This girl talked to me today..." I started.

"Girl?"

I playfully punched him against the shoulder, to which he did not respond. "Yeah, you know, the humans with the complementing parts."

"I know what a girl is." He muttered in quiet defense, making me smile.

"Aiden Pippa." I continued. "She is like the queen at school."

When he frowned I knew I shouldn't have used a metaphor.

"Not really a queen." I explained. "Not a "queen queen", but really popular, so in school circles that sort of makes her a queen."

He nodded, handing me the last dish and then drained the sink.

My hands worked quickly to towel dry the plate as my mouth worked equally hard describing the awkward situation I had found myself in with Aiden after biology.

"... and she was wearing those low riding jeans, you know, the kind when someone bends over you can uh... see the moon?"

"See the moon?" His voice sounded as surprised as you could expect the perfect soldier to let it.

I laughed. "Forget it. I'm just saying that she's really attractive and certainly dresses to punctuate that and it sort of felt like she was flirting with me. With me!" I repeated, as if that would make Heero understand the gravity of it. "She asked me why I kept my hair so long-"

"Did you tell her?"
I was startled by his interruption. "Uh... no, no, of course I didn't. Anyway-"

"Why do you keep your hair so long?" He interrupted again, his forehead wrinkled.

He really wanted to know. That came as quite shock to me. "Uh... well... because it looks hot."

In spite of his social "retardation" he knew I was lying to him. He didn't call me on it, but the shutters opened and his eyes let me know that he knew, but that he didn't understand why.

"Okay, I'll tell you."

"Why? You don't have to."

I shook my head. "No, actually I do. Because you are my friend." I smiled and stepped closer to him. "My friend friend."

He waited, not acknowledging the sentiment.

"It's uh... It's an idea that stems from a long time ago. Control. When I was living on the streets," I swallowed heavily, "there wasn't anything I had control over. I couldn't control what I ate each day, I couldn't control what I said, not even what I did, or what other did - stupid stuff - ... and I couldn't control sickness and subsequently I couldn't control death and then people started dying. Friends. After watching them die, all but one, we both became obsessed with control and we wanted to control everything." All the time, as I told, I looked him in the eye, to gauge his reaction. "But God showed us that we couldn't, by taking it all away again and taking my last friend. After that, I realized there was only one thing I could truly control," I reached my hand around to the back of my neck and grabbed my braid at the base, pulling it over my shoulder, "Once I had gotten that idea into my head, it just stuck. Now my braid just serves as a reminder, like those bolts." I nodded over my shoulder to the two bolts, side by side, balanced on their heads on the TV furniture.

Heero followed my nod and looked at them. He still hadn't gotten the concepts of the two bolts, so I'm sure he wouldn't get this. A long braid was just too impractical, it was the opposite of rule 2: "be inconspicuous". "Thank you for telling me." He finally said, after thinking about it for a long time.

"You're welcome." I had hoped we could turn the moment into an exchange, but he wasn't willing to volunteer any information about himself.

After standing in the kitchen together for a while, the soldier inside told him to extract himself from the awkward situation, so he did. No order of the soldier went unheeded.

I mindlessly fingered the surface of the table for a few minutes, drawing unimaginative patterns. When I heard our closet door open I realized he was going to bed, so I followed him into our bedroom. I walked in right as he was taking off his button-up shirt, maneuvering past him on the narrow floor space. "Sorry." I said as I lightly brushed against him. I lowered myself onto my bed and this time didn't avert my eyes as he undressed further, unbuckling his belt and letting gravity take the fine fabric of his pants down. After that, he took off his underwear. He was turned away from me, so I couldn't see his most private parts, but he did not position himself like that intentionally. I had seen all of his body on countless occasions. I remembered a particularly uncomfortable one, when I tended to a wound that was high on his inner thigh.

Naked as the day he was born, after carefully folding his uniform over the foot board of his bed, he walked into the bathroom. He let the door open, but closed the shower curtain.

Normally he was the one having difficulty understanding the things I did, this time, I was the one...
who didn't understand. Maybe it was a way of preserving his modesty and still leaving a quick escape route unbarricaded? But why would someone who felt comfortable enough with his own body to undress in front of someone else, not just leave the curtain open?

I was just wondering, it wasn't like it's was something I absolutely wanted to see, I just wanted to know why he did that. Knowing Heero, he would have a very good, very efficient reason.

After also drying his body and hair behind the privacy of the curtain he stepped out and put on his clothes. His skin was still damp so the fabric of my Tampa high T-shirt immediately clung to his frame, accentuating the perfection of his toned body. His black boxer briefs left nearly as little to the imagination as the plain sight of his naked body did.

"That's my shirt." I suddenly stated, for no reason whatsoever.

He looked at me dryly, if it had been anyone other than Heero, he might be thinking what a Captain Obvious I am, but it wasn't anyone other, so he asked a neutral question in response to my outburst. "Do you mind?"

"No." I really didn't mind, I guess I just wanted to know what he thought about it. Was it just another pragmatic solution to the problem of impractically shared closet space? Or did he like wearing my clothes?

I shook my head. Why did I even go there? I asked myself. I shouldn't bother myself with the idea that he has some sort of misplaced man-crush on me... It was stupid.

"Okay." He got into bed, putting a lot of attention into arranging the covers over his body, his hands smoothing most of the folds and wrinkles.

I got up to the closet and opened the door, which shielded me from Heero's eyes. In that little space behind the door I changed into a fresh pair of underwear and a clean night shirt. I wasn't displeased with my own body, I just felt uncomfortable getting dressed in Heero's sight, because he sometimes found reasons to stare as he does not understand it is rude to do so. It was uncanny, to have those intense eyes on me when I was so vulnerable, undressed.

I closed the closet door and got into my own bed. "Ready?" I asked, holding my fingers up to the light switch.

"Hn." Was his short affirmation.

I flicked the switch and instantly the room went dark. I turned around in my bed a few times before deciding to lie on my back. When I looked over I saw Heero was also lying on his bed and I could see the glint of his open eyes. I raised myself on my elbows. "Heero?"

"Hn?"

"You okay?" I asked because normally he would immediately turn towards the wall and promptly fall asleep.

"Yes."

I settled back, lying my heavy head on the pillow.

"I was just thinking," He suddenly continued.

I looked over and saw him frown at his own words. "Yeah?" I gently encouraged.
After more time had passed he finally asked: "Do you mind?"

"That you are wearing my shirt?"

"Yes."

"No. I don't." I kept looking at him, studying the thoughtful look on his face. It was a subtle expression, not like most people's when they were going over a real head-cracker. His eyebrows drew closer to each other by just a little, creating a barely perceivable fold in the middle - I actually couldn't see this in the dark, but I knew his face and its expressions well - and there was a tightness in his upper lip, narrowing it a little.

"Is it another "friend friend" thing?"

My heart fluttered and the feeling made me smile. "Yeah."

My answer satisfied him. He nodded curtly and then he turned to face the wall, distancing himself from me, after we momentarily got a little closer to understanding each other.
Another morning, waking up before the crack of dawn. The earth's rotation could not keep up with me. My morning ritual progressed as usual. I dressed myself, went out for bagels, made my own with peanut butter, Heero's with cheese and then lengthily gazed out the window with my cup of coffee in one hand and the half eaten bagel in the other. The novelty of domestic life was quickly wearing off, I noted. When we had just moved in, everything was new and even the smallest, stupidest thing was exciting to me; a homely adventure. Figuring out how to operate the coffee machine and which way to turn the faucet to actually get warm water in the shower, which neighbors were friendly, which no so much... Now that I had moved passed all that and nothing was new anymore, just repetitive, I realized I needed to shake things up. I needed to explore more things again, to keep my ever functioning, hyper alert brain occupied and stimulated. The way that was phrased makes me sound like a species of primate that needs to be entertained in the confines of his zoo exhibit. I guess in a way that description was more accurate than I was willing to admit. Weren't we, the other pilots and myself, caged animals in the sense that we could do so much more than we were allowed to do?

It was a Saturday and even though Heero had the day off and seemed to experience no difficulty sleeping, unlike me, he was out of bed by six am and emerged five minutes later dressed in a form fitting pair of faded jeans and a white V-neck sweater with the sleeves casually rolled up. Everything Heero wore had been picked out by me. I was shocked when he came back from my order to shop for some clothing with three identical pairs of poorly fitting - but comfortable, he argued - jeans, three pairs of spandex biker shorts - really, what could he possibly need those for? - five black tank tops and three sweaters in an ugly shade of green - "Throw-up color" I had explained to him.

Before he had managed to unpack the bags I threw the clothing away, keeping nothing but one pair of spandex shorts, I don't know why, he claimed they were practical. I called us a cab to a decent sized shopping center, where I dragged him around from store to store, holding sweater after sweater up against his torso, trying to imagine how they would look on him. Heero made no resistance of any form and obediently complied whenever I asked him to try something on.

We came back with more clothes than I had set out to buy, but Heero looked good in nearly everything and each time I was about to put something back, I had the feeling I was going to regret it if I didn't get him that one shirt, or that one pair of jeans.

Heero's only criteria was that he could move easily in them. When I had asked him what exactly he meant by that, he mentioned rule 4: "Be prepared for anything at any time." It basically meant the clothing should enable him to jump out of airplanes and climb up rocky cliffs, but I figured if Heero could do those things in spandex shorts and still make it look good, he would manage in levi jeans and a tight grey turtleneck, amongst other things.

He also rejected any bright shade of color that I pulled from the rack on the bases of rule 2: "Be inconspicuous".

With his long legs and shapely muscles, Heero could be a model, I thought, looking at him as he poured himself coffee. I shook that thought out of my head.
"Hey Heero,"

"Hn." He took a large bite from the bagel.

"Wanna do something today?"

The bagel in his mouth hid an unrepressed grimace. "I have work." He answered me when he had worked his way through most of his breakfast and his dying appetite allowed for a slower consumption rate.

"We should really get some furniture." I gestured around.

He followed my waving hands, gazing around out living room and kitchen. He looked at the couch, thought about it and then looked at the TV furniture, thought about it and then looked at the dinner table and thought about that. Finally he asked: "Why?" after coming to the pragmatic solution that we didn't need any more furniture.

"Well, we could use a dresser and maybe a bookcase and a lounge chair or something... and a coffee table and a rug or something and just some stuff to fill the place." My long list was already confusing him and I added insult to injury when I said we really needed to do some painting around the apartment as well.

Again he asked why.

I snorted. "Heero, our kitchen is pink! Pink for God's sake!" I exclaimed.

"Then you go buy all that stuff. You don't need me."

"But I need to know if you like the same things I like."

"I'm sure anything you'll pick will be fine."

"Fine," I grumbled, insulted by his disinterest, stomping over to the kitchen to ditch my cup and plate in the sink and then I turned to him with an angry expression, holding out my hand, "give me your credit card."

Two hours and three trains later Heero and I arrived a vast life-style boulevard, with shops varying from home improvement, to interior accessories. I knew Heero really didn't want to come with me, I could tell from his glowering demeanor, but I wanted him there and sometimes that should be enough, sometimes that should mean something, even though it did mean I would have to stand his scowling all day.

I knew the issue of money would be the best way to convince him to come along with me. The thought of me, with his credit card, in a store where expensive things are sold, irked him enough to leave his work for the day. My erratic spending behavior had become apparent on our little clothes-shopping spree. If Heero didn't have his emotions in check as much as he had, he would have reeled back when the cashiers added it all up.

Sometimes I wished I could freely spend money and not ask Heero for his credit card every time I wanted to by a carton of milk, but Heero never offered to open a shared account and I didn't want to be so intrusive to ask, after all, it was his money, he worked for it. Contrary to complaining about not having free access to money, I should be grateful that Heero willingly paid rent and food and everything else we needed, for the both us, without ever mentioning it or demanding appraisal or credit.
Side by side were stores for every shopper - more importantly, for every budget. I guided Heero to the IKEA (1), a centuries old furniture, lifestyle and interior design store with trendy things at an affordable price. The wide range of colors that decorated the entrance hall of the store must have shocked Heero, but he blankly walked two steps behind me. I looked over my shoulder once in a while, to see how he was doing. I noticed he didn't have much interest in the things surrounding him, he just looked at all the people with apparent distrust. I could see him do threat evaluations on all of them, quietly in his head. I had never put much faith in those "evals", I knew people to be tougher to figure out, especially the ones with bad intentions, but for Heero they served as guidelines in "peace time". I did a quick scan around myself and no one appeared to exceed threat level 2, this put me at ease, because I knew it would put Heero at ease. As far as possible.

"C'mon." I said to him with a smile and I grabbed hold of his hand and pulled him along, though the living room section, the kitchen section, the bedroom section, the children's room section and finally the accessories. I talked and Heero listened - or not, you never knew with him, there was no way to tell. When we made it to a doorway that read "exit", about two hours later, I was surprised to find that I was still holding Heero's hand. I looked down my own arm, at our intertwined fingers and then my gaze moved up Heero's arm, to settle on his face. His eyes were turned away from me, he was still focused on the people, their threat level going up because some were paying specific attention to us. But I knew that had nothing to do when them planning devious, terrorist attacks on a shopping district, but because there were these two guys in the middle of the aisle, arms extended out to each other, connected at their hands.

I relaxed my fingers and watched Heero's hand slip from mine. Immediately I could feel his eyes on me, but I did not look up at him to meet his gaze. I felt embarrassed and I knew the only reason Heero didn't was because he didn't understand what "holding hands" meant. I scraped my throat and said in my most masculine tone: "C'mon, man, let's go eat." As we turned, to go upstairs to the in-shop cafeteria, I caught the eyes of a father, looking directly at me, his two children dancing around him, tugging at his sleeve for his attention. People were never open books to me, but I could read him as though he was.

He was thinking: "Faggot".

We had a cheap brunch of crispy chicken- and tuna salad, before our hunt for furniture continued. I hoped Heero wouldn't ask me about what happened at the IKEA store. I really didn't want to answer that particular "I don't understand"-question surrounded by a crowd of possibly hostile people.

Luckily for me, he didn't. In fact, he didn't say a single word - "Hn" doesn't count - the entire day, only grunting his agreement or disagreement when I'd point at a table, chair or dresser that appealed to me.

Our final stop was a home improvement store for paint. I insisted on doing the kitchen cupboards and all the walls, explaining to Heero that I could not stand all the white. Normally he would have asked me, in that monotone that I have grown to love, "Why?". But he didn't today, subconsciously letting me know something was wrong, but I wasn't in the mindset to comfort him.

For the kitchen I picked an interesting shade of blue. I had tested for Heero's approval, but he just shrugged. Paint couldn't be efficient, nor inefficient, therefore he had no opinion on the matter. For the walls in the living room I chose a light shade of aqua that would fit nicely with the sand colored carpet we already had and the dark wooden furniture we - I - had ordered. I guessed I just liked the color blue, further avoiding Heero eyes. The bedroom would be a light brown, neutral and calm and the little office would be a deep shade of red.
My choices may not have been the most fashionable, but they suited the kind of feeling I wanted the rooms to evoke. I wondered if they would ever reflect on Heero.

At the checking counter Heero stepped forward to swipe his credit card through the machine, his only input.

During the quiet train ride back to our apartment, I figured it was a good thing the furniture wouldn't be delivered for another three weeks, that gave us plenty of time to paint all the rooms.

"Home sweet home!" I exclaimed cheerfully as we stepped through our own front door. Heero walked by me to place the heavy tins of paint on our dinner table, ignoring me completely, though that was nearly always the case. Still, I felt guilt, I had the idea that I had insulted him, which was never my intention, I just wanted to get the judgmental stares off our backs.

"I'm going to work tomorrow." He suddenly announced, arranging the tins of paint neatly next to each other.

"Oh." I hadn't expected otherwise. Either he decides himself to work on a Sunday, or he gets called in, or rather: he'd get a pressing email from Une, functioning as his boss, urging him to solve the latest case. I didn't really know what Heero did, just that he was a hacker, he never said anything else about it. To me it seemed like he was misplacing his righteousness, trying to crack every case, solving every problem before people were even aware they had a problem. I couldn't determine whether the job was filling an otherwise empty existence, or eating away at him, one nibble at a time.

In front of the paint he laid out all the equipment we had acquired for the chore: sandpaper, several brushes of different sizes, rollers and a paint tray. Because it was only four in the afternoon and I was against lounging around, I changed into an old pair of jeans and a plain white T-shirt. By myself I started sanding down the kitchen cabinets, Heero disappeared into the office.

I was a little upset that he didn't offer to help, but I should have known Heero better than that. He doesn't offer, only responds when asked or complies when ordered. Moreover, it might have been best to work alone for a while, away from the awkwardness that had sprouted between us that afternoon. I wasn't so much concerned with Heero's thoughts and, in hindsight, was neither that bothered by the plentiful homophobic stares, I was more worried about what it meant for myself, holding his hand like that, without even noticing. Apparently subconsciously I felt quite content and comfortable holding his hand and didn't register it as something abnormal at that moment, but I was having second thoughts about the "normality" of it all. Of course it wasn't normal for two regular guys to hold hands, I knew that, but we weren't regular guys, so I wondered were to draw the line. For normal people these things were clearer, more defined, borders were shaped by society over a long course of time and widely accepted. For us it was different. We have seen each other's naked bodies. We have touched each other's naked bodies. We have tended to each other's wounds. We have held each other for warmth in cold prison cells. I have shot him, twice. He has knocked me unconscious. All of these things were well out of the "normality spectrum" and left me feeling confused.

I had only finished the bottom cabinets by six o'clock and deemed it was time for dinner. Not feeling like cooking in a dusty kitchen with appliances, plates and cutlery strewn everywhere, I ordered pizza, one with every pizza topping known to man and one plain. Heero didn't care much for fast food.

I knocked on the door of the office but didn't open it, it would save him the trouble of hiding the confidential files he was working on. "Dinner will be here in about twenty minutes."
Okay.

Exactly twenty minutes later Heero emerged from the home office, he waited on the couch in front of the TV till the pizza man delivered five minutes later. With our respective pizza boxes in our laps, we sat next to each other on the wide couch and silently watched TV, eating the slices with our hands; another thing Heero didn't like, but he didn't complain.

"Let's watch something else." I suggested when the news broadcast we were watching started a report on the aftermath of the eve war. We didn't need to see that. We were breathing examples of the aftermath, twisted and ruined.

I never had any difficulty eating an entire pizza, stuffing is a technique best perfected on the streets, when opportunities to eat are scarce. An hour later, Heero had only finished two slices when he threw the rest out.

"You weren't hungry, buddy?"

Heero shrugged and then went back to work in the seclusion of the office.

I was doing it again, I realized, the mothering, the worrying. I just couldn't help but notice how little Heero ate; the breakfast bagel, lunch and dinner, no snacks, unlike me and no stuffing, unlike me.

Maybe he's afraid he'll get fat, I thought. It did dawn on me that the end of the war had been the end of a previously vigorous exercise routine for the both of us. I hadn't done a single push up since and neither had Heero, to my knowledge.

I worked on sanding the cabinets till I heard Heero exit the office and head for the bathroom for his evening shower. Knowing he would go to bed after that, I decided to stop. I had been so engrossed in the work I didn't even notice time pass. It was eleven PM and usually I'd be beat at this hour, desperately crawling towards my bed, but I felt invigorated and eager to start transforming this empty shell of someone else's home into something that is ours. In a totally normal - no holding hands - kind of way.

I dusted myself off a bit and headed for the bedroom, changing in the time it took Heero to shower. Occasionally I glanced at his blurry figure, moving behind the shower curtain, rinsing out his hair, face turned towards the warm spray of water. I was jerked awake by sudden silence. Heero had turned the water off and a bare arm reached past the curtain to the towel rack. I jumped into bed, hoping he hadn't caught me looking at him. No, I berated myself, I stared, totally fixated with the sight of him. Definitely not normal. I wondered what was the matter with me. When I had grabbed his hand that day, I didn't expect it to have as much effect on me later as it had. It had stirred up thoughts that I preferred sunken at the bottom of the heavy, clunky soup that was my mind.

After wearing it two nights, my Tampa High shirt made an ungracious stage exit to the hamper and it's stand-in, one of Heero's simple, black T-shirt, took it's place. The underwear was always the same, he owned like thirty identical pairs. Thirty because I had trouble keeping up with the laundry which, for some reason, had become my responsibility as an unspoken agreement. I never made any objection, not because I didn't mind it, but because I didn't trust Heero to separate colors and we would end up with one fucked up wardrobe.

"I'm almost done sanding the kitchen." I informed him. "It should be painted by the time you get home tomorrow."

This news didn't excite him the least. He didn't care which color our kitchen was, or the walls, or
that we hardly had any furniture. Heero wasn't interested in making this apartment a home, Heero was only interested in efficiency, practicality and emergency exits. As long as I didn't obstruct the doorway with a dresser, he could not be bothered.

A little peeved, but not deterred in my resolve to make us a normal home for two regular roommates, I wished him a goodnight and then reached out to switch off the light.

The furniture was delivered too soon, I hadn't finished all the painting yet, caught up in school projects. I had the delivery man stack all the heavy cardboard boxes on top of each other behind the couch, hit with realization what a daunting task it would be to put all the furniture together. I was certain I would get a barely concealed "I told you so"-look from Heero once he saw all of it.

Luckily, he was at work - I never figured I would ever say that - so I had the rest of the Saturday to get as much done as possible. Painting the office and the bedroom would have to wait, those chores did not have priority.

I knelt down and opened the first, large, rectangular box. It were the pieces of the dresser for the living room, to be placed against the far wall, parallel to the couch. It was a simple design and the construction plan seemed pretty straightforward, but putting together all of the nine drawers took me longer than I would have preferred. After only one piece of furniture I was already tired and defeated. I wiggled it the last few inches into place against the wall. The bare surface of the dresser mocked me. I grabbed the bolts from by the TV and placed them on the dresser.

"Better." I concluded.

Next was a bookcase, also for in the living room. More desolate surface space.

By the time Heero came home I had finished everything but the new dinner table, on which I was furiously working, but the damn thing stubbornly refused to cooperate. Sitting with my legs folded - painfully sore and stiff - on the floor, my arms numb from keeping the tabletop balanced on only three of it's legs and thoroughly frustrated because the plans didn't make any sense, I was not the ideal person to be coming home to.

Heero assessed the situation from the doorway for a second before actually stepping inside. His dread was not uncalled for, my mood was volatile.

Though he didn't ask, I promptly informed him of my dilemma, with my one free arm I gestured wildly around myself to punctuate my words, "The plan," with a pointed index finger I pricked the construction plan as if I wanted to stab the life out of it, "clearly says there should be four, three inch, steel pegs. One for each leg! But-" I dramatically raised my finger, "I have only three. One in that leg, one in that leg and one in that leg," I pointed at all the table legs respectively, "which leaves me with how many pegs for this leg, Heero?" I asked with a heavy tone of agitated sarcasm.

He didn't answer, even someone with social skills as underdeveloped as his could tell that my question was rhetorical.

"None! None! I only have these stupid one inch, wooden pegs! Which are utterly useless. I guess I'll just have to sit here for the rest of my life to hold this damn table up!" I grumbled.

"Do the pegs look something like this?" He asked behind me, his voice ever dry.

I twisted my head around, with every intention to glare at him because he was probably pointing at the picture of the pegs in the construction guide - he could be dry and thick headed like that. My jaw dropped to my knees as I looked up at him. Pinched between his thumb and index finger was
the exact same peg that I had hammered into the other table legs. "W-where did you get that?" I sputtered.

"Just under the couch."

Baffled I looked at the couch, about two meters away from me. The peg must have jumped out of the plastic bag and rolled over there when I had ripped it open over an hour ago. Sheepishly I looked back at Heero, who handed me the peg. I felt relief wash over me, my problem was solved. "Heero, I love you."

He straightened back up, his arms suddenly tense and his jaw clenched.

"No, I mean, I'm just really glad I have a roommate that finds little shit like this." I held the peg up to him like I was making a toast. "Thanks, buddy." I turned my face away from him and released a deep breath. I didn't think my little joke would be like launching a torpedo into the waters...

Heero stepped past me with stiff movements, a clear sign of his discomfort, and he disappeared into the office.

But there was a torpedo in the water, one that I couldn't stop thinking about and couldn't stop worrying about. Heero's fleet - so to speak, since we're being metaphorical - was in no danger, the "I love you"-torpedo would in all probability just sink into the abyss, where it will implode upon impact with the rocky sea bed. Heero was safely out of range, but I was right on top of the explosion, drifting on the sea's surface in a little dingy, violently being rocked back and forth.

I occupied myself with the table to push questions from my mind, but with the newly found peg, my work was quickly done. I looked around my self and to my disappointed, the apartment, though fuller, didn't look any more homely than it had before. It still had that abandoned look about it.

My thoughts drifted back to Heero and the L-bomb I had dropped. I didn't mean it the way lovers mean it. I didn't mean "in love", or romance.

So what did I mean?

Did normal "guy-friends" tell each other that they love each other? Is love even something that can be said without disrupting the concept of "friendship"?

"Peace time is a pain in the A." I mumbled to myself, cleaning up the mess of plastic bags and cardboard boxes that I had made. During war all you had to worry about was surviving. That was hard, but in a way it was so much easier, after all, we knew what we were doing back then. Now we are completely clueless and though I try to lead Heero along to the best of my abilities, it was the blind leading the blind.

Or rather, I thought, remembering an old saying on L2, in the land of the blind, one-eye is king (2), giving myself a little more credit.

"I don't love the guy." I continued to mutter, picking things up from the floor. I stopped myself. What I said was not fair, not to Heero and not to myself. Of course I love Heero, I told myself, why else would I be here, doing this with him, if not for love? He was my friend after all, or so I had myself convinced, there was nothing wrong with loving a friend in a friendly manner.

As soon as I had the mess cleared I started on a simple dinner of rice, meat and vegetables. I mindlessly stirred the broccoli in the boiling water, in the freshly painted kitchen. It took three days for the smell to disappear, of course by then I had started on the living room, which stank for another four days. For someone not given the tools to build a home, I praised myself for doing an
all right job, that's something that just needed to be done from time to time and Heero sure as hell wasn't going to do it for me. It was funny to even imagine him saying something along the lines of "Good job". I nearly choked on my own tongue when Heero had complimented my piloting skills, Heero approving of my paint job would just be way out there.

"Heero!" I called. "Dinner's ready!" I scrunched my face up. Homemaker, okay, but housewife?

"How was work?" I asked him over dinner. I never could stand the silence for long.

He thought about it for a long time, maybe going through his day and evaluating everything. "Good." was his final answer and he looked at me for approval.

I smiled. "It's not a pop quiz Heero. Were there more guys at work, or was it just you?"

My desperate attempt to keep the conversation going was not in vain as Heero answered after another moment of thorough contemplation: "There were more."

"How many?"

"Five." His answer was quick, so it was something that he had already thought about.

"Do you know them."

He gave me as close to a "duh" look as possible without too much facial movement. "Yes."

"I don't mean if you know their names, but do you know them, what kind of guys they are?"

"No. Just names."

I grinned at him and mocked: "Aha, I see a flaw in your battle tactics Captain, isn't it true that you need to know the members of your team, so you know who you can rely on?" I had merely wanted to inspire him to get to know his colleagues a little in the future, but I should have phrased my comment more carefully as I could tell by the look on his face that it had registered as an insult.

"We are not a team."

I could tell that I had struck a cord as his words were shorter, like stabs.

"I know what I'm doing. I don't need to rely on anyone." I didn't apologize, because I realized I had done nothing wrong. He was taking it the wrong way and was reacting far too defensively. I'm talking barbed wire and artillery fire. "I didn't mean it like that. You know I didn't."

"You say more things you don't mean?"

I could have sworn his tone was vindictive. I stared at him for a while before I realized my torpedo had hit. It had penetrated his steel hull and exploded, now a fire was raging down below.

I would be mad at his childish spite if I wasn't so silly-happy about getting a human - dare I say emotional - reaction out of him. "Heero," I said in a hushed tone, leaning over the table as if we were about to discuss a secret, "is this about what I said today? That I love you?" I waited for a reaction, all I got was a weak nod. "Heero, I'm sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to imply that we are uh... you know... gay." I chuckled sheepishly. "'Cuz of course we're not! I'm not and I know sure as hell you're not either so..." my voice died down.
"I understand, Duo. You misspoke, but then you made it very clear."

I had a feeling of dread. "Made what clear?"

"That I'm the roommate who finds miscellaneous clutter."

I smiled at him. "I don't think I put it like that."

"I'm paraphrasing." He explained.

Things fell silent between us. Heero continued to eat and I just studied the pattern of the wood of the new table as I retraced my steps throughout our conversation. I realized I had missed an important point, the reason of my dread. I cast my glance up at him, his head was bowed forward and his bangs covered most of his face. I imagined a sad expression on his face, but I knew he would never let his emotions show, even though he must be feeling like a beaten puppy.

"Heero,"

He looked up, there was no sad expression, or hope for what I was about to say, he was just himself, perfectly impassive. But I loved him regardless.

"You're not just my roommate who finds, er, shit. You're my friend, who just happens to be my roommate who finds shit. And I love you as my friend."

He looked into my eyes for a few seconds and time went by without any words spoken. The expression on his face didn't alter the slightest, the blank mask firmly in place, but I knew him well enough to know that I had warmed his heart, if just a little and in turn, he warmed my heart with a curt but endearing: "Okay."

"Okay." I agreed. He didn't need to say the words for me to know he loved me too, these little moment - though socially awkward - were enough confirmation. I had always known. We were a dysfunctional little unit that in spite of irreconcilable differences still stuck together. Because we loved each other in our own demented ways. Love grown from a tenderly nourished trust.

To take the edge off the situation I blabbered on as normal, running by him the idea to get a gym membership, so we could stay fit and healthy. As far as I could tell from his "Hn" he thought it was a brilliant idea - my turn to paraphrase. At receiving his approval I surfed the web that evening for local gyms and found there was only one within walking distance. At least that narrows it down, I thought and looked around their website. Pleased with the pictures I saw and the reviews I read I clicked on the "online sign up" button and wrestled myself through the un-dignifying experience of having to ask Heero for his credit card again.

Night fell quickly and we proceeded with our evening routine consisting of Heero taking his daily shower while I pretended not to notice his every movement.

With his hair still damp he got into his bed.

I shamelessly watched him, like he sometimes shameless watched me. It didn't seem to bother him. My heartbeat leaped into a thunderous pace when he turned his head and our eyes met, but for some reason neither of us looked away and we ended up staring into each other's eyes. The silence between us was not awkward or uncomfortable, instead it had a serene quality. I felt my heartbeat slow down to it's usual pace and my body relaxed. I smiled at him, he didn't smile back, but I could have sworn I say his eyes light up.

"Wanna go check out the gym tomorrow?"
"I am going to work."

I was a little disappointed. I didn't think that I let it show, but maybe I did, because he surprised me in a positive way with his next statement.

"I suppose I could go to work a little later and we could work out first."

"I would like that." I admitted.

"Okay."

I smiled. "Okay."
"The woman is relentless..." I muttered.

One hour earlier:

It's four thirty, I concluded, casting my first glance of the day at my alarm clock. My vision was blurred with sleep but I could still make out the offensive red letters. Will I ever be able to sleep in? I ignored my growing back pains and stayed in bed for as long as I could stand it.

By four forty I was kicking the sheets away from my body and jumped out of bed. I stretched lengthily and arched my back with a groan. I have come to call the painful lower back aches as "pilot back". Being jostled around violently while you are firmly strapped into a hard, uncomfortable seat didn't do wonders for the vertebrae and back muscles. I knew Quatre and WuFei had it too. I could tell because Quatre tended to whine about it and WuFei had the habit of stretching thoroughly, like me. I had always teased that he looked like a pregnant woman, with his hands on his back as he arched. Now I had eagerly adopted the technique.

I took my time getting dressed, if I was at the bakery before five, they might not be out front in the store yet and I would have to wait. I did not like waiting.

With plenty of time to spare I leisurely walked down the streets. It was going to be one of those hot, humid days. More of them were coming as summer was fast approaching and I was not looking forward to it. Even at the early hour and in only a pair of dark jeans and a T-shirt, I felt the fabric getting damp in my armpits. With all the time that I had, I should have remembered to spray on some deodorant.

At five o'clock I was met at the door by an apologetic face.

"I'm so sorry, Duo," the old lady began, gesturing me to come inside, "Drea messed up the orders... She's a really sweet girl but-" Her train of thought was derailed, "You should meet her!" Suddenly she sounded excited.

"No, really," I resisted her pull toward the back of the store, for an old-timer she had a good grip, "I should get back, make breakfast ready." I knew what her intentions had been, but I wasn't interested in meeting anyone in that regard.

"I don't have breakfast. I don't have bagels." She sounded frustrated with herself.

"That's alright. I don't mean to be a bother."

She shook her head, "You are not a bother, you are a good boy. I will find you something else for breakfast." and she scurried to the back room. I could hear her talking in a language I didn't understand. She emerged moments later holding a paper bag like it were queen Elizabeth's crown jewels. "Croissants," she announced as she handed me the bag, "fresh out of the oven, hot hot hot." She smiled at me.

"Thank you, you are so kind. Are you sure you don't want me to pay?" Her generosity made me feel a little guilty.
"No, please! Don't be silly. You go home now and eat. Good boy must grow to become good man!" She made powerful hand gestures to emphasize her point.

I chuckled while I was being ushered out of the store. "Thank you for the croissants."

She smiled at me again, a gap between her teeth showing. "You don't have to keep thanking me, Duo. Go, go."

I went back to our apartment, our home. I was looking forward to our work-out, finally an activity we could engage in together, something different from the alien movie nights. Heero was still in bed, his morning ritual was short, due to purposefully established and well timed efficiency of course.

"And because someone prepares his breakfast." I said to myself with a smile as I cut one croissant through the middle and placed a slice of cheese in between. My own croissant was slathered royally with peanut butter. It might not have been the most conventional combination but I ate peanut butter with nearly everything, so croissants weren't that much of a stretch.

I had just taken my spot by the window when I was startled by our loud buzzer. I leaned into the bay window to look down at the front door of the apartment complex. Waiting impatiently outside was a delivery man, shifting the weight of his obese body from one foot to the other. His face was obscured by a baseball hat, his finger went for the bell again and in our apartment the buzzer sounded once more. I hurried over to the intercom before the third buzz would wake Heero.

"Yes?" I didn't know what else to say, we had never gotten mail before.

"Uh," my own uncertainty threw the delivery man off, "I have a package for 'Hero Yuy'."

My whole body tensed. "Is it heavy?"

"Uh... Uh, no... why?"

I shook my head. Yeah, why, Maxwell? I asked myself. Like anyone would send Heero a bomb or something... "Hmm..."

"Sir? Is this Heero Yuy speaking?"

"No. I'm his roommate."

"Could you come down here? I just need a signature, so..."

"I'll be down in a second."

I hurried downstairs. I saw his figure behind the frosted glass. "I should have asked which company he works for. I should have asked for the return address..." I wasn't sure if that was truly me speaking, or Heero whispering paranoid nothings in my ear. I opened the door just a little.

He gave me a weird look and held out a digital reader and a plastic pen.

With the pen I scribbled my signature on the touch screen where indicated, all the while never fully opening the door.

He handed me the package, small of size and so light it almost seemed there was nothing in it. He left with one final, confused frown.

I sniffed at the folds of the cardboard as I went back upstairs. I didn't detect any suspicious scent,
but a lot of dangerous gasses were odorless.

"This is just crazy!" I said to myself and once I had returned to our kitchen I ripped the box open. I didn't care that the label said "Heero Yuy". A protection detail was the perfect excuse for snooping around in privately addressed mail.

The box held no biological or chemical weapon, just a single piece of paper, rolled up and bound by a velvet, red ribbon. I eyed it curiously. What the...? I thought.

I gingerly lifted the delicate roll of paper out of the box with my two index fingers, judging the grain of the paper. Expensive, I noted, some sort of handmade parchment. It obviously didn't form a threat to Heero's wellbeing but my curiosity was too piqued to wait for Heero to come out of bed and open it himself. I pulled the ribbon loose and unrolled the paper. Intricate calligraphy came into view, it was almost impossible to read.

"Dear mister Yuy," I read aloud, "You are cordially invited to the second annual ball celebrating the Earth Sphere Unified Nation, as a guest of honor..." The rest of the invitation praised the soldiers of the war briefly but concentrated on the peaceful relations between the Earth and the colonies under the Earth Sphere Unified nation, denouncing violence of any sort. "This sounds an awful lot like..." I mumbled, skimming through the rest of the barely legible invitation.

"Oh good God... The woman is relentless..." I breathed as I read the signature at the bottom. "Relena Cecily Esme Peacecraft... how many names does a person need? One for each of her personalities...?"

I felt a little caught in the act when the bedroom door opened and Heero stepped out. Even though he was going to work later, he wasn't wearing his uniform, that was probably folded neatly inside the duffel bag he carried with him. He had donned grey sweatpants and one of his fitted black T-shirts. He placed the bag on the floor by the table and moved into the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee. With the cup at his lips he walked back towards me and cast his gaze down at the table, where his breakfast lay prepared for him. He looked up at me.

"They were out of bagels." I explained and watched him pick up the croissant. "This is good too. Besides, a little variation in diet isn't a bad thing."

"I like bagels." He admitted, taking a bite from his croissant.

I smiled at him and replied: "Duly noted." I held the pretentious invitation up for him to see. "You got an invite."

He didn't seem interested and didn't take the letter from me.

"The second annual Ball for the ESUN. You're a guest of honor." I teased him. "It's probably all Relena's doing, a devious ploy to get you where she wants you, under the pretence of honoring the Gundam pilots." My voice was unintentionally bitter.

He finally took the letter from me to read it for himself. The expression on his face betrayed little, but his lips grew a little taut. That would mean nothing to anyone but me. I knew he was displeased. He probably disliked the idea as much as I did, attending as "guests of honor" while guilt and doubt was eating away at us, to remember a time of which only we knew how atrocious it was and to celebrate a time we had difficulty adjusting to. The invitation requested him kindly to prepare a speech, a testimony of how little Relena knew about him and of the war. What was Heero supposed to say up on that stage? What was anyone supposed to say? Our words were not the words Relena and the other pacifist politicians wanted to hear. Our words refer only to pain,
dirt, blood and doubt. Hardly a topic to discuss with royals and upper class dignities who just wanted to talk about peace like it's a shiny new toy every kid on the block wants to play with.

"Where is your invitation?"

His question was logical, but it startled me nonetheless.

"This invitation is clearly addressed to me." He pointed out dryly.

I smiled grimly at him. "Mine probably got lost in the mail."

He frowned at that. "I don't think the postal office would be so careless."

His sweet innocence and ignorance to sarcastic verbal cues was as endearing as it was amusing.

Heero continued his breakfast under my watchful eye, not bothered in the least by my scrutiny as I further familiarized myself with the color variations in his eyes, the still muscles in his face and the slight, unintentional movements of his mouth as he himself was lost in thought.

"Do you want to go?" I finally asked, curious about his answer and underlying motivations.

"I'm not ready yet." He said and took a purposeful bite of his croissant.

My lips curled. I sat down across from him at the dinner table and placed the invitation back in front of him, to clarify my question. "I meant: Do you want to go to the ball?"

He eyed the calligraphy. "I don't know." He answered honestly. "Do you want to go?"

I shrugged. I wasn't dead-set against it, but I also knew it wouldn't make for a fun evening, being stuck up in a rented suit. "We could go. You don't have to make a speech."

"Do you want to go?" He repeated, noting the deliberate formulation of my answer. He didn't know why I tried to evade his question, just knew that I hadn't given an appropriate answer. His logic told him a simple solution was to ask again.

I shrugged again. I didn't really know myself, I hadn't made up my mind yet, there were more cons that pros, but for some reason I edged towards a "Yes" on the RSVP. Not just to bug the shit out of Relena Cecily Esmee Peacecraft but more importantly, I realized, Quatre, Trowa and WuFei's invitation probably won't get lost. The ball would create the perfect opportunity to see them again, without putting pressure on either of us. But the suit, I reminded myself and the small-talk with people who think they are better than everyone and are just looking for a pat on the back while I just wanted to smack them in the face... "I guess I don't either."

He nodded. "I'm done now." He announced, moving to place the empty plate and cup in the sink.

"Okay, let's go." I grabbed my own duffel bag by the door and together we headed out. We moved quietly through the hallways, as to not disturb the other residents and took the three stairs to warm up. In a comfortable pace we walked down the street, sometimes we bumped shoulder and I was happy Heero didn't shy away from the contact. Who gets happy from that? I asked myself, with my lips tightly pursed in displeasure, that certainly isn't normal.

It took us five minutes to get to the gym, which had just opened. We were welcomed by a receptionist, who signed us in and showed us to the dressing rooms, the showers and finally the several work-out areas. I smiled when we passed a ring for sparring, that might be of particular interest to Heero. We didn't need to get dressed, we were already wearing our gym clothes, a clean.
"Cardio first?" I suggested.

Heero nodded and he followed me to the area where all the treadmills were. We picked two side by side by the window. Since it had been a while, I set mine to a medium pace, having no intention to exert myself too much and end up with painfully sore muscles, but, being a guy - competitive by nature - I responded to Heero's fast pace by cranking up the speed on my own machine. We were running in step with each other, but fifteen minutes in, I wasn't keeping up with the treadmill quite as gracefully as Heero was. I had broken a sweat, the back and front of my white T-shirt were embarrassingly wet. I couldn't get enough oxygen through my nose so I had opened my mouth and started to pant and the muscles in my calves and thighs had started aching and burning. I knew I would have to give up soon, or I would regret it come tomorrow. It shouldn't bother me as much as it did, after all, Heero didn't think of it as a competition and therefore wouldn't mock me for backing down, but it was a pride thing, fed by years of training with the burly men of the sweater crew who made an art form of mockery.

Defeated I reached towards the red arrow pointing down and pressed a few times, till the speed had been reduced to a walking pace.

"I'm gonna..." I took a deep breath, "lift some weights..." I stopped the machine and stepped off.

"Okay." He didn't even sound out of breath.

The weights were in the back, far away from the cardio section. I had chosen the weights deliberated because it would give me the privacy to catch my breath. There were only three other people working out at the early hour on a Sunday morning. Two men who were also in the cardio section and a woman in the aerobics section, stretching her body elegantly.

"Oh Jesus..." I breathed, sitting down on one of the benches. I never did excel in cardio, I always blamed it on the boredom of the work-out. Weights and sparring was more my kind of exercise. I looked over at the ring and at my frantically beating heart and painful lungs taking effortful breaths, I knew sparring would have to wait till next time. Friend or not, Heero would not fail to take advantage of an opponent's weakness. He would whoop my ass and I'd never get an apology. I chuckled breathlessly at that thought. Though difficult to live with someone in that kind of mindset, I knew I could always feel safe around Heero, he may whoop my ass but he would kill anyone else.

Feeling better I grabbed a three kilogram weight in each hand and worked them up and down from my knees to my chest. When my muscles had warmed up, I choose a heavier weight and continued the repetitive motions. Heero joined me and imitated my course of action, starting with a lighter weight before working himself up to something more serious, straining and ultimately: muscle building.

The weights made me feel better. Heero may be the faster runner and he kicks and hits harder too, but my arms were bigger. My pride was vain, as Heero would argue if he knew. My muscles may be bigger, as was my entire frame, but Heero's body was most efficient, more compact and lithe, but with unrivaled endurance and strength. He didn't need to tell me that, I knew, yet as vain pride was all I could get, especially if I start arguing with myself on Heero's behalf, I took it and brushed it off's an innocent "guy thing".

"Duo?"

I looked up at the source of the high pitched voice that had called my name. I was surprised to see Aiden Pippa, I didn't think regular high school kids went working out on an early Sunday morning.
After staring at her inappropriately long I blabbered a cheery greeting. Only later did I recognize the outfit, she had been the woman I had noticed in the aerobics area earlier.

She turned to Heero and held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Aiden, I go to school with Duo."

Of course Heero didn't take the offered hand, he stubbornly kept lifting the weights and uttered a dangerous "Hello".

Aiden was undeterred by his hostile demeanor and sat down on the bench close to mine. As I feared, she hadn't come to lift weights.

"So who's he?" She opened the conversation, which I suspected to be awkward and slow, nodding towards Heero who was sitting at my other side.

"Heero is my friend and my roommate." I continued to lift the weights but she didn't take the hint. She crossed her long, slim legs and leaned in towards me. I noticed she was wearing make-up and thought it was silly.

"Is he always that quiet?" She asked with a sultry smile.

"You got more than most people do." I said and added a chuckle when she looked at me funny.

She joined me in laughter. I could tell it was forced, being the master of fake smiles and laughs. For the second time, talking to her, I got the distinct feeling that she was being flirtatious and found myself questioning her motives. What could she want from me? As far as I knew, though introspection wasn't my strong suit, I was the dorky outsider who hung out with the strange, outspoken southern girl. I've seen the popular boys flock around her in what I observed to be normal adolescent male behavior, sniffing out the estrogen.

"We could work-out together." She glanced past me at Heero, who had decided to ignore us, "The three of us."

My brain scrambled for an excuse. "Sparring!" I blurted, catching perplexed faces from both Aiden and Heero. I smiled it off. "Heero and I were just about to uhm... push each other around a little."

Normal friends would have ruined my cover with stupid, surprised questions like: "We are?", but that was the beauty of having a silent partner in crime. He didn't rat me out. Instead, he put down the weights and rose, ready to go with me to the ring.

I got up myself.

Unfortunately, so did Aiden. "I'll watch you."

I stared, dumbfounded. Why?

"If you don't mind." She sweetly batted her eyelashes at me.

"Course not." I pivoted on my heels and walked over to the ring with short steps and stiff shoulders. My whole body burned from the previous work-outs, it wasn't wise to fight Heero in this condition. Heero had trouble containing his strength in a combat situation, he could end up hurting me more than he intended to because he expected me to be able to block and evade more of his jabs and kicks.

By the ring there was protective gear, but we paid it no heed. In real combat, you didn't have time
to don gloves and put on protective head gear. Moreover, it looked geeky.

"Level?" Heero asked, fully in soldier mode, shaking his arms and legs to loosen the muscles.

"Mild." I whispered back, so Aiden wouldn't hear. I didn't know why I cared, but I did.

Heero raised an eyebrow at my hushed response, it was yet another thing he did not understand.

We face each other, brought our fists up to our faces and held still for a moment, seizing each other up. At my curt "Go" Heero jabbed his fist at me with lightening speed, but I ducked and he missed. I grinned, he always opened with left, because he figured everyone expected him to open with right. It was his tell, his only tell, the only free pass anyone would ever get from him, after that, your reflexes would have to be fast enough to keep up him, because the only sign you get that he is going to hit you, is that fist speeding towards you.

I threw punches back at him, three in rapid succession, but he danced around me.

"She is watching us." Heero pointed out whilst throwing and evading punches.

"Don't think about it." An impossible suggestion as I was hyper aware of her watchful stare myself. Feeling pressured into doing something spectacular, which I usually didn't care for. Heero was the quiet one with the flashy moves, I was the underrated blabbering fool who didn't give a damn - just did whatever got the job done.

"You guys look hot." Aiden called, admiring us from outside the ring.

I was caught off guard and was barely able to make Heero miss with his next move; a stiff, outstretched hand trying to cut into the juncture between my shoulder and my neck. I shook it off and pinned my gaze back onto his eyes, but staring into the blue orbs, I found myself becoming distracted by the sight of them and the surroundings they were set in. His eyes were dangerous, peering low at me from beneath his eyebrows. He had started to sweat just enough to give his golden skin a light sheen. His lips had parted to get bigger lungfuls of air, more efficiently. I couldn't speak for myself, I probably just looked like a sweating, panting moron, but Heero did look hot. My blood ran cold at that and the icy fluid froze my body.

Slap! My cheek burned from Heero's sole act of charity: instead of taking the obvious opportunity to crack open my eye socket, he slapped me across my face with an open palm - lightly by his standard. His eyes scolded me. "Stay focused." They beamed, sharp like daggers.

Aiden's laughter added insult to injury, it fuelled my dented ego and I made mistake number one: emotionally based fighting. Heero expertly twisted away from my sloppy, angry right hook and grasped my arm by the wrist in a death grip and gave me another slap across the face, from the other side.

With both cheeks burning, more from shame than pain, I took a few steps back and spotted the slight, victorious grin on his lips. Anyone else would have judged Heero's expression as blank, but I recognized the minute changes in his facial features. The bastard is mocking me! I thought, indignant. Before he figured I had recovered I moved forward and pushed out my right fist, he evaded it by moving to his right, my left, which I had anticipated. I gave him a piece of his own medicine and slapped him with my left hand.

I grinned at his barely surprised expression. "Don't ever get cocky with me, Yuy." I bantered.

He didn't take the jest lightly. I saw his leg twitch, but he stopped himself from delivering a low kick, realizing "mild sparring" didn't include kicking.
We continued but were both stopped by Aiden's following question. "Where did you guys learn how to fight like this?"

Heero and I looked at each other, both failing to come up with a sufficient lie.

"Just... You know..." I was a little out of breath and worked my way out of the awkward situation with a trademark, carefree smile.

Aiden smiled back and handed me my water bottle. "Must be a great work-out."

I drank heavily from the bottle to avoid looking at her and responding to her. I felt very uncomfortable in her presence which exuded an obvious sexuality that was supposed to move me - being a young, healthy, fully functional male - but of all the confusion feelings it left me with, none of them was lust. Though surely a girl like her would be irresistible to any guy...

"Maybe you could teach me?"

I caught Heero's questioning frown. I took the bottle from my lips and answered that it was more of a guy sport.

Aiden huffed at that, giving me a feminist flavored speech, but no matter what she would tell me, I knew men and women were not equal, because I could never imagine myself hitting a woman, within or outside the ring, contrary to men, of whom many have felt the blunt force of my knuckles.

"I just can't hit a woman." I explained to stop her short of producing a political, verbal essay.

Her face turned friendly with an endeared smile. "Aw, that's so cute. And so like you."

Like me? I asked myself. How could she possibly know what was "like me"? She didn't even know me. What was up with this misplaced interest anyway?

"I'm going to shower." Heero announced.

"Bye, Heero." Aiden called.

Heero just walked away.

"He's a real charmer." She joked.

I felt strangely insulted and defensive. "He's okay." I retorted.

Aiden scoffed. "He is weird, that's what he is."

I glared at her and she backed away at the intensity. "That's not fair," I pointed an angry, accusing finger at her, "you don't even know him."

"I'm sorry." She raised her hands in surrender, like I was holding a gun to her forehead. "I'll see you at school tomorrow." She didn't sound scared, just confused. With one last look she quickly moved away from me, back to another area where she soon continued her yoga exercise.

I released a deep sigh, feeling guilty about going all soldier on her, but I did not regret standing up for my friend. I joined him the locker room and took the shower stall next to his - the only one in use when I came in, Heero's uniform hung over the door.

"Sorry 'bout that." I started, turning on the warm water. "About Aiden." I added.
"Why?"

"Well, she was a little annoying. Didn't you think so?" I raised my voice to be heard over the sound of the running water.

"No, why are you apologizing for that?"

"It's just something you say, when someone you brought into the situation was annoying."

"Why? You have no control over her actions."

I smiled under the spray. Always the rational one, I mused. "I don't know."

"It doesn't make any sense. I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand everything. No one does."

He was silent.

I chuckled. He still wanted to understand everything. "Heero?" I called out after a few seconds of contemplation.

"Hn?" He turned off the shower and started drying himself off.

"Why do you have to understand everything?"

He thought about this quietly as his hands moved to dry his body. Finally, he answered, with that innocently honest tone that his voice sometimes had: "I don't know. I hope that when I understand, it will be normal."

"What isn't normal?"

"Everything."

My smile turned sad. I felt for him. I could empathize with his confusion, there were a lot of things I didn't understand either, of most I accepted my lack of understanding, of others I knew life would whisper the answers in my ear sooner or later and I had the patience to wait. But for Heero, this was his new mission, to be normal and experience mundane things as normal. And as rule number one dictates, the mission has priority. "And that's why you have to understand everything."

He grunted affirmatively.

"Okay. I'll help you, buddy."

He didn't thank me, he didn't say anything, probably because he had to refrain himself from biting back: "I don't need your help."

When I turned off the water I could hear clothes rustling in the stall beside mine and then the sharp sound of a metal belt buckle.

"I'm going to work." He announced, opening the door of his stall.

"See you later. Bye." I listened to him walk away, instantly missing his calm, assertive presence. "What a total man-crush you have, Maxwell." I whispered flippantly to myself, but after that I was deeply lost in thought all day.
Heero and I had both been silent since that morning. Usually I would have started up a meaningless conversation just to get some grunts and nods out of him, but I didn't trust my voice with words, afraid of what more stupid things could fall out.

I wouldn't call it an epiphany, but my innocent little comment whispered under the spray of the gym's shower, had gotten me thinking. Only it had gotten me thinking about things I didn't want to think about. I was suddenly seeing Heero and our relationship in a different light. The light had been tilted and from this new angle it illuminated aspects of us that had previously been in the dark. Shadows shifted away from aspects that may have better stayed in that dark a little while longer, away from our own - and everybody else's - prying eyes.

Maybe those things I had deemed abnormal, weren't abnormal at all, just not relevant to the kind of relationship I had convinced myself that we were in. In hindsight, constantly thinking about him, worrying about him, always looking at him - even when he's in the shower! - and not being able to sleep without him, started looking a lot like a sincere crush.

But he's Heero, I told myself with a scoff, Heero is asexual. When I look at him, dressed in clothes I picked out for him or naked as the day he was born, I didn't think about sex. All I thought about was him and how grateful I was to have him with me and how proud I was of both of us for coming this far, in peace time, together.

So I didn't understand how the two added up. A crush, if that's what it is, should involve thoughts of sex too, shouldn't it?

My confusion and inner qualms were apparent on my face, but Heero was an illiterate in facial expressions. He didn't catch my change in demeanor and my uncommon silence. On one hand I felt comforted by that, I wasn't in any state of mind to be dealing with his "Why?" and "I don't understand". I had a lot of questions I needed to answer for myself first, a lot of things that I had yet to understand. On the other hand, I felt disappointed that he either didn't notice or couldn't be bothered, perhaps even grateful for the rare pause in my incessant speaking.

I could reason that my affection - call it a crush, call it whatever - for Heero was only a natural consequence of fighting a war together, being forced to trust each other with our lives, and now exposing ourselves to one another in our most vulnerable state: without missions, without goals, without purpose. A human coping mechanism against loneliness, latching onto the one person that is there and knows you and knows what you have been through.

But that sounded so clinical and demeaned so much of my feelings to psychological processes that can be reduced to statistics and formulas - if X than Y. I hated being reduced to anything that wasn't me, let alone statistics. Moreover, it was unjust towards Heero, he is my friend and he deserves to have me feel these things such as trust, comradeship and concern, without it being pulled apart and left without meaning.

The problem of rejecting the purely post-war, psychological approach, was embracing the concept
of a romantic infatuation, maybe even love. After all, I had already come so far as admitting that I love him as a friend. Can someone you love as a friend, really turn into a non threatening infatuation? A crush that will burn brightly like a jet fuel fire but be doused in a matter days? If you love someone as a friend, you can only move up from there, right? Not reduce him to a school girl's puppy love.

I put my cup of coffee on the window sill to rub my temples and try to ease away a sudden headache. I was in my head too much, thinking about it too much, making too big a deal out of it.

I felt exhausted and drained, not up for a long day at school, but I had no choice. I refused the idea to call in sick. Gundam pilots don't call in sick, especially when we're not really sick. I smiled as I remembered a certain school infiltration with Heero.

We had snuck out of our dorm rooms in the middle of the night to intercept an escorted Ozzie caravan. We couldn't use our Gundams, even my stealthy Deathscythe could be heard from miles away, besides, the mission required more finesse.

When the convoy passed a line of trees that had branches reaching over the road, in which we had been hiding, we jumped onto the last truck. With his pocket knife Heero cut open the canvas and jumped in ahead of me. By the time I had moved over and followed him inside, the two soldiers had already been expertly silenced, without the driver ever noticing. We stripped the two soldiers, who had a similar built to ours and donned their uniforms. Using their coms we called in a disturbance and the whole caravan came to a halt. Before anyone could see we dragged the unconscious soldiers out of the truck and hid them in the thicket by the road. All around us Ozzie's started scouring the grounds, anxiously aiming their weapons at every rustle in the trees.

Heero and I moved forward, no one even noticed us. In the center of the caravan was an armored SUV. Casually as you please Heero and I opened the doors and slipped inside, flanking the man in the suit in the back of the car.

"Is everything alright, soldiers?" The man was peering through the tinted windows, obviously on edge, not threatened by us.

"Everything is fine sir." I laid my hand on his shoulder.

In a flash quick as lightning, Heero leaned forward and wrapped his arms tightly around the driver's neck. The man struggled to reach for his com to call in the attack, but as his hand reached for his pocket, I heard something snap and the driver went limp. Heero sat back in his seat.

The man in between us begged us not to hurt him. I promised him we wouldn't, looking at Heero.

"All we want are the codes." I told him in a quiet, non-threatening voice.

The man had been surprised. "The codes?" He suddenly cackled. "As soon as the soldiers notice what has happened they'll call headquarters and they will change the codes. They will be useless."

"Not for approximately four minutes." Heero interjected.

"Plenty of time." I said with a smirk, confident in Heero's skills. His laptop we had hidden under a bush along our escape route. Before the codes would be changed Heero would have downloaded all the information necessary to complete our mission: OZ transportation schedules. We expected the organization to be cocky enough not to change the schedules, even after the security breach. Like the man in the suit, they would deem the time frame too short.

With trembling hands the man opened the briefcase in his lap. Figuring I was the one in charge,
being the talkative one, he turned to me and handed me a small disc.

I took the disc from him and authenticated it, keeping the man's attention focused on me as I gave Heero a nod. My partner's hands went for the neck of the unsuspecting man.

The man felt nothing, just like the driver hadn't. He did it quick, to uphold our promise.

We had no choice but to kill him, it would give us more time to escape and access the OZ database.

Unfortunately, as we exited the SUV, soldiers in the back had discovered the undressed soldiers and all of a sudden we were suspiciously young for Ozzies and stood out. Without hesitation they opened fire on us, without verification of our ID, we could have just as easily been real OZ soldiers, but like we knew they wouldn't, they did not care.

Bullets grazed us both as we escaped into the forest. OZ soldiers had a lousy aim, being granted the uniform after dangerously minimal training, but one had managed to get lucky. Running behind Heero I saw the back of Heero's uniform get red.

That night I plucked the bullet out of his body with a long set of tweezers designed for the purpose. All the while Heero never made a sound, laying flat on his stomach, almost relaxed as I prodded inside the wound. The next day - rather: three hours later, because we had gotten back so late - Heero joined me in class, never complaining, even as the wound was agitated during P.E.

During every break that day, we snuck into a restroom stall together and I would redress the still quite heavily bleeding wound, so the blood wouldn't soak through and become visible through his shirt.

Even though Heero was injured, I remembered it as an especially successful mission and a good day. I had enjoyed the closeness Heero had allowed me. Though of course he only did so for the sake of future missions.

If Heero could go to school with a bleeding bullet wound, I could go to school with a little heartache.

Behind me the bedroom door opened and Heero stepped out, dressed to go to work.

"Good morning," I said. The past few days my morning greeting had been all I said to him all day.

He nodded, which made me happy, because it was more of a return greeting than I had ever gotten.

Heero went to work and I went to school. I had the idea that we both dreaded it that day. I did because of my unanswered questions that gnawed at my insides. And Heero probably did because Lady Une had announced a team building day. I smiled at the scowl with which he left.

I showered some of my doubts away, feeling comforted under the warm spray and enjoying washing and rinsing my hair. "I swear I was a dog in my previous life." I mused, enjoying my hands, moving with their own will, as they stroked my scalp. I had taken so much time under the shower that I had to hurry getting dressed if I didn't want to be late.

I arrived at school just in time for the bell and sat down in mister Ducette's English class. I was surprised to see Sookie wasn't there. In the time that I had known her, she had never been sick and never missed a single class. But of course, we can't all be Gundam pilots and take up our responsibility with bleeding wounds, broken bones and cold fevers.

When I headed for the biology lab later that day, someone suddenly latched onto my arm. I had
expected to see Sookie, but instead I saw a golden face, wavy, black hair and dark eyes.

"Hey... Aiden." I was immediately uncomfortable.

"Hi, Duo." She quipped back. "How's your friend, Heero?"

It startled me that she brought it up. It had had the appearance that she had been avoiding me ever since we ran into each other at the gym. "He's fine."

"Good!"

We headed into the biology lab for class and though she normally sat several rows in front of me, she chased away the girl that occupied the table next to mine and sat down there. "I'm having a party next week, do you want to come?"

"I don't."

"Please?" She interrupted, leaning in towards me.

Her position allowed for an obscene view into her blouse, but I got the impression that that was intentional.

"You can bring Heero too. He's hot." She added with a smile.

She invited strangers to her own house on the bases of their attractiveness? That didn't seem like a sound selection process. "Heero doesn't really like that sort of thing." I didn't say anything else, I wasn't about to confide in her that he was a social recluse and that I wasn't much better.

"Oh?" She drawled and a sultry smile appeared on her lips. "What does he like?"

The question seemed innocent enough, but her tone gave it a vulgar insinuation.

"He just doesn't like parties. Neither do I actually." I looked away, hoping that that would be the end of it.

"No! You have to come," she whined - very Relena-like -, "My parents are gone for the weekend, it will be great!"

"Class is starting." I hissed.

"Promise me you'll come." She whispered back.

I didn't respond.

"Promise!" She said louder.

"I promise... I'll think about it." I finally answered, knowing it was the only way to get her off my back. How I would eventually fight my way out of going, I didn't know yet.

My answer pleased her. With a nod she sat back in her seat and opened her biology text book.

"Today," The teacher said, his voice echoing through the sterile room, "We are going to start with the new chapter: Human reproduction. Starting with the human reproductive system. Everyone-" The teacher reached under his desk and slammed two anatomic models down onto the surface.,"-meet mister Penis and misses Vagina."
The whole classroom roared with laughter, but I just groaned. Great, I thought, that's not uncomfortable at all.

Mister Penis was a model of the erect human "manhood" that could be split through the middle to view the internal structure. Misses Vagina was a model of the female genitals that could be completely dismantled.

More laughter sounded when the teacher tilted the female model and the end of her clitoris came off and rolled away, off the desk, across the floor, to, as luck would have it, one of the most loud mouthed jocks in school. He picked the ball up from the floor, proudly held it up in the air and yelled: "I found it!"

More hard laughter.

The jock turned in his seat and purposefully looked at a girl - one of the cheerleaders - in the back that everybody knew to be his ex-girlfriend and he added with a grin: "And you said I never would."

Another roll of laughter drowned out the girl's colorful comeback.

The teacher tried to restore order, shouting at the top of his lungs and taking the clitoris form the boy. "Settle down everyone. Settle down. Open your books on page 523 and read the first paragraph while I try to fix... this..." He fumbled with the plastic ball.

I didn't have any trouble reading through the material, but all around me I heard childish giggles and whispers. Sometimes it was easy to forget how different I was from the other kids, I looked just like them and seemed to fit in just fine, at other times, like these, it became painfully obvious how much I differed from them, how much I had matured beyond them. A plastic clitoris rolling over the floor doesn't amuse me and the pictures of the naked men, women and children of both sexes, to illustrate the development of secondary sexual organs, didn't make me want to share dirty jokes with my neighbors. It were just bodies. There was nothing funny or weird about it, there was only functionality. I sounded like Heero, but that was how I viewed the human physique. I was able to appreciate it objectively, admire it's functions, it's healing abilities, neither the man nor the women - and thankfully neither the children - brought sex to my mind.

Finishing the paragraph and taking notice of the commotion around me, I wondered if that was yet another thing about me "abnormalized" by the war. Though seriously, I wasn't supposed to find these unflattering photographs of not particularly pretty individuals attractive, was I?

The class continued, covering all the basics of the human reproductive system. During his speech the teacher got many more uncalled for laughs and chuckles. Every time the words "penis", "vagina" or "intercourse" rolled of his tongue, chaos ensued.

When the bell rang and the class was over I didn't take as much time to pack my bag as I usually did, even though, with Sookie apparently absent, I had no one waiting for me in the cafeteria.

"Sookie is sick, right?" Aiden asked, standing by my table as the classroom around us drained of it's students.

"Yeah, I guess."

She quirked an eyebrow. "You don't know?"

I shrugged, how was I supposed to? I didn't talk to Sookie outside of school.
"Well, you can sit with me."

I stood up and flung my bag over my shoulder, gripping at the shoulder strap uneasily. "No, that's fine. Thank you."

"Come one, you don't want to sit all alone, do you?"

Actually, that was fine by me. "I've got to go to the bathroom." I excused myself and hurried off, practically diving into the men's room, just around the corner. I waited for a few minutes, till the hall grew silent and then I cautiously opened the door and checked to see if the coast was clear. No one was there.

I didn't know what it was about Aiden - perhaps her open sexuality - that made me so uncomfortable, but something did. I didn't want to insult her and consequently alienate myself from the entire school community by blatantly blowing her off, but her advances were most unwelcome. I wasn't interested in her that way, which I thought to be pretty obvious, yet it seemed difficult to convey that to her and to convince her that she's not irresistible to everyone - an idea that was overtly stuck in her head.

I went outside through a backdoor, bypassing the main hallway that opened up to the cafeteria. As nearly always the case, with the summer months closing in, the weather was good. The sun shone brightly and I figured I might as well have my lunch outside, picking a seat in the grass under a tree in the shade. I didn't care much for the sun, my sensitive skin burned easily, used only to the fluorescent lights of the colonies, which mimicked sunlight but with much less UV radiation.

I worked my way through a simple lunch: bread with peanut butter. I loved peanut butter, it was the only food I genuinely had a taste for, but I detested it in combination with jelly. I didn't understand what that was all about, though hesitantly thinking it was an idea sprouted from earthian greed and indecisiveness.

Sitting in the silence, watching two guys toss a football back and forth a few yards away from me, I realized I missed Sookie. I wondered how much information I could trust her with. I supposed we really weren't friends until she knew me and I knew her, but to really know me, I would have to tell her about the war and my role in it and what I have done, for no reason other than blind faith in mad scientist. I didn't want to talk about that. That's why it was so much easier to be with Heero. He inherently knew, he had lived my life, maybe an even more gruesome version of it.

It was easier, it was. Now it was getting harder, as I struggled to understand my feelings for him. The more I tried to fight it and come up with counter arguments, the more blatantly obvious it became that there was something dysfunctional about our relationship. It was like we were precariously balanced on a scale and a heavy weight had started to tip the scale and we were sliding across the line that separated friendship from something else entirely. I didn't know what "something else entirely" was, I didn't dare to call it love. I had never experienced love and therefore had no guidelines, no comparisons, moreover it could be questioned if both Heero and I were even capable of love. We were damaged people after all.

I didn't even know if "something else entirely" was a bad or a good thing, if I should fight it, or embrace it, if it would make us, or break us. I just knew something was happening, something within me shifting towards it. I didn't have many friends, but the intensity of my feelings for Heero shadowed my feelings for Quatre, Trowa, WuFei and Sookie. Everything paled in comparison.

That means something, right? I asked myself, so confused. All my efforts to try and figure it out proved to be feckless. I was still as lost as I was after coming to my startling conclusion in the shower at the gym. I wish I had someone to turn to, like Heero sometimes turned to me. Someone
to ask "Why?", someone to say to: "I don't understand". Heero - though my only true friend - wasn't that person, he couldn't even figure out the his own demons that were troubling him.

I suddenly found myself missing Quatre, though that made me feel like I was betraying Heero. But Quatre always seemed to know what to say and what to do. Always the right thing.

I decided I was going to Relena's ball, whether Heero was going or not. Though she still hadn't "cordially invited" me, I trusted she wouldn't embarrass herself by trying to send me away once I was on her doorstep, on the technicality of a missing invitation. After all, that was supposed to be accidental.

It was very un-gundam-pilot of me to do, but I skipped school the rest of the day to wander around town. I didn't go back to the apartment until it was time for me to start working on dinner. I had nothing waiting for me at home but daytime television and it was common knowledge that I'd be just setting myself up for disappointment if I went home for that.

I found myself a seat in the park by the water and watched an elderly woman feed the ducks leftover bread, she broke it into tiny bits and gingerly threw it into the water, where the birds fought over every piece, making the lady smile. Then five boys playing soccer caught my attention, with their uneven number it didn't seem like they were playing the game in the way it was intended, just kicking the ball around and fighting each other for it, laughter roared out of their small bodies. Beyond them a young couple was sitting in the grass, tenderly kissing each other, they looked like they had also skipped school, but not to ponder their lives, as I was.

I felt envious of the kids, the young couple - so shamelessly and openly in love - and even the old woman, because I was never like that and I never would be. War changes people irreversibly, all that I can still have hope for, was acceptance of my differences by both myself and the society. I would always be different from the way they were, are and will be. If they were the standard by which to measure ourselves, I wasn't normal, for I wasn't anything like them.

I privately smiled a sad smile. "I'm something else entirely."
I was back home in time to prepare dinner for the both of us. Heero always kept me waiting, but when the clock struck ten and outside the skies were ominously darkening, a sick, worrying feeling grew in my gut. The clock kept on ticking relentlessly. The sounds had never bothered me before, I hardly ever noticed it, but the mechanics of the clock seemed louder that evening and after it struck eleven, I flinched at every tick it made. I had stopped myself from picking up the phone and calling his office several times. I didn't want him to feel suffocated, that I was choking up on him or give him the impression that I expected more from him than he was willing to give - his freedom and independence - but I finally figured it was his own damn fault for not telling me why he wasn't home yet.

With my decision made I raced to the phone, stumbling on my way. I pressed speed dial one, which would connect me to the Preventers HQ reception. I had never called him at the office before, so I was uncertain of what to say when a sweet sounding young lady, whose name I had missed, answered the phone and asked me how she could be of service.

"Uhm, I'm calling for Heero Yuy."

"What department is he from, sir?"

"Something with computers?" I said sheepishly. How was I supposed to know what department he worked for? Every question I asked him regarding his work was answered either by: "That's confidential, you're not authorized", or one of his damned "I don't understand."

The receptionist chuckled at my respond. "I think you mean Computer Intelligence Analysis."

"Yeah, I guess..." I muttered. I heard the sound of a keyboard being worked ferociously.

"There is an H. Yuy working in that department, shall I patch you through?"

"Yes, please."

"Have a nice evening sir."

Before I could return the sentiment, the phone started ringing again. One... two... three... I counted, impatient.

At the seventh ring the phone was finally answered. A wave of relief crashed over me, but I was drowning in it when an unfamiliar voice asked, quite annoyed, who I was.

"I'm Duo Maxwell," I answered, indignant. "Who are you?"

"Reid Mixson." The voice said, adopting my tone.

"I'm a friend of Heero, I would like to speak to him." That's what I said literally, but it sounded more like - and it was meant more like -: "What the fuck are you doing at Heero's desk, answering his phone?"
"Are you?" The condescending brat questioned. "Heero and I are very close, but he never talks about you."

I rolled my eyes at him. Heero doesn't talk about anything or anyone, if they were so close, he would know that, I thought to myself, pushing away thoughts of strangling the man for insinuating what I did not like to have insinuated... "Is Heero there?" I urged.

"Heero isn't here." He answered casually, not at all threatened by my attitude.

"Oh -" I stopped when I heard a key slide into the lock of the front door. Without saying goodbye, as would have been proper, I promptly hung up the phone. Before the door opened I looked at the clock and noted it was eleven thirty already.

When Heero stepped inside he eyed me cautiously, gingerly closing the door behind him, so softly I barely heard the click. He stayed by the door for a moment, looking at me, finally, he asked, a little irritated, "What?" He looked exhausted and when he moved his muscles seemed to strain. His eyes were narrow and focused, looking dangerous and intimidating.

"I was worried." I admitted without shame.

"I was at work." Heero simply stated, draping his jacket over one of the chairs by the dinner table and turning to switch on the microwave. As always I had already placed his dinner inside.

I suddenly felt very taken for granted, but I didn't want to dramatize the situation. Heero wasn't making me feel the way I did on purpose, he simply didn't understand one might get worried when he's not home by the time he usually is.

Heero casually started eating his dinner, totally unresponsive to my sensitive mood. It bugged me enough to say: "I'm angry, Heero."

He looked up momentarily and furrowed his eyebrows in thought. "Why?" He asked.

I sat down across from him at the table, watching as he continued to eat. "Because I was worried."

The hand holding his fork stilled. He looked up at me again, blue, radiant eyes questioning. "Why?"

I let out an awkward, sarcastic chuckle. "Why? Because it's almost midnight and you didn't even call! I was worried that you had gotten hurt!"

He didn't understand, I could tell from the look on his face. He was wondering why I would get so worried, considering he got hurt during the war all the time. What he didn't know was that I worried those times too, but in the war I was supposed not to show, but instead to handle the situation in a cool and calculating manner. Now, in peacetime, I was allowed to be a chaotic, worrisome mess.

"Heero," I started, but then I didn't know what else to say. I leaned over and stretched my arm out over the table. I came so close to his relaxed hand, splayed over the wooden surface just by his glass of water, that I could cover it warmly with my own, but I didn't, I just touched my fingers to his.

Heero allowed the contact for a few more moment before retreating his hand and taking hold of his glass, emptying it in his mouth in a succession of big gulps. He cleaned up after himself and then left for the bathroom to take a shower.
I stayed in the kitchen for a little while longer, over-thinking the dreadful evening I had experienced. I realized nothing was going to change if I wasn't going to facilitate change and make it happen. I could wait on Heero forever, I could hold his hand and gently guide him through life and make him learn and experience till finally he would understand and he could help me make these hard decisions about our relationship that I was currently dealing and struggling with by myself. But by then my feelings might have changed, confusion or unrequited love might have made me bitter and maybe I would wake up some day realizing that all I had been doing was grooming him for someone else. For Relena, or some other nice girl, or Reid Mixson. I felt myself become queasy with possessiveness. I wasn't sure if I loved him the way a lover would love his lover, or a husband would love his partner, but I knew I loved him to extent that I was not willing to share him with anyone. I wanted him to be with me and I wanted to be the one who showed him things and taught him things and to be by his side when his eyes would finally open and he discovers the world around us, with all it's sensations and emotions.

So far that was all I had been able to figure out, but I felt pleased with the progress. Whether I would have to teach myself to love him the way normal people would, or teach myself to stop loving him in my own abnormal way, I didn't know yet. It scared me to think that that decision was Heero's. For the first time in my life, in spite of my dangerous and boisterous past, I felt like I was at risk of getting hurt.

What would happen if Heero made a decision that I didn't like? Whichever that would be...

The sound of the water running, cascading down into the tub, suddenly stopped, so I rose from my seat to turn off all the lights and go the bedroom. I didn't look with the intention of sneaking a peek, but I did, when I glanced through the open bathroom door. I don't know why I felt so embarrassed when I caught the sight of him naked, he obviously wasn't bothered with being seen, but when he met my own wildly curious gaze with his own calm and open one, I quickly turned my head and practically leaped onto my bed just to get out of his line of sight. It was a instinctual reaction that I couldn't alter, even though it made my behavior interpret as all the more suspicious.

He came out two minutes later in his black underwear and black shirt. Golden, muscled thighs, round and firm ass, strong, elegantly curving back and a long slim neck that held his head in a slight tilt as he gazed at me, his blue eyes questioning rather than accusing.

I groaned inwardly, unable to deny or look away from his physical perfection. Did it mean I wanted to be with someone like him, or did it mean I wanted to do someone like him?

As Heero got into bed, I went to the closet to change into my own nightwear, hiding behind the open door as Heero returned the favor of casting a scrutinizing glance.

I got into bed and switched off the light, but I had no intention of sleeping yet. It was just easier to talk in the dark, where embarrassed blushing and nervous lip biting would remain secret. "Hey Heero?"

"Hn?"

I sought out his silhouette in the dark. He was still lying on his back. I could observe the profile of his face against the white wall. His low eyebrows, curving nose, shapely mouth and sharp chin... it was a profile worthy of being on a stamp or a coin.

"I'm going to that ball." I announced, hoping he would come with me.

He just said: "Okay." His tone of voice didn't pass any judgment.
"Will you come with me?" I asked hopefully.

Without thinking about it long he answered in his deep voice: "Okay."

"Thanks, buddy." My happy smile was audible in my voice, but it wasn't the kind of subtlety Heero would notice.

"Hey Heero?" I tried again after a few moments of silence.

"Hn?"

I smiled at his repetitive reaction. "Next time... call or something. To tell me you'll be home late."

He took a little longer to answer this time, probably struggling to accept my logic after suffering explosions, bullet wounds, cuts and blows. I feared Heero thought he was invincible in these times of peace, while I knew better. People die from the most randomly accidental things. If you don't pay attention crossing the street, a car could run you over. You could misstep down the stairs and break your neck. You could bump your head and have blood hemorrhage into your brain.

I shut my eyes tightly. I didn't want to think about those things, but for some reason I often did.

"Okay." He answered after a lengthy pause. To take initiative and indicate the end of our conversation he rolled over onto his side, facing away from me.

"Goodnight, Heero." I whispered, loud enough for him to hear should he still be awake, but soft enough not to wake him should he have fallen asleep already.

"Hn..." Was his soft reply.

The next morning proceeded as usual. Getting the bagels, making breakfast, having coffee, thinking, thinking, thinking, trying to stop thinking about certain things only to think about them more, watching Heero eat and drink like he's trying to break a record, a shower and then getting dressed to prepare for another day at school. The mornings were starting to become a grind, but instead of letting the predictability get to me, I saw it as a welcome break from the surprises and challenges living in peace time and living with Heero made me endure.

The day started with P.E. I spotted Sookie in the hallway by the locker room, but she disappeared into the girl's locker room before I could catch up with her and get her attention and I didn't want to risk fuelling the rumors by following her inside. I got dressed swiftly. The fit, young bodies surrounding me confirming me that my feelings for Heero weren't as superficial as sexual attraction. Though of course no body present came near to equaling Heero's toned and trained physique, some of the jocks and older boys looked good. I may have been able to acknowledge that, however, following that statement was nothing that could be interpreted as desire or sexual arousal. In fact, I approached the nudity so clinically that I thought of mentioning to one of them he had a suspicious mold on his inner thigh.

I was one of the first to head out to the field, where the boys started to gather first. I didn't know why the girls always took longer, but they did. I supposed their outfits and hairstyles were a carefully balanced mix of attractiveness and functionality and comfort, sometimes leaning more towards attractiveness.

"Hey." I greeted when Sookie joined me in the circle around the coach. "Feeling better?"

"Sure." She didn't sound like her usual, chipper self, brushing me off.
"Hey Duo!"

I looked over to a group of the school's most popular girls, Aiden, of course, not excluded from that selection. She waved excitedly at me and the girl with her chuckled. Hesitantly I raised my hand and waved back sheepishly. "Hey..."

"I don't get what ya see in her." Sookie stated accusingly.

"I don't see anything in her." I replied. "But apparently she sees something in me." It was stupid and vain of me, but Aiden's apparent crush - though putting me in awkward position - was very flattering. I had never before experienced what it was like to be the object of someone's affection, it was unknown territory and however much it got on my nerve, it certainly was good for my ego. I noticed how her increased attention in my persona, had opened up a whole new world for me. Girls smiled at me in the hallways. Jocks, instead of pushing me aside roughly, said "Hello". As was always the case with me, the positive was mixed with the negative. I wasn't at all pleased with the concept of popularity: thinking you're better than everyone, prettier, smarter, stronger and pushing everyone around. At least on L2, we were all equals. All equally poor. All equally at risk of getting raped, mugged or shot. All equally without possibility and hope. But I knew when to push my morals aside and take advantage of the circumstances.

Sookie sarcastically scoffed at my remark.

"What?"

"People are just tools to her, Duo. Tools are manipulated for use. That's what she sees in ya."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The whistle of the coach silenced her response, if she was even going to answer me. He announced the game of the day, basketball and ordered one of the students to get two balls from the supply shed while the rest of the class moved over to the two courts at the far end of the field, where we were separated in four equal teams. Two male teams, two female teams. At the girls whining about gender based discrimination, the coach curtly announced that the winning boy team and winning girl team would compete if time allowed.

I analyzed my teammates, for the most part not displeased. Both teams of five had three strong players and two weaker players and each had three more on the bench for rotation. Currently on my team were two boys I didn't know but presumed to be the unpopular, nerdy type and though I always tried to be a fair person, some things went against my competitive nature and I judged that it might not be in the best interest of the game to pass the ball to them. The other two boys were very popular and athletic, one of them was even the captain of the wrestling team, I knew, the other was Danny Conner, the boy from biology that "found" the clitoris.

The other team had a member from the actual school's varsity basketball team, but I estimated our chances of winning high, despite the fact that I would first have to find my rhythm, lacking the dynamic I had with Heero when we share a court, in his absence.

I made a mental note of suggesting a friendly game of basketball to Heero, supposedly as an addition to our work-out routine. I had noticed there was a fenced off, full-sized basketball court in the park when I was there the day before.

Sookie's comment from before, ringing in the back of my head, distracted me a little but I still managed to steal the ball away from the opposing team and pass it to the wrestling captain by the opponent's basket. He tried to dunk, but came up short and the ball missed by a good foot or two.
Danny, a sore loser, cursed under his breath, but the coach constructively shouted: "Good attempt Eduardo!"

The ball went to the other team and the varsity player dribbled towards me. I tried to hit the ball out of his hands, but he outturned me and dribbled past. Danny blocked his way to our basket so he took his chances from the 3-point line. He jumped up, extended his arm and threw the ball over Danny who was jumping up trying to block it.

They scored.

"Well done, Hunter! Well done!" The coach patted him on his back.

When Danny walked past me to get back to his position on the court, he roughly bumped shoulders with me. When I looked at him, I received a hateful glare. I frowned at his back as walked on. What had I done wrong? I asked myself, blaming Danny for doing a lousy job of blocking Hunter.

The ball was ours. The coach gave it Eduardo, who quickly passed it to Danny. Danny dribbled over to the opponent's side of the court, where his way and a possible shot was blocked by three players of the other team.

"Danny!" I shouted. Standing free and with a clear shot of their basket. He looked over and I emphasized my position with a wave. He ignored me. I watched him rise to the tip of his toes and throw the ball into the mesh of outstretched hand before him. Of course the ball didn't go anywhere but into Hunter's hand, who took a chance passing it to one of the weaker guys on his team, standing unprotected by our basket except for one of our weaker players. Both were clueless when the ball landed in his hand - it was amazing that he had even managed to catch it - but light dawned to him before the player on my team could react. The short, awkward moving guy took a shot and when he scored the coach went wild, blowing his whistle excitedly. The boy was pretty amazed and ecstatic himself.

"Why didn't you pass me the ball?" I called.

"Oh please." Danny responded, like I was such a bother.

"I had a clear shot." I gestured to where I had been, in an ideal position to score and unguarded!

"Calm down boys," The coach warned, "keep the excitement down."

"Yeah," Danny snarled quietly at me, "don't get so excited, Duo."

I frowned at him and decided to create distance between us. From across the court I observed Eduardo approaching Danny and share a soft conversation with him. My body instantly tensed up when Danny threw an angry glance my way. Were they blaming me for the poor game strategy? I felt insulted, mainly because I knew that I was good at this game and I knew what I was capable of with the right teammates - actually, the only "right teammate" I needed to win was Heero, he could score from across the mid-line and even dunk at only five foot eight tall.

I smiled, remembering a time we played basketball at school, during a time we were required to lay low.

"Let's start again boys." The ball was returned to the court and the game continued. I stopped my musing and chased after the ball, but none of my teammates passed the ball to me, consequently forfeiting a sound strategy. We basically had no offence with only two active players and I by myself couldn't block every pass and shot from the other team, as the two less athletics guys just stood by and appreciated the game from a distance and both Danny and Eduardo had only interest
in being a star and invested themselves at the other side of the court. Hunter made his approach to score a fifth time, against our single point, but I managed to steal the ball away from him. Realizing they had turned this team sport into a competition of individuals, I chose not to pass the ball to Eduardo, who was free to my left. I dribbled through the opponents and my own teammates, but Danny wouldn't have it. I didn't see him coming but he made his presence known by slamming into my side, throwing off my balance and knocking the ball from my hands.

As I fell, Hunter went for the unguarded ball, but the coach, previously preoccupied with the girl's play, blew his whistle at the obvious foul.

"I'm on your team, asshole!" I yelled, dangerously angry - Shinigami angry - rising to my feet and strongly pushing Danny back as he invaded my personal space.

"Don't touch me!" He warned with a despicable tone of voice.

"Boys!" The coach placed himself between the two of us, but like two predators fighting for territory, we kept our focus on each other, locking wild gazes.

The young coach reprimanded Danny for the body slam, but mildly in my opinion, then he turned to me and said: "Remember Duo, this is a team sport. There is no I in team." His attention was called away from us when high pitched screaming and yelling resounded. The coach jogged over to the other court to stop two girls amidst a gathering crowd from pulling each other's hair out. I watched him go with an incredulous expression. As if I didn't have enough to deal with, the school was suddenly turning against me! Just last week Danny said "Hello" to me and we touched fists in what I had interpreted as a friendly manner. Now he seemed to be disgusted by my presence!

Beside me, someone scraped their throat, obviously to get my attention. I looked to the side, then down at one of unpopular members of the other team. I didn't know his name and I regretted that and scolded myself for that as I looked at his friendly face and he kindly, though shyly pointed out: "You're bleeding."

I followed his gaze to my arm. Upon my landing I had badly damaged the skin of my left elbow, trying to catch the weight of my falling body. The skin was raw and torn in places, a single trail of blood went down to my little finger. "Oh." With my shirt I wiped away the blood. Noticing his concerned expression I assured him it was nothing. "It doesn't hurt." I added.

"It looks like it does."

"It doesn't." Maybe if I had been a regular high school kid, it would hurt, or at least feel sore. But I've been shot and beaten up. Pain is a relevant sensation and it's meaning is altered by life experiences. My life experiences made me deem my injury as nothing more than a scratch. I decided to introduce myself when a few seconds later he was still standing there. The coach was too busy with the girls to restart our game.

He smiled, with a surprised but happy glint to his eyes. "Hi. I'm Aston. We're in math together."

"Oh." I felt guilty for not noticing him before.

"Yeah," he chuckled awkwardly, he tucked a loose strand of his blond hair behind his ear, "You're the only one who has ever gotten a grade higher than me on a test. You're good."

"Thanks." Match just came naturally to me, after G forced it down my throat for years. I could still
hear him scream in my ear: "If you want to make things go BOOM, you have to know math!"

I turned my attention to the commotion on the girl's court as the volume only increased as time progressed.

"Ladies, calm down!" The coach frantically tried.

"She's a sleazy bitch!"

I hurried over when I recognized Sookie's voice and I saw the coach separating her from Aiden like he had separated me from Danny. Murder was in their eyes.

"You're an ugly troll!" Aiden shouted back.

"Skank!"

"Dyke!"

Sookie lunged forward but the coach stopped her before she could get near to Aiden. "That's it!" He yelled. "To the principal's office! Now, young lady!"

I inserted myself into the drama, approaching Sookie, who was obviously upset. "Sookie, what's going on?"

"Don't get yourself into this, Duo." The coach warned. "You go back to your own court."

I watched Sookie leave the field and head for the school's entry. "But, I want to go with her." I argued. "She's upset." I had no clue how to deal with emotional teenagers, having never been one and having never encountered one - save Relena -, but I figured Sookie was my friend and if I wanted her to remain my friend, I would have to learn how to deal with this sooner or later.

"No, Duo. Go back."

"But-"

"No!"

I knew exactly how to get him to allow me to go with her. With a mischievous grin I said:

"Asshole."

The coach seemed to implode, his face turned a furious shade of red. "To the principal's office, Maxwell!" He yelled, not realizing he had been played.

"Oh no, not the principal's office." I mocked, but I already started walking away. Once I had cleared the field I quickened my pace to a jog to catch up with Sookie. I caught her in the hallway by the locker rooms, she hadn't dressed, but she had taken the liberty to get her bag first. Principal Murphy would probably send her home.

"Sookie." I slowed down once I was beside her. The exercising with Heero was already paying off, I wasn't even panting. I felt uncomfortable and unsure of myself when I noticed she was crying. I searched my memory, but no, I had never had to comfort a crying girl before. "Eh..." Words always failed me when I needed them most.

"What are ya doing here?" She asked as we walked towards the principal's office.

"Called Taylor an asshole."
A smile broke through her sad expression. She chuckled and wiped away some of her tears. "Ya did? He must've shit his pants with fury."

"Sooks," I gently said, using the nickname I remembered other people call her by, realizing that if there was ever a time to adopt it, it would be at that moment, "what's going on?"

"Nothing." She lied innocently. "I hate her guts and she hates mine."

We arrived at our destination and the clerk told us to sit down. "The bench of shame" - as it was known - that's where we took our seat. "This wasn't a regular fight." I pressed. "I've never seen you guys fight before, so why now?" I tried to empathize and tried to put myself in her position to understand. I was finding it incredibly hard, but I supposed I shouldn't be too disappointed in myself for not being able to identify with a dramatic teenage girl.

She groaned and then looked at me like something suddenly dawned on her. "Ya really don't know, do ya?"

I shrugged. Obviously I didn't.

"Don't ya check yer school mail?"

"Why would I?" I defended. "Supposedly it's for teachers to assign homework, but all my teachers are so "late cretaceous" that they never use it."

"Well, students use it too." She informed me.

"For what?"

She thought about something clever to say and finally responded, quoting mister Ducette, who liked to work his PhD in Psychology into every conversation: "Organizing the social structure of the school population."

"Meaning?" I asked, feeling incredibly dense.

"Cyber bullying." She clarified.

The door of the principal's office opened and a rebellious looking boy casually stepped out, his hands deep in his pockets and a satisfied grin on his face. He was followed by principal Murphy, who looked flustered and annoyed. "Next?" She asked the clerk, who nodded over to us. "Duo," she said with a surprised tone to her voice as she recognized me, "I didn't expect to find you sitting there. What did you do?"

"I called mister Taylor an asshole."

She sighed heavily. "Oh boy..." She drawled, then gestured for me to follow her inside. "Come in."

Before I closed the door behind me, Sookie advised: "Ya should really check yer mail." I nodded, understanding what she meant. An email was the cause of all the drama earlier and I would have to read it to fully understand.

Murphy kindly offered me a seat. She didn't come off as threatening, angry or even like she was going to give me any punishment at all. "So you called mister Taylor an asshole." She started, grabbing a blank form from a large stack on the corner of her desk. She clicked on her ball pen by pressing it against the surface of the desk. "Why?"
"'Cause he was being an asshole?" I deadpanned.

She dryly looked up at me, her pen hovering over the form. "Do you really want me to write that down?"

I didn't. Taylor was notorious for getting students suspended, using the powers higher up in the chain to establish his authority as a first year teacher. I didn't want to get suspended. "No. I just wanted to go with Sookie, she was upset. But he didn't let me. He was being an asshole, honestly."

She wrote down my story. "Hmhm," she appreciated, "why was she upset?"

"Apparently some email has been sent around using the school's mailing list. That's what started a fight during P.E. Hair pulling and that sort of stuff."

She looked up, her expression had turned serious. "What kind of mail?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, I haven't read it yet. But it's got everyone on edge."

"How many students was this email sent to?" She asked, using the computer on her desk to check her own account. Obviously no one had been stupid enough to send a copy to her or one of teachers, or she would have been notified already.

"I think everyone."

"Do you," she second-guessed herself before she continued, "it might be inappropriate, but do you mind logging in on my computer, see if you have this mail?"

"No." I walked around her desk and she rolled her chair out of my way. I quickly typed in my log-in ID and password, fingers fluent, nimble and deliberate. Heero wasn't the only one who could work magic with a computer. It took a while for the outdated computer to log me in, but there it was. I only had one, unread mail in my inbox.

Murphy took over, moving the mouse and clicking on the mail with the subject: ImPoRtAnT! IT'S CONTAGIOUS!

The computer uploaded the email and it popped up on the screen.

SOUTHERN SKANK SOOKIE SHAW INFECTED DUO WITH HER DYKENESS!! THE BUTCH BITCH RUBBED OFF HER FILTHY GAYNESS! IT'S CONTAGIOUS! SHUN THE LISTICK LESBIAN! SHUN THE DYKE OR YOULL GET IT TOOO! (1)

Both principal Murphy and I were shocked. When she composed herself she scrolled through the list of receivers, back up to the original sender.

Aiden Pippa.

"I- I don't understand." I stammered. "I spoke to her, she was being nice to me." I felt rage boiling up inside of me. This girl was vicious! Evil! She made Relena seem like a chocolate sprinkled, pink frosted, mini cupcake!

"Don't worry Duo. I'll make sure this will be handled accordingly." She rose from her chair and walked to the door. I followed her. While Murphy told the clerk to call someone to get Aiden to her office, I exchanged meaningful looks with Sookie.

"Miss Shaw," Murphy said, turning to Sookie with an apologetic face. "You can go home, it's
fine."

Sookie nodded, grateful to be able to leave and shouldered her bag. Before she left, with me on her tail, she was called back by the principal.

Murphy, with a determined face, said to her: "I'm not supposed to condone violence, especially on the school's premises but... well done." She finished with a nod.

"Thanks." Without further ado, Sookie left, eager to go home.

"Wait. Sookie. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought ya knew, everyone knows."

"About the mail or about you being gay...or," I bit my lip, hoping I hadn't said something wrong, presuming the hate mail had a basis in reality.

"Well, I didn't think ya knew I was gay at first, but I thought ya'd figure it out." She stopped at the main entry of the school. "Ya should probably go back. Get changed. Next class is starting soon."

"I'm not going back." I said determinedly. "I'm walking you home."

"Bus. I take the bus."

"Fine, then I'm bussing you home." She didn't laugh at my joke, but it was pretty lame and she was having a hard day. In the bus, we didn't say anything. I didn't want to bring it up because I was afraid she wouldn't want nosy listeners in the vehicle knowing what had just transpired, or about her sexual orientation. The silence left me time to ponder a second aspect of the mail. The accusation that her gayness had rubbed off on me, meaning that everyone who had read the mail - apparently everyone in school - perceived me as gay. It explained Danny's behavior from before.

I paused myself for a moment. As opposed to what I thought, as I was struggling to figure out "which way I swayed", "what team I batted for", it didn't upset me that people knew or thought me to be gay. The only thing that bothered me was how negatively people responded to the fact. It was one of those things that made you wonder if anything had really changed since the twentieth century, or since medieval times, for that matter. Or if we have just gotten better at hiding the truth within ourselves, where we secretly nurtured our biased hatred. In a few generations time, I mused, we could all be like Heero, looking impassive and blank on the outside but experiencing the inner turmoil that we always feel and in this present day, feel more comfortable showing.

"We need to get off at the next stop." Sookie said, jostling me awake from my deep thoughts.

We got out of the bus and I realized we had traveled quite far out of town. She took me to a large, iron cast gate that framed a low rise, wide building with tiny balconies that treasured a wide variety of flowers and ceramic gnomes. I stopped, perplexed, at the golden sign by the entry.

Sunny Hillside Retirement Home.

"I live here with my grandparents." Sookie answered the unasked question. "They moved down to Florida when grandpa retired early. Heart problems. My ma and pa send me down here two years ago. When I told 'em I was gay. They don't really like that in the traditional suburbia of the Southern states."

"I'm sorry." I offered.
"I'm not."

"Then I'm sorry about the mail. Is that why you were absent yesterday?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to wait for it to blow over, but grandpa made me go. Usually I do get to stay home for a week, so I don't have to rip out chunks of hair." She smiled.

I smiled back.

"Ya don't have to worry about it. They really will forget in a week and the notion of ya supposedly being gay won't stick, after all, ya peek into the girl's locker room."

"I don't do that!" I argued with a smile. "You made that up!"

"Well, as did Aiden about ya being gay."

I shrugged, I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell her, but she had been so candid, I almost felt like I owed it to her to return a piece of personal information. "Maybe she didn't..." I muttered.

"Oh?" When I remained silent and cast my glance down, she continued: "Duo, obviously I'm not gonna mind if yer gay. Ya can tell me."

I squirmed and as soon as I noticed I was doing it, I stopped myself. A Shinigami doesn't squirm, I said to myself with a hint of humor. "Aiden saw me in the gym with Heero. She said something about him that I didn't like and I almost bit her head off."

Sookie chuckled, her sullen mood forgotten. "So, Heero huh? Now I definitely have to meet him! To make ya rethink yer sexuality, he must be quite an amazing guy."

I couldn't fight back the heartfelt smile that crept up on me. "He is. But I'm not sure! About being... gay, I mean." I added. "It's so confusing! I've been thinking about it all week, but I just can't figure it out."

She nodded. "That's why ye've been so silent."

"Yeah..."

"What makes ya doubt so much?"

I realized I needed to tell someone, or these questions would eat away at me. Though I should not be grateful that Sookie has had to go through what she had, I was grateful of the possibility to have someone who would understand and could help me. Once I had decided to trust her, words just started pouring out, even as my cheeks grew red with embarrassment. "I guess... because I don't think about sex, with him. But every time I see him or think about him I'm just like... I don't know how to say it. I'm usually quite good with words!"

"Just breathe, Duo." She said with a smile, "It's just communication. I'm not asking you to quote Shakespeare, just say how you feel."

"I love him." I blurted. "But I don't know what kind of love that is. I don't know if it's romantic or not."

"Because you're not thinking about sex?"

I nodded, eager for her advice.
"Sex and romance... are two very different things my friend." She leaned in to give me a kiss on my cheek. "And once you accept the romance... the sex will come." She whispered that last part as an old lady passed us. "I gotta go. Ye'll figure it out." She started walking away from me.

"Wait! What are you saying? Is it just love, or love love?"

She frowned at me but her lips kept the smile. "I don't know what that means!"

I smiled back. "Heero will."

"Than tell him!" With one final wink, she opened a door of one of the apartments and disappeared.

"Yeah..." I said to myself. "Just tell him." Feelings of nervousness were growing in my stomach and I swallowed heavily to get a knot out of my throat. "It's just communication..."
I walked home in my black sweatpants and grey Tampa High shirt after picking up my bag of clothes at the lost & found desk, a small room tucked away in a dark corner of the school. For the first time in a long time, my own inner voice kept quiet in my head and it left an almost eerie calm. I had decided to skip the rest of the school day based on my own dazed state. I felt disconnected with my own body, numb after hurting inside for so long.

It was still early in the day. Heero wouldn't be home for many more hours and I wondered how I was ever going to span that distance of time. I toyed with the idea of promptly visiting him at work, unannounced, but I didn't think he would appreciate that, let alone make him more receptive to, or more comfortable with what I had to say to him. Half an our into a tel-sell program for a new diet pill, a quiet mumble started questioning in my head:

How to tell him?

I didn't have a clue. I found it hard to think. After the emotional rollercoaster of the day I just wanted to rest, sleep even. I decided there would be no harm in taking a short nap.

I was fast asleep before my head hit the pillow.

My dream was vivid. I hardly ever dreamt and sometimes questioned my own ability to get lost in the subconscious realm, but I found myself layers deep into a twisted universe that made absolutely no sense.

I was in a large, museum like building, with big rooms and doorways, every room opened up to a multitude of other and the walls were painted in faded shades of bright colors, dirty and depressing in their lost vividness. Even though I was aware of my dream state, everything felt so real. When I saw Heero pass in front of one of the doorways, I felt a pang of fear of losing him in the labyrinth of oversized rooms. I called out his name, but my voice was captured by the walls and echoed back to me. I hastily made my way out of the room and looked around the corner, into the direction I had seen Heero go. I was just in time to watch him round another corner. I chased after him. Every time I looked around a corner, I saw Heero disappearing through a doorway.

"Heero!" I called again. My own voice couldn't exit the room, but his laughter resounded back to me. Though caught in a lucid dream, it didn't occur to me how alien it was for Heero to laugh. I continued to chase him desperately as we went further and further inside the maze and the rooms and doorways started to shrink. My heart was beating with anxiety when the size of the doorways had been reduced so significantly I had to duck my head to pass through.

I suddenly became aware of the fact that someone had been closely shadowing me all this time, but I didn't look back to see who it was, happy and safe to have whoever or whatever it was with me. A comforting presence that was just always there, underrated in it's significance.

"Heero!" I yelled when I just saw him crawl through a small doorway.

He laughed again, loud and carefree.

I got down on my hands and knees and crawled through the doorway. When I rose to my feet on
the other side I noticed the ceiling was high again and the room large, but it was a dead end. The far wall had a massive appearance, built up from large, heavy bricks, not covered by plaster and faded paint like the other's. It was gritty and rough. A single brick had been taken out, lying on the floor. The hole it left in the wall was big enough for Heero to have wormed through, but when I approached it, the hole shrunk. Every brick seemed to shrink, but the wall remained as tall and broad as it had been. By the time I reached it, the bricks had been reduced to a regular size. I peeked through the tiny gap, but it was dark on the other side, when I called through the hole, my voice echoed louder than ever before. No one answered me. I laid a hand over the brick at my knee.

"Put it back." Sounded the deep voice of my follower.

I turned my head to look at Heero, with a familiar, blank expression.

He gestured at the brick as I lifted it off the ground. "Put it back." He repeated seriously.

I frowned at him, concerned. "But," I started, looking back at the black hole, "you're in there, I have to get you. I have to get you out." The illogic of what I was saying didn't register to my dream self.

"No. Put it back. You're not supposed to look inside there."

"Why not?"

"There's nothing there."

"You're in there."

"No. I'm right here."

"No," I refused, "You went in there. The laughing you. It's where you've gone. It's where you've always been. Inside, I have to rescue you! I have to get you out!"

"No." The blank, monotone Heero said. "There is nothing in there. You will have to make do with me."

"But..." My voice did little to conceal my disappointment.

"Duo."

With a jolt and a wild leap of my heart I was back in my bed. The room had gone dark around me, except for the beam of light, coming through the open door, in which I spotted Heero's silhouette, by my bed, bending over me. He pulled his hand back from my shoulder. "Dinner is here." He said with an unusually gentle voice.

"Here?" My mind had trouble keeping up as it kept being drawn back into the dream.

"Yes, I ordered pizza."

I stared at him, he casually looked back at me. "You hate pizza." I stated, propping myself up on my elbows.

"You like it." He straightened up and walked out of the bedroom.

I let myself drop back onto the bed and rubbed my tired eyes and throbbing temples with trembling hands. The implication of the dream made me feel so guilty. I wondered, fearfully, if it reflected
the truth. Had I really been chasing something that isn't there? A happy, laughing Heero, accepting
of love and romance. Chasing a dream within reality while the real Heero has been by my side all
this time? Maybe all that I have been doing was not helping him, but rather, making him feel like
he wasn't good enough the way he was... More guilt crippled me and made me feel sick.

He was good enough. He was too good...

It's just a dream, Maxwell, I told myself, climbing out of bed with effort. Still in my gym clothes I
shuffled to the living room. Heero was sitting on the couch, the TV was set to the Sci-fi channel,
one of my favorites. My pizza of choice, anything and everything topping, was in a box on the
table by his plain pizza.

With a sigh I sat down next to him. When I looked over at him, I saw he was looking at me too,
nibbling at the end of a slice of pizza, child-like and endearing. Heero wouldn't let me live to see
another day if I would tell him so, but he sometimes managed to look cute, in between the focused
frowns and angry glares. Or maybe... maybe he was cute even then.

"Your arm." Heero pointed out, nodded at the ugly scraped skin of my elbow.

"Oh, yeah. I fell during P.E. I had the craziest day. Hey-" I noticed a bruise on Heero's shoulder,
hardly obscured by the band of his moss green tank top. "What happened to you?" I asked,
pointedly looking at the blue mark on his shoulder.

"I also fell." He answered dryly.

I chuckled. "So it's just like the old days! Us comparing wounds!"

Heero was not amused, he turned his attention back to the television. As far as I had been able to
tell, Heero didn't really like science fiction - it was too illogical - but he seemed focused on the
current show about a werewolf that is actually a robot - I had already seen the end of the
particularly bad miniseries and knew he would not be pleased with the irrational plot-twist. "What
happened to your Preventer shirt?" I asked, tugging at the tank top. He usually wore his uniform
from the time he got out of bed till his evening shower, but he was only still wearing the black
slacks, oddly combined with the casual top.

"I tore it. When I fell."

"Oh. Quite the fall you made... You okay?"

He nodded and took another tiny bite from his pizza that he took long to chew on.

"You really hate pizza, don't you?"

That questioning frown appeared on his forehead again as he wondered out loud: "How can you
tell?"

I placed a warm hand on his bruised shoulder - with purely platonic intentions - and told him with a
smile: "Heero, I've seen you wolf down military rations. Dried food and stale bread. This, you can't
even stand."

"It's just food. Taste doesn't matter." He forced himself to take another bite, bigger this time,
perhaps to prove his point.

I sighed. "Taste is what matters most when it comes to food, Heero. It's not just about creating a
feeling of fullness anymore." I let my hand on his shoulder trail down his arm, back to rest on the
cushion in between us.

Heero ignored me and continued to eat his pizza, one tiny bite at a time.

Half an hour of silence later I reached for the remote and muted the television. Heero didn't even seem to notice, he kept his eyes fixed on the screen. He had given up on his pizza and had closed the lid and pushed the box away from him as if he couldn't even stomach the smell of it. "Heero?"

"Hn?" He looked at me and made something in my stomach flutter and reduce me to a love sick school girl.

I studied the angles of his face for a while and traced his long eyelashes from root to tip, just to bypass the intensity of his radiant eyes.

"I have something important to tell you. It has something to do with the crazy day I've had..."

He just continued to stare at me blankly.

"I've been struggling with my feelings for so long... I didn't want to tell you because I thought maybe you didn't understand, or maybe I was just confused myself, but in spite of my confusion the feelings have remained unchanged. No, that's not true, ever since I started thinking about... these feelings, they have been getting stronger."

A narrowing of his eyes indicated I was losing him with all this feelings-blabber that was foreign to him and beyond the grasp of his understanding.

I felt like I could throw up, I was so nervous. A primal part of me just feared he would reject my declaration and punch me in the face. Mostly however, I feared he could offer me no more than his "I don't understand" and leave me to tender these feelings by myself till they would wither bitterly. In an ideal situation his eyes would start to water and he would whisper "I love you too" before leaning forward and letting me envelop him in a warm lover's embrace. But in that same ideal situation, the war never happened, the training never happened and however detached from reality I could ever manage to get, I would never forget that those things did happen. I had to remind myself to be glad for them, because if they hadn't, Heero and I would have never met. My life would have been very different, maybe easier, but, I figured, emptier.

I was uncertain if Heero agreed those sacrifices were worth it.

"I'm in love with you." I finally breathed. A shudder went through my whole body, my gut coiled uncomfortably for a moments and then all the insecurity, doubt and nervousness evaporated out of me, leaving me an empty vessel to be refilled with whatever feelings Heero's response would bring.

But Heero's answer left me with nothing other than remaining painfully void and anxiously suspended in time.

"Okay." Was his dry and monotone and ultimately disappointing answer.

I realized I had preferred a fist to the nasal bridge. "Okay?" I repeated expectantly.

Heero kept his face still and towards me, but his eyes started moving around. I didn't know if he did that deep in thought, searching for answers, or a means to avoid my gaze. I had never observed this behavior in him, but I was too distraught and confused to be curious.

The awkward silence and tension between us didn't ease.
"Do you know what I mean?" I eventually tried, my heart beating wildly and painfully.

Heero gave the matter his final efforts, frowning deeply and tightening his mouth in thought. He came to the same conclusion that had also dawned on me. "No."

Heero had focused his gaze at a point in mid-air and seemed frozen in his spot. Perhaps he felt uncomfortable in the situation - the situation that I was responsible for. More likely was that he was displeased with own lack of knowledge and experience. Love was not something J had been able to teach him, or something that had been explained to him via biological or psychological textbooks. He looked lost and severely displeased with his own confusion and disappointment in himself for not knowing everything there is to know.

Feeling sorry for myself made way for empathizing with Heero.

"Well," I struggled to find words to explain it - has anyone ever been able to capture love in words? -, "It's like the way I've always loved you and something extra." I couldn't help but smile at myself. I was certain poets and authors had found a more profound and eloquent way to describe romantic love other than "extra". But I could argue that love is something personal and it wouldn't be my love if I quoted strangers from history. It wouldn't be honest either, the pretense that I understood what the likes of Shakespeare and the Brontë sisters were referring to enough to adopt their words as my own.

He looked into my eyes, he had that frown on his head that meant he genuinely wanted me to make him understand, help him be normal. "What extra?" His deep voice and the possibilities of answers his question left me, made me shudder. I locked my gaze with his intense, penetrating stare, as he tried to bore holes into my skull and get the answers out himself.

I didn't want to scare him or rush him into something he wouldn't be ready for yet, but I didn't know how else to explain "extra" to him then leaning forward, closing the distance between us.

Heero didn't pull back, he was committed to getting the answer like he would get committed to completing the mission.

Our faces were closer to each other than they had ever been. I appreciated the perfection of his golden complexion and how innocent and childlike his face appeared with the defined chest and muscular limbs out of sight, but his worldly eyes reflected a tremulous past that left a boy commanding respect and authority for enduring it.

I kept my eyes open, not willing to miss this moment as I carried out my approach. I recognized this moment could be unique, one of a kind. Heero could reject me and never allow me this opportunity again. If so, I wanted this moment with me as a lasting memory, forever.

Heero kept still in front of me, though his face was blank, as it was ever - with the exception of a slight crease of curiosity between his brows - his eyes betrayed a fascination.

Just kiss him already! The cheekiest part of my personality shrieked impatiently in the back of my head.

And so I did. The final inch, my muscles were hard to move, they seemed frozen still, but when our lips finally connected, the warmth that shot through me instantly melted the frost away from my body. I was leaning forwards dangerously far, but I would be damned to have a clumsy moment. Miraculously, my straining muscles held out. I kept my lips lightly pressed to his for three Mississippi's before pulling back to gauge Heero's reaction. That fist to the nose might still come, I realized.
"That's extra?" He asked.

My ears may have betrayed me but that cheeky part of me could have sworn to have heard a hint of disappointment. "Uh..." I was a little caught of guard by his mechanical reaction to our first kiss. "A tiny part of it."

"Show me more then." He pressed, clearly not bothered with what had just transpired. Not by the act itself, nor by the implications of homosexuality or the threats it possibly posed to our relationship as a platonic interaction between friends.

"No!"

His frown deepened. "Why not?"

"Because... You're supposed to build this stuff up."

"I don't understand." He admitted, relaxing back against he couch. He looked back at the muted television where the next episode of the science fiction series had started. He was unfazed by the blood and gore that was displayed as part of the genre.

I sat back as well, frowning, deeply confused by what had just happened. I got the feeling Heero still didn't understand what I had been trying to tell him. Not even the kiss - or the "barely kiss" - could make that clear to him. I started to regret embarking on this quest before thoroughly thinking through my route beforehand. I felt stranded and lost, without means to either return or go forward.

It's just communication, Sookie had said. There is no such thing! I thought, frustrated. "Just" implies an ease with which it should, supposedly come, but that was a lie, communication was damn hard!

With determination I scooted closer to Heero, catching his attention. He looked at me as I kneeled on the couch right beside him, my knees touching his thigh.

He waited patiently for my next move.

"I usually "extra" way better than that." I told him. To prove my point I leaned forward again in a second attempt to blow him away and expose him to all the complicated feelings that I had been dealing with. If I couldn't open his eyes to these sensations, I realized, there was no sense in putting us through this and ruining our carefully constructed and lovingly nurtured friendship.

When our faces were close again, I felt his breath come through his slightly open mouth and faintly caress my lips in a slow and even rhythm. I could smell tomato sauce and cheese in both our breaths but it didn't make the situation any less intense.

Finally, I gently touched my lips to his, closing my eyes to allow myself to get caught up in the moment instead of concerning myself with the future. His lips felt soft and smooth, I noted, feeling Goosebumps rise to my skin. I started to softly move my lips against his, sensitizing myself till every light graze caused a surge of heat within me in contrast to my shudders and bumpy skin. I felt excitement when Heero finally started to move his lips with mine, actively joining our open mouthed kiss and made the world around us disappear. Everything but the moment - the moment in which we kissed - became obsolete; insignificant.

I loved everything about our kiss. The sensation of his lips that were as perfect to the touch as they were to the eyes. The sensation of our bangs becoming one and caressing my forehead. The sensation of his warm breaths through his nose, against my cheek. The sensation of pure trust and love between us, no longer concerned with war, implications, expectations... All the new
Reluctantly I pulled away, but I didn't go far. I opened my eyes to see Heero had closed his eyes as well. He opened them a few moments after I did and struggled to conceal new emotions.

"There is way more extra of where that came from." I breathed, followed by a low chuckle. Relief washed over me and I felt light and childishly giddy. My questions concerning myself, my sexuality and our relationship had been answered. I wanted him, that way. That way and every other way. All it took was a kiss. The world finally started to make sense to me.

I looked at him to find an absent expression on his face, his eyes turned away from me, down at the carpet.

"Heero?" I grew concerned when he didn't say anything and refused to meet my gaze.

He suddenly looked at me, his gaze striking me like lightning. In the back of my head I heard an ominous, roaring thunder. He cleared his throat. "I have work." He rose to his feet and walked away from me, he withdrew into the office.

A sad smile touched my lips at his awkward bewilderment.

It was new for both of us, but even more so for Heero. It went without saying that those were his first kisses. I hoped I hadn't disappointed him, but I sincerely doubted Heero had ever given his first kiss any thought. However, that didn't mean he wasn't capable of regretting it. He had opened himself up to a lot of difficult thoughts and feelings that had even me struggling and Heero might not be emotionally equipped to handle them. He might just want to shut them back out again.

I was tempted to go after him and embrace him tightly, stroke his hair and tell him that everything was okay, that I was going to help him explore this; that we were going to help each other. But I knew it would only make him feel more cornered and confused, that was something only the laughing Heero from my dream would be responsive to and he wasn't real. With the real Heero, I always knew - since I first ventured into his personal space - that progress would have to be slow and gentle. That was the case when I worked on befriending him and that did not change just because we had kissed. I couldn't just declare myself his boyfriend and hold his hand.

No matter how much I wanted to.

I decided to leave him alone, grant him the time to figure things out for himself without feeling rushed or embarrassed about his newly exposed inadequacy. Heero didn't like feeling insufficient or unprepared, but what he detested even more so, was other people being aware of his shortcomings, his weaknesses. Because if other people knew, he couldn't uphold his infallibility and the mask would start cracking under the scrutiny of reality.

I knew he would come to me for more answers, for more understanding, on his own terms, at his own pace. Heero couldn't be forced into anything.

It felt strange to go about normal life after something so momentous had occurred, but I was in desperate need of a long shower and a change of clothes. Even under the shower, as I tried to rinse away my thoughts as well, I couldn't shake this feeling of "oh-my-god-I-can't-believe-that-really-happened!". I wondered if there was a word for that particular feeling. "Shock", "amazement" or "astonishment" didn't quite cover it. I had experienced a similar feeling a long time ago, the night the first war was brought to an end. Seeing Heero return from destroying that piece of Libra, realizing with great relief that he was okay, followed by the "oh-my-god-I-can't-believe-that-really-happened!"-feeling that the war was over. Over! It had been a great feeling, but also scary, because
you didn't know what would happen, which path your life would take. We had only been prepared for war and our expectations didn't exceed war time.

When I had dried my hair and dressed in night wear I went to bed but not with the illusion that I would get any sleep. Staring at the ceiling I recalled my dream. Chasing after a fun and frivolous Heero while the perfect soldier had been by my side all the time. I wondered if that was the reason for these feelings I was having, the possibility of finding, or rather: creating a Heero that wasn't even in existence yet. I toyed with the despicable idea that I used him as a blank canvas to color to my own desires and specifications; strokes of vivid, happy colors, when in all probability - left to evolve on his own - black and red paint would bleed through the fabric, accompanied by the scent of gun powder and kerosene.

I did love him, but not his blank expressions, not his monotone voice. When he wielded the curt words of the soldier like a sword, hiding behind a mask that was stronger than himself, he made it hard even for me to love him. I loved him most when his forehead frowned and his lips pursed, when his eyes started to sparkle beyond the control of the soldier.

Could I keep loving him if Heero lost the battle with the perfect soldier and had to succumb to his reign?

I closed my eyes to rest them, listening intently to the ticking of a keyboard from the office.

Heero didn't come into the bedroom until far past midnight. I was too tired to even turn my head and look at the time on my alarm clock. He softly closed the door behind him, not because he thought I was sleeping and was being considerate, but because it seemed like it was a life goal of his to go unheard and unnoticed and that was a sad perspective for me to ponder.

I didn't feign sleep, it would have only made him distrustful when he caught me - and he would have caught me, because I couldn't convince someone that I was sleeping even if I was actually asleep - my eyes were wide open, my vision adjusting to the dark. Finally, the red light of my alarm and the faint moonlight coming through he curtains offered some help. I saw his shape moving in the dark, getting undressed. He didn't shower before he got into bed, but he may have done that while I was sleeping before.

I felt relieved that when I looked at him, he was still Heero, my friend, but accompanied with blossoming, awesome, new and exciting feelings. I felt so many things any sexual arousal may have been drowned out, but I didn't feel like anything had changed between us in the sense that I wanted to undress him with my eyes and mentally molest him. Maybe Sookie would eventually be proven right, maybe the sexual feelings would come later. I hoped they would, because it would very geriatric to love someone yet not lust after them, but I hoped those feelings would take their time, so Heero could keep pace with me.

I realized he had been staring at me, his eyes finding mine in the dark. He had an eerie composure over him. The "soldier composure" I feared, feeling a disconnect between the two of us, even though we had locked gazes. I couldn't see his subtle expressions, but the tension slowly died down and the atmosphere became more comfortable.

"Duo?" He quietly called out and my heart leaped at the acknowledgement that the soldier was out for the night. He sounded honest and vulnerable, a moment he allowed me to love him more than I ever had before.

"Yeah, buddy?" I called him "buddy" because I wanted to emphasize nothing between us would have to be different. There was no rush, no pressure. I wanted him to know that, because I knew it to be vital to earn his trust and accept the new abstract concept of our relationship.
"Thank you for helping me understand." He whispered, as if he was embarrassed to admit his own shortcomings.

I smiled. "No problem, buddy." I assured him, smiling big enough for him to be able to see in the low lights. "Are you okay with it?"

He remained silent for longer than my beating heart was comfortable with, bleeding heart ache into my chest like a throbbing pain. My dependence on him scared me not for the reason of sacrificing any masculinity, or freedom for that matter, but because Heero was an unpredictable love interest, torn between his efforts to be normal and the ingrained drive to be the perfect and impassive soldier. The soldier could break Heero and consequently, break me. Once broken I didn't know if either of us could be repaired.

"Yes." His voice was suddenly loud with certainty, after thoroughly contemplating the matter, as was his nature. "It made me feel..." He struggled for words, the frustrated frown, visible even in the dark, pulled at my heart strings. "It made me feel different. Strange. And that made me feel normal." He frowned at his own illogic.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to make him feel like I was passing judgment or advising him on how he should feel, how normal people would feel. I wanted him to make these discoveries on his own and decide for himself. Moreover, I was hardly an expert on the subject of emotions myself.

"I'm not making any sense." He berated himself.

"You don't have to make sense, Heero. You can tell me whatever you want. It's just communication."
Another early morning, another bagel run.

My face must have sported a big, goofy smile because at the bakery it was no secret that I was in a deliriously good mood.

"You look so happy!" Were the first words that welcomed me inside.

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention. I watched her scurry to wrap two bagels and bring them to me. Her kindness and generosity amazed me every single morning and withheld me from responding negatively to her, even though it was early and she had a tendency to be nosy. I had never known someone who had unconditionally offered me their kindness and shared with me their food. We could have used a bakery like this, run by a lady like this, back on L2.

"I'm happy to see you happy." She said, handing me breakfast.

"Okay..."

"Aww, don't be embarrassed!" She poked me with a stubby finger. "You look like a boy in love."

I swallowed. "How can you tell?"

She looked at me indignant. "What do you mean: "How can you tell"? I can always tell, I can tell everything! Just like I could tell that you are a good boy. Now go, go, go, go, I have work, you have school. Go, go."

I let her push me out of the shop, like she often did. I was grateful nobody in America had been exposed to my face during the wartime, or she may not have been nearly as generous if she knew what I was capable of and what I had used those capabilities for. I wasn't self-loathing enough not to see the benefits of our - the pilots - combined efforts. Our actions made a difference for the better, but we still killed sons, brothers, fathers even a few daughters, sisters and mothers and people would always blame us for that, like we would always blame ourselves.

My heavy thoughts could not dampen my light mood, however. If possible, I prepared Heero's bagel with even more love and an extra slice of cheese. Which made no sense, but I just felt like reflecting generosity all through the day. Even though, ultimately, it was Heero who paid for the cheese.

Instead of taking my position by the window, I waited for Heero by the dinner table. He looked great in his uniform, luckily he had two reserve shirts because the other had apparently been so badly torn that he hadn't even taken it home with him. I appreciated how long his legs looked in the black slacks and how his messy hair clashed with the pressed green shirt and tightly knotted tie.

"Good morning." I greeted. I wasn't sure if I should give him a kiss. I decided not to.

He nodded back as a way of greeting and then quickly ate the bagel, seemingly oblivious to the extra love - and cheese - I had put into it. I reminded myself not to have expectations that exceeded...
his comfort zone. But I had faith that one day he would greet me in the morning with a: "Good morning, love."

"I will be home late." He announced dutifully once he had finished his breakfast of bagel and coffee.

It was disappointing to hear, but there wasn't an argument in the world valid enough to make him come home early. Work was a mission that kept him moving forward, instead of getting caught up in his head, concerned about past decisions in the war. I knew what that was like. I didn't want to forcefully subject him to that.

When he left I frowned at myself and at us. This was not what I had hoping for, nor what I had been expecting. If possible, he seemed even more uncomfortable around me. Obviously he didn't know how to assert his new role, as boyfriend - if that's even what he was, we hadn't exactly defined the relationship as of yet. I snorted at the idea of having to teach him, it seemed so silly, but it appeared that it was going to take some direct guidance on my behalf for him to grasp the concept and behave accordingly. But I had no idea how receptive Heero would be to teachings of such kind, or even if that's something I should want. It brought me back to my dream. I wanted Heero to be himself, because that's who I loved, but at the same time I worried that Heero - as himself- would end up disappointing me because he has no clear idea of his own identity. He is so caught up in functionality and practicality, that he has reduced himself to a function: a tool that hacks into computers.

A strike of the clock alerted me I was going to be late if I didn't hurry.

I rushed through a shower, not washing my hair, which I regretted when I stepped out of the stall and noticed how messy and uncontrollable my hair had become. I redid the braid considerably tighter, but even then strands of hair stuck straight out towards the sky, as if to praise the lord. If anyone's hair can praise, it's mine, I thought with a chuckle, but honestly annoyed by the mischief of my bangs.

"Oh shit!" I called out when I caught the time on my watch as I wrapped it around my wrist. With rushed hands I blindly reached into the closet and dressed myself in the pair of jeans I had worn the day before, a red T-shirt and an open, caramel button-up shirt that rightfully belonged to Heero.

I wasn't worried about people's reactions to me based on the vicious email Aiden sent around the school population, but maybe I would have if my head and heart hadn't been so preoccupied with Heero, more so than regular. I raced to school without feeling any reservations or inhibitions, people could think whatever they want, but I did prefer them to keep it to themselves. I wondered how Sookie would fare.

I heard the bell ring loudly at a distance, around the corner from the school. By the time I had arrived at the front gate, the yard had already drained. I was definitely going to be late. I wasn't so much concerned with detention or a foul look from the teacher as I was with being suspended or even expelled. Being late to class isn't a good addition to two skipped days of school and calling a coach an asshole - regardless of how much he deserved it. So I raced up the three flights of stairs, noting that the next time at the gym, I should not bypass the stepping machine. My face was red and my mouth open in an unflattering pant that neither made me look fit, nor intelligent, but for the sake of things I was willing to barge into mister Kowadka's math class looking like that, had I not spotted the shy guy from the basketball game blocking the entry to the classroom.

In spite of the hectic day, I had not forgotten his name and greeted him with a tired wave and a breathless: "Good morning, Aston."
His ashen face lightened up. "Good morning."

I tried to see past him, through the frosted glass. The class room appeared to be dark.

"Principal Murphy came by to announce that mister Kawadka called in sick and they could not find a substitute in time, so we have the period off." Aston informed me, watching me intently with his almond eyes.

"Oh." I steadied my breathing and then allowed for an annoyed: "Couldn't they have called us at home or something?"

Aston shrugged and then said: "I just thought I'd wait for you, to tell you. In case you would come looking for us in other class rooms."

I nodded. Kowadka had the unusual tendency to switch class rooms when the class room that was assigned to him smelled "funny" by his own specifications. Sookie had filled me in on the "stink-bomb-drama" that had occurred the previous school year. Disrespectful students abusing the teacher's quirky attitude. "Thanks, Aston. That's really kind." With a sigh I walked away. A pair of squeaky footsteps - new sneakers on old linoleum - followed me. I turned and looked back at Aston, a little perplexed.

"Are you going to the cafeteria or to the library to study?"

I quirked an eyebrow. "I don't know." With concealed suspicion I asked: "Where are you going?"

He stared at me, like I had said something stupid. "Where you are going."

I did not like the "duh"-intonation that his voice held. I weighed my options for a second or two. Aston was a nice boy and obviously fragile and uncertain, I didn't seek to hurt his feelings, but his sudden interest in me was questionable at the least and had me at a loss of words and without solutions on how to act and what to say. Aside from knowing his name, he was a stranger. I did not like having strangers in my presence. Right before he could frown at my long silence I decided the library would be the best option, there we had to focus on studying as speaking was not permitted. "Library. I have a test coming up." I didn't, at least, not for another two weeks and I studied and absorbed information much quicker than that, but it would be silly to head for the library without cause.

Together we went to the library. Aston didn't say anything, further unnerving me. He took his seat by mine, claiming it with his cardigan and school bag, neatly draping the two over the back of the chair whereas I dumped my bag on the table in front of my chair of choise before heading out to the maze of bookshelves. Aston followed me to the history aisle.

"Are we in the same history class as well?" I asked, if merely to break the uncomfortable silence.

"No, I don't have history, I dropped it for advanced physics."

"Oh. That's cool." A blatant lie, even someone as marginally involved in the school's hierarchy of popularity, I knew for certain the kids in "advanced physics" were considered anything but cool.

"How is your arm?"

I looked at my limb, the scrape was still ugly but I had forgotten all about it, barely noticing a dull pain when I rolled up the sleeves of the button-up shirt that morning. "It's fine." I scoured the shelves for the designated literature, a thick book on all the pre colonial World Wars. "Aren't you going to study?" I asked Aston five minutes into my search with him still standing there.
"I'm gonna work ahead with math. If you're ahead with your homework by three weeks you get extra school credit."

I nodded. In the current system, if you had accumulated enough credit over the course of your high school period, you could enter an honor program in your final year. People in the honor program had better chances of being admitted to their university of choice, but I didn't have that drive. I wasn't planning on going to college or a university after high school, after all, I mostly did it for the normal human experience. The subjects that we actually studied I found to be redundant in everyday life. But it was fun to pop quiz Heero, though more fun if I could finally ask him that question that he would have no answer to.

I eventually found the book, heavy in my arms as it came down from it's high shelf. WORLD WARS 1 through 4. I carried it back to our chosen seats and flipped it open at the index. Beside me Aston started work on his math homework. I didn't recognize the assignments and wondered how far ahead he was. I was ahead five weeks myself and almost done for the semester, only because Math came so easily to me and when I sat myself down to the work, I always continued till I would get tired or had to make dinner. Slowly I had been getting ahead of everyone, but never boosting about it, fearful of attracting unwanted attention. Not even Kowadka was aware how far ahead I was. Extra credit was useless, the honors program would not get me what I required from this education-experience. The honor students had different hours, including Saturdays and had class in a side building, away from the regular school community, supposedly for privacy and the quiet required to study intensively. Though it presented enjoyable extra's such as private study rooms and always having a computer available for school work, I didn't want to be isolated. I wanted to force myself into the crowd, getting used to the exposure. Akin to Heero, I was in search of normality: feeling normal about things that should feel normal, but don't to us.

As I read I made quick notes in barely legible handwriting, a code I had developed during the war to be able to write secretly and privately, even when we were assigned a mission on a school campus, with many curious eyes studying the "new kids". Only I could read it and Heero a few words of it that he had been able to observe and place into context.

"Are you writing in a different language?" Aston asked.

My hand holding the pen stilled. Why was he watching me? "No, this is just my handwriting."

"Really? Is that how they teach writing on L2?"

I was offended by his question, taking it as a personal insult. Like the "colony-folk" couldn't even write "normal" (read: Earthian). "No," I bit at him, "on L2 they teach perfect writing." I had not enjoyed it though, but the graffiti on the walls had appeared normal and G, born and raised on L2, taught me a refined writing aesthetic, before he instructed me to create a secret code.

He immediately apologized. "I didn't mean to be offensive."

I turned my attention back to the book and studied till the bell rang. Aston went off to his advanced physics class and I headed for biology, where I noted Aiden was missing. Later that day I approached the English class, glad to see a smiling Sookie by the entry, talking to a group of people that had surrounded her.

They were saying things like:

"What Aiden did was so stupid!"

"I truly hate that bitch now."
"I can't believe how anyone, today, can still be so narrow minded."

They offered me their sympathy as well and they distinctly registered as groupies to me, gushing over us, complimenting us on our clothes and our hair - while I knew for certain I looked like crap - and expressing their jealousy about our grades. When they finally headed into class, I eyes Sookie questioningly.

Sookie chuckled. "Can't ya tell, Duo? They're my fans." She disappeared into the class room before she elaborated.

"Your fans?" I curiously asked in a hushed tone.

"Their just this group of student from the Arts and Drama department that think being gay is so cool. I get so tired of them telling me how much they wish they were gay themselves." She was smiling as she spoke though, she liked the positive attention and I could not blame her.

Many of them I had seen with her before, but many different kind of people hung out with her. I thought about it more carefully and realized that, stereotypically speaking, everyone I had ever seen her with fit the "art & drama" kind of person with unfashionable - or depending on your perspective: fashion forward - clothes and edgy hair, often dark or in shades of purple or red. I had never noticed it before. I remembered only one guy that didn't match the group. "What about that jock, though?"

"Michael?"

I shrugged, I didn't know his name.

"He has a total crush on me. He thinks he can turn me back." She finished with a mischievous grin.

"Turn you back? Do you think that's why Aiden was so nice to-"

"Duo!" She shushed. the class started to quiet down around us as the teacher entered, "Be quiet for a minute, will ya?"

I nodded. "Right, class." I directed my attention to the black board but looked back at Sookie when she prodded me in the side with one of her pencils.

"No!" She interrupted with a smirk, "I wanted to ask ya about what happened with Heero!"

That instantly brought a smile to my face, which in turn made her go "Awwww!".

"Well?" She pressed, uncaring about the teacher and his lecture on pre colonial, nineteenth century American literature.

I shrugged, but I still couldn't suppress my stupid smile. "We kissed."

"Ah!" she squealed.

Thirty heads turned to look at her adding to the scathing glare of mister Doucette, interrupted during his introduction of Huckleberry Finn.

Mister Doucette peered dangerously over the flat top of his purple tinted glasses, presumably to diminish glare of the sun, but he was known throughout the school as most flamboyant. "Miss Shaw, why this remarkably pointless exclamation?"

Sookie blinked at him, with a straight face she managed to pull off seriously: "Well, mister
Doucette, I am just such a devoted fan of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn!

Some classmates snickered - she did sound ridiculously hilarious when she exaggerated her southern accent to the point of making herself a caricature - others rolled their eyes and turned back in their seats.

He glared at her a little while longer but his sternness had no effect. "Let's continue. Huckleberry Finn, written by Mark Twain followed the successful and more popular Adventures of Tom Sawyer-"

"And then what?" Sookie hissed, kicking me under the table.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" She repeated, skeptical.

"Nothing." I confirmed.

"Hm." She paused briefly for thought and then continued with a big smile: "So when do I get to meet'im?"

I shrugged again. Heero disliked strangers as much as I did, if not than more so. Sookie may be my friend, but to Heero she was nothing but a threatening invader should I bring her to the seclusion of our apartment, where our life was tucked away in a secret universe. I still hadn't told her the truth about my past, confident that I could maintain a believable facade of being nothing other than a slightly less than innocent teenager from the colonies. Heero's near alien demeanor would certainly raise questions and Sookie was undoubtedly immodest and uninhibited enough to ask them, putting me in a difficult position.

"Let's just pay attention." I whispered back.

Sookie knew when she was being blown off so she sulked next to me for the duration of the English period.

Right before the bell rang, timed to it perfectly, mister Doucette announced with a finger in the air: "People, disperse!"

As we all got up the bell rang and the entire school started to "disperse", noisily.

"Why can't I meet Heero?" Sookie asked me with a whining voice as we headed towards the cafeteria.

I didn't know what to answer her. I had my reasons, but I couldn't tell her for the sake of those same reasons. "He's just... different..."

"Duo," She groaned, pushing me in line to get lunch, "we are all different."

"Yeah, well... I don't think you will like him and honestly," I said, taking a leap into the unknown, "I don't think he would like you."

"What? Why?" She shrieked.

"He's just very quiet." I explained, as to not insult her feelings. "He keeps to himself." I got my serving of macaroni and cheese, looking distastefully at the slosh. I normally brought my own lunch, but I had been late that morning.
"I really want to meet him... You know," She pointed out thoughtfully as we sat down at our usual table and she brought of forkful of lunch halfway up to her mouth, "I don't really know all that much about ya."

I shrugged, trying to brush off upcoming questions.

"Like... why did ya come to earth? Or rather, how could ya afford to? Didn't ya say ye were poor? And why did ya quit school during the war? Neither party was recruiting on L2, to my knowledge."

I inwardly chuckled bitterly at that. Someone had been recruiting on L2.

"And how did ya and Heero meet? Doesn't he work for the Preventer Agency, isn't that like some high-tech space spy agency?"

I wisely kept silent, throwing her off with a small smile on my lips.

"Yer not gonna tell me, are ya?"

I widened my smile and shook my head.

"Secretive bastard." She said with a smile, flicking the forkful of macaroni she had gathered towards me. "But I will meet Heero, someday." She announced arrogantly confident.

"Oh?" I drawled.

"Hmhm. Ya dunno it yet, but I'm gonna be yer maid of honor."

Laughing I flicked macaroni back at her, catapulting it forward using my fork like she had, but my aim was significantly better and the blob hit her in the chest and then dropped down into her shirt.

"DUO!" Laughing she fished it out and threw it back at me, hitting me right between the eyes.

I was going to throw something back at her but then I saw her hold up her jello.

"Give me a reason." She bantered.

I surrendered, distracted by the thought of Heero and myself dressed in white suits on a white sandy beach in front of a red sunset and a minister in a black robe. Though same sex marriage had been legalized worldwide and in the colonies a long time ago, marriage was still not something within the range of possibilities when one significant other was formerly known as the self-proclaimed God of Death and the other was the Perfect Soldier. That would make for an entirely different beach scene of black capes, Dracula costumes, army patterns and fully automated weaponry. The priest would be dressed in a black robe and bulletproof vest and wear a carbon fiber helmet to cast a shadow over his terrified expression. In the background, ominous in the blood red sunset, a mushroom ash cloud and the earth vibrated with the force of a powerful explosion.

To break myself away from the visual that made me grin, I asked: "So what have you heard about Aiden?"

"Oh, real subtle, Duo." She deadpanned, lowering the jello.

"No, seriously. I mean, are you okay now? And what is being done about it?"

"Duo, I'm sorry if my own emotions got ya all worked up. It was just the last straw for me. This isn't really the worst that she has done. It'll blow over."
"I'm not so much worked up as I'm seeking justice." I thought for a moment and then added frustrated: "And I can't believe she was being so nice to me, even after the email had been sent! She even invited me to her party next week!"

Sookie suddenly got excited, leaning over the table towards me. "Really? Ya should totally go!" She encouraged with an evil glint in her eyes.

I scrunched my face up. "Why?"

"Bring Heero and just start making out, right in front of her!" She got really excited by the idea. I shook my head. "Heero and I aren't really there yet."

"Then bring Aston." she joked, but there was always truth to jest, I knew that best of all.

I peered at her. "Why would you say that? You know him?" I curiously inquired.

"Hmh. Total crush on you. But he's kinda cute in an offbeat way, don't ya think?."

The thought was as flattering as it was eerie. That's why he was practically melting all over me that morning and before during P.E. when he had finally accumulated the nerve to approach me after I had been malevolently outed via digital messaging. "Any more gays you should warn me about."

She considered it for a moment. "Maybe Hunter, but I'm not entirely sure."

"Hunter? The basketball guy?" I frowned. "Didn't he used to date Aiden, before I came here?"

She nodded, her evil smirk reappearing. "Yeah, that's why she is not so keen to have him outed. I think it's the main reason for her focusing so much negative attention on me. If he is and if he says he is she would die of shame. I mean, seriously die- Oh my God!" She exclaimed, clearly having an epiphany, reaching further across the table to grab the side of the button-up shirt and pull me towards her. Her eyes were diabolical. "Ya have to hit on Hunter!" She confided in me in a hushed but excited tone. "It would be the perfect revenge!"

"I don't know." I did know, I wasn't going to do it, with whatever intentions, it would be betrayal towards Heero and I wouldn't do that to him.

"Duo," She pressed, her tone becoming serious and haughty, "It would be justice."

Justice. The word didn't fuel me as nearly as much as it did WuFei, but the prospect was alluring. I still turned her down. It was wrong, I wasn't about to be sucked into the feud.

With a sigh she gave up, deflating back in her seat. "Okay."

The lunch break came to an abrupt end. None of the students were in a hurry to get to their next class. The crowd sluggishly moved through the halls, a mere shadow of the bustling activity that went on when the bell indicated the end of a period, rather than the beginning of one. I parted ways with Sookie, sensing her disappointed at her ruined revenge. I could not really blame her. I wanted to get back at Aiden as well, but what she simply didn't understand is how important Heero was to me and that I was aiming for a relationship much more serious than most teenagers were. Perhaps her own open homosexuality had something to do with the promiscuous request. The concupiscent plan might have suited her own personal ideas and morals, but it crossed a boundary for me. The particular boundary I had crossed before, plenty of times in the past, but now I had it defined and lined with barbed wire and indicated with warning messages.
In the hallways the excited talk about parties and tanning at the beach reminded me that Spring break was coming up in the final week of April. I was disgusted to hear how many people still expressed their genuine excitement about Aiden's party, the opening weekend of spring break. It seems people were already forgetting about her heinous act.

Making my way over to class I was pushed aside only once. I had recognized Danny long before he had reached me, but didn't waver from my path. I ended up pushing him aside more than he did me. What people forget, distracted by the feminine movements of my long braid, was my height and strength. These high school kids were hardly Gundam Pilots. It took a lot more than a determined shoulder to get me out of the way. I could feel him glaring at the back of my head, but I didn't dignify him with a glance over my shoulder. Now that my own sexuality was no longer something that had me confused, but rather something that brought me joy in the withdrawn and awkward shape of Heero Yuy, I felt empowered.

My confidence only faltered slightly when the topic of the biology class was announced. It was right there in bold lettering at the top of the next chapter in our textbooks, written on the blackboard and pronounced explicitly by the teacher like he was introducing us to something completely novel.

"Homosexuality."

Of course the whispers that followed could not have been prevented. I wondered if Sookie was right, if everyone would eventually take Aiden's claim as nothing more than a joke about Sookie. I sure seemed to get a suspicious amount of stares.

We were instructed to quietly read through the entire chapter, from "Demography and prevalence" to "Sexual intercourse". The last paragraph offered a very clinical description of the sexual act between two males and between two females, but even I snickered at the dry mention of "strap-on dildos to imitate the sexual input a male would normally have during intercourse" in the case of two women. I wondered if this book was also one Heero had been forced to memorize. If so, his discomfort with physical comfort was even more understanding as the text didn't suggest any arousal or pleasure. It took a mechanical perspective on the "situation" that would suit Heero's take on everything, but it could not tempt, not even when read to a man high on aphrodisiacs by an experienced call girl. The tone was flat and asexual and insinuated that when sex did not have any reproductive purposes, it was only useful to establish a "normal" relationship in which everyone was appointed their respective role. It claimed there were four titles to divided amongst the two; Emotionally dominant, Emotionally submissive, Physically (or sexually) dominant and Physically submissive.

I knew reality to be not nearly as clear cut as what the text suggested. Heero nor myself could be called "submissive" in any emotional or psychological regard. I resented the idea and I knew Heero would too. He was silent, yes, and heeded to my guidance, but I never allowed myself the illusion that I could make Heero do anything he didn't want to by asserting the dominant role. Sexually, I hadn't figured things out yet.

I did have sex with men before. I grimaced at the memory. When you are at sea, weeks or months at a time, training and preparing for battle, waiting for that call to come in, sexual frustration had to be vented and the all-male sweeper crew could only turn to itself. I knew that in those instances I had a definitive preference for the dominant position, as did everybody else. The times you repaid the favor by taking the submissive role you just closed your eyes and forced your mind to go elsewhere. Expertly able to detach myself, I could reach climax as a bottom, but with Heero, I
wouldn't want to be absent. And I didn't want him to be absent either. It would be interesting how it would turn out, I thought.

I expected Danny to bark an insensitive remark, but he wisely kept his mouth shut, not willing to risk detention, or my wrath for that matter.

At home I realized I would have a lot of time to kill before Heero would come home. If nine or ten pm was normal for him, "late" probably meant he wouldn't be home before midnight.

I busied myself with homework, but that didn't last for long. In my opinion teachers were mild on their students. In the three years that I trained with G he kept me busy eighteen hours a day, with physical training till my body would be too exhausted to move then he tired my brain with relentless exercises. On top of that it was not uncommon for him or an employee at the facility to wake me up in the middle of the night for an emergency escape drill, a physical challenge, torture training or a pop quiz. Torture training was the worst because no matter how well I did it would not come to an end until G said it was over. If not for pure exhaustion I wouldn't have slept a wink, fearful of being awoken in the middle of the night, blindfolded and taken to a secret wing of the facility, purposefully designed, with cold water tubs and several different restraints and tools. The only luck I had was that G would never torture me so much as to cause permanent scarring. Nothing was done to me that would later enable identification or make me suspicious. Why he left me my braid was to my own wonder. Though I preferred to think he knew better than to test me that far, the more logical explanation would be the art of being underestimated. The braid added to a whimsical femininity that would distract any opponent and allow me an advantage.

I picked the note from the fridge and headed to the supermarket. All the items scribbled down were in my own handwriting. Heero never made any requests, of course having the presumption that he didn't need anything that wasn't there but would make do with whatever that was.

Or he really did think food and beverages just appeared magically.

I daringly headed into the personal health aisle and ended up at the far end section of sex items: a wide variety of condoms of different materials, sizes and with different flavors and an equally elaborate collection of tubes, canisters and packets of lube, also with a selection of flavors. I was overwhelmed by the choices, I didn't think there was any rush behind the purchase, but the scientists had turned us into super-boy-scouts: always prepared.

I randomly picked a tube of lube to read the description of "Tropical Coconut Sensation". The sweeper crews sexual escapades had only been accessorized with a jar of Vaseline and plain condoms, the brand of which eluded me. With Heero, I opted for a more "professional" approach, of which he would surely be appreciative.

I felt extremely uncomfortable when an old lady walked past me, peering at me through her thick glasses, enlarging her judgmental eyes. I finally managed to identify a plain lube without the risk of unexpected allergic reactions and regular condoms. I felt so strange buying these things, my face was red and my hands clammy as I carried the items through the store with me in my basket. I plucked an anonymous package off a shelf to cover them. My embarrassment had nothing to do with homosexuality. Apparently, after thoroughly investigating many different kinds of lubes, the product is not solely used for "male on male action" but for heterosexual intercourse as well. Condoms, obviously, also. I just didn't like the idea of people knowing - or thinking they know - what I would be doing, especially since it involved something so private as sex. Or rather: making love, but that was not something they could tell from my shopping list. People were eager to judge a young man for these purchases. I preferred to postpone that judgment till I would have to display them at the checking counter.
I also bought a six pack of beer cans, feeling like I could use some relief of the tension that had been bothering me and the rest of the items I had written down.

Back home I was guilty of ordering pizza two days in a rows and washing it down with two bottles of beer. After that all there was left for me to do was flick through the channels. Not even the sci-fi channel had anything interesting to offer. I stopped when I encountered an official conference.

She was out of frame but a text box at the bottom of the screen clearly stated: "Miss Peacecraft."

The camera was focused on a male journalist in a large crowd of people holding microphones and photo cameras, asking her: "Will the Gundam pilots attend the ball next month, miss Peacecraft?"

With a rapid swoosh the camera was aimed back at Relena and then zoomed in on her politely smiling face. "I have sent them all invitations and I am confident they will attend the event because during the war I've have come to know them very well and we have a mutual respect."

I snorted.

Another journalist, off screen, asked: "Will the identity of the pilots be kept a secret, or will they finally go public?"

Relena shook her head and deftly explained "No, their identities will be protected to ensure a normal life post war. The guest at the ball are all sworn in diplomats, royals and politicians who have agreed not to share the identity of the pilots with the public, for the pilots own protection."

"Miss Relena, as a believer in true pacifism, how can you condone the actions that have been undertaken by these so called "Gundam pilots"? They are responsible for a lot of lost lives during the AC 195 war."

Her face turned serious. "I do not condone violence, I never will." Camera's flashed brightly in her face but she was undeterred "But I've learned to accept the necessary acts that had to be taking in order for both the AC 195 war and the AC 196 conflict to be resolved. And I am grateful the Gundam pilots took this duty upon themselves and made themselves the anti-heroes, so no one else had to."

"Miss Peacecraft, Quatre Winner, heir to an array of resource satellites, has been rumored to be one of the five pilots, what is your reaction to that?"

"You know I will not confirm those allegations. But before anyone accuses mister Winner or anybody else of being a Gundam pilot, remember that their identity is one of the ESUN's best kept secrets and the tabloids most certainly do not have access to that information. Don't believe what you read."

"And what about this boy?" The camera showed a reporter standing up in the otherwise seated crowd, holding up a grainy picture of myself.

My blood ran cold and my heart skipped a beat.

"More false allegations. This time not by the tabloids, but by OZ. They had claimed to have caught one of the Gundam pilots to lift the moral of their soldiers. This young boy obviously isn't capable of being one of the Gundam pilots." She finished with a chuckle.

I was relieved that the reporters accepted her words as truth, but I was insulted by her joke.

I turned off the TV and got dressed for bed in underwear and a T-shirt. I picked one of Heero's
shirts again, this time on purpose and wondered if he would notice. The shirt fit me a little tighter than it did my roommate/friend/boyfriend - relationships are confusing! - but it didn't look like I was wearing a shirt far too small for my frame. I left the door to the hallway open, where a kept a light on. The bedroom was otherwise dark. I crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling, waiting for Heero. I missed him, but I didn't like to admit that, not even quietly to myself.

I heard a distant church bell indicate midnight.

I thought about the stuff that I had bought, hidden safely in my drawer of our shared nightstand. I was confident Heero respected my privacy and would not look in it, just like I had never peeked inside his drawer. Not that it would necessarily be bad if he saw them, he was going to eventually, after all. I wondered how long "eventually" would take, realizing that it would take longer, perhaps forever, if I didn't affirm our romantic relationship with more kisses and encouragement. I couldn't expect Heero to take the initiative, it would be like letting someone drive a car without a driver's license and any sense of direction.

I smiled at the irony. Heero was an excellent driver and could find a guns and ammunition store in Relena's back yard. I smiled. The boy definitely had his priorities in strict order...

My ears perked at the ever so soft sound of our front door being opened. The sound of the refrigerator door being opened was louder as the vacuum of the strips was released. He was probably taking a drink directly from the new orange juice carton I had bought today. I knew he liked orange juice and that he drank out of the carton. The former he would never admit to, the latter I never confronted him with. I wasn't his mother, I wasn't going to reprimand him for it.

It's not like I was afraid of his cooties, for God's sake.

His body appeared in the doorway and cast a sharp shadow across the bedroom floor in between our beds. It disappeared when he turned off the lights in the hallway. I greeted him softly. He stilled and the messy hair of head turned to face me, eyes searching for me in the dark. He grunted, which I preferred to interpret as a warm "Hello" and then went into the bathroom. New light flooded the bedroom when the lights in the bathroom were turned on and, as customary, he left the door wide open.

I hard him move under the spray, washing his body. I had no trouble envisioning him naked and for the first time it sparked desire. A weak little flame. The condoms and the lube seemed to have had a bigger influence on myself than I had initially expected.

The water was turned off and it took him little time to dry himself off. The light in the bathroom was switched off and the room turned completely dark again but Heero had no trouble navigating to the closet and getting a pair of underwear and a shirt, taking his time to get dressed.

By the time my eyes had adjusted and I could clearly see him in the dull blue moonlight, he was fully dressed and softly closed the closet door. Before he could get into bed, I reluctantly got out from underneath the warmth of my own covers, shivering at the sudden cold. His eyes shone as he fixed them on me, the blue light enhanced the unique shade of his vibrant irises, confiding in me more than he would want. The veritable "shutters" were wide open, allowing me to look inside as he gazed back at me through the opened barrier of the soldier.

I was standing right of front of him, looking down at him; as he was slightly shorter. Everyday I seemed to grow taller while his body remained unchanged.

When I sensed no discomfort on his behalf with the closeness I announced in a deep whisper: "There is something I need to do before we go to bed." I saw him raise an eyebrow. "Goodnight,
Heero." I gently cupped his face with my hands, my ring finger felt an even pulse in his throat. I leaned down and forward and pressed my lips to his. I softly nibbled on his full lower lip. His lips still tasted of sweet fruit, orange juice.

I was undaunted by his impassive state as instead of kissing back, he just let himself be kissed, let it happen to him. I was encouraged by the quickening pulse and his face and neck became warm under my touch. With a final tender kiss I parted. I took a step back, surprised to have him suddenly reach out a hand and twist his fingers into the front of my shirt. Before I fully comprehended it, he released my shirt from his grip and smoothed the fabric over my chest. I enjoyed the caresses of his slim and deliberate finger, however short they lasted.

"Goodnight." He said with a steady voice after letting a brief moment pass.

I smiled and stepped to the side, clearing the way to his bed. We both crawled deep under the covers of our respective beds. I almost instantly fell asleep, slipping into a comfortable dream. My smile unconsciously lasting till morning.
Part X - A bucket of blood

"I thought we could do something different." I said with an excited tone, hoping to be able to encourage him to engage me.

"What is that for?" Heero suspiciously eyed the object in my hands.

I playfully dropped it and it bounced right back up into my grip. "What do you think, genius? For some good ol' fun." I suddenly threw the basketball his way.

In spite of the surprise, Heero's reflexes allowed him to effortlessly and elegantly catch it with one hand. Heero held the ball as we continued along the sidewalk, breathing in crisp morning air.

"Don't hog the ball." I joked and swatted it out of his hands. The ball bounced out in front of us and I jogged after it to catch it before it would roll into the speeding traffic. I could tell Heero was not convinced. When we arrived at the split between the way to the gym and the way to the park, he halted and positioned himself in the direction of the gym. He was hesitant to accept my logic.

"I don't think basket ball will be as effective as an exercise as treadmills and weights."

I trapped the ball against my side with my left arm and reached out with my right hand to catch Heero at his elbow and gently ease him along with me towards the park. "Then we'll just get fat and be happy with it."

His face remained blank but his wide eyes darting my way betrayed his displeasure at that possibility. Surely it wasn't a vain or purely aesthetic pet peeve of his. Rationality, as always, was his basis. Fat people aren't as fast or agile as thin and toned people, therefore are less likely to dominate a fight or successfully escape a hazardous situation.

"You're not gonna get fat." I assured him with a smile and poked him against his hard abdomen.

He didn't like that, with a barely concealed cringe he shied away from me.

I tried not to let it get to me and pretended I didn't even notice. "Come one, just one game, so I didn't just waste 9.95 on a ball."

That was the argument I should have started with. Heero offered no more resistance. Being wasteful was not effective. Not soldier like. I should have known this argument to have the greatest effect on the Perfect Soldier, after all, this was the guy that mastered a guard with the use of a strategically placed cabbage. He was a veritable post colonial reflection of the pre colonial character MacGyver and was never too retired to leave me uninformed of his use of random vegetables and manipulation of at-hand tools to serve a completely different purpose than they were intended to be used for, just to show me the fallacy of my profligate use of explosives that left me no unnoticed escape. Every time I dared to refer to myself as the master of Stealth, I swear to God he never failed to snort.

I remembered a game we used to occupy ourselves with when caught in the tedious life of the orphanage. One of the kids would start: "You are going to an uninhabited island and you are allowed to bring only one thing... what would it be?" It was totally unrealistic in the sense that how
you could possibly get to this island. The location itself proved a difficulty as well: all landmass on
earth had been population by the ever expanding size of the human race before they turned to a
solution in outer space.

Regardless of the technicality, we enjoyed this came, but I never used to be very good at it,
purposefully, to get the other kids to laugh. I was known to bring a pair of mismatched socks, a
shower head, a Christmas tree and a telephone booth - mind you, without the actual working
telephone. I knew better now. I would bring Heero with me. I believed him to be able to fashion a
small handheld weapon out of a pipe, some screws, a string and a bag of potato chips. Imagine
what he could do with the natural resources on an uninhabited island. I chuckled to myself. He
would probably build a bamboo mobile suit and fly our asses out of there, I thought.

I played the game with Quatre once and he surprised me by telling me he would bring disinfecting
hand crème. My reply had been: "Obsessive Compulsive Dummy." I chuckled again at the
memory, in particular the embarrassed look on his pale face.

I caught Heero's questioning look. "Just thinking." I told him before he would go thinking along
the lines of undiagnosed mental illnesses - I was laughing to myself after all.

With the park still five minutes away I asked him, genuinely curious about his answer: "Heero.
You are going to an uninhabited island and you are only allowed to bring one thing with you...
What would you bring?"

Heero frowned, he kept looking up ahead as he answered me with a hint of confusion. "Why would
I go to an uninhabited island?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't know, crash landing or something..."

His frown deepened. "Than I would hardly have the time nor the luxury to bring something with
me of my choice."

I laughed. "Just, for the sake of it, what would you bring if you had anything to choose from?"

"A duffel bag?" He suggested tentatively, not sure of the rules and intentions of the game.

"What? Why?" I was trying to imagine what good a pile of fabric and threaded shoulder straps
would do for your survival in a desolate environment overrun by nature.

"A duffel bag has a greater capacity than just my hands and I will be able to bring more with me to
this island."

I laughed again. He was so adorably dense. "Okay and what would be in the duffel bag?" I pressed.
There was an answer I was hoping for, but I wasn't sure I would be able to fit into a duffel bag, or
even if Heero would want me with him...

He did not understand the use of this game even as a way of gathering information. But he replied
of water. Salt water pump. Food." He nodded, he was done, satisfied that his mentioned equipment
would last him for long enough for the emergency troops - that he called with his satellite phone,
clever boy - to locate and extract him. He surprised me when he asked: "What would you bring?"

I needn't think about it. I did not have a long, practical list to offer. I simply said: "You."

Heero wouldn't meet my gaze, strict eyes looking up ahead. "Why?" I was, again, making very little
sense to him.
"Because your the kind of guy that packs an entire duffel bag." I admitted with a sheepish smile and mentally added: and because I love you more than life itself.

"You would willingly put me in a life threatening situation?"

I stilled. I hadn't even thought about it that way. It would indeed be a selfish act of mine to bring Heero with me just because I couldn't stand being without him. In the purely hypothetical situation I risked both our lives. "You're right, I'm sorry." We continued our path leading to the park.

"That's okay." He said after a while, very soft-spoken. "I would come with you. With my duffel bag."

My heart may have burst leaving a mess of bloody gore in my chest but it felt wonderful to hear him say that - it almost sounded like an innocent attempt at a joke.

I kept silent for the rest of the way. Enjoying his calm presence, his powerful aura. I wondered if Heero felt these things he radiated himself as well. If that was the case, it would seem easy to fall for the illusion of being invincible. But it was an illusion by the soldier, that tricked us both.

I was in no hurry to get to the park, it was Saturday, I had no where else to be, no other responsibilities than to be with my friend and my boyfriend, but I had to keep pace with Heero's strong gate, nearly jogging after him as he covered a meter with every step of his long legs. A lavish green park finally appeared between the space of two business towers, their glass facade reflecting the greenery and optically expanding the size of the truthfully medium sized, rectangular park. I remembered it's lay out from when I had visited the park before. The pond was at the far end, the basketball court hidden somewhere in the middle, flanked by tall trees obscuring the court from sight as it was surrounded by several grassy fields for picnicking, kicking a ball or throwing a Frisbee back and forth. It was an idyllic place I could imagine being filled with happy faces and resounding with laughter, but as early in the morning as we had chosen to go, it was all quiet. Only occasionally a dog, restrained by a leash, barked at a squirrel or an ostentatious cat.

I guided Heero along the winding sand and shell paths, taking a wrong turn myself and we ended up approaching the court from the other side, but I pretended that to have been on purpose.

Heero assessed the fenced-in court. It was as well maintained as you can expect a public court to be. The nets had been torn away by vandalistic teens, leaving only the hoops, fastened to the backboard by bronze, rusting bolts. Most of the white lines on the court had faded with the wear of shoes and the bouncing of balls, only at the perimeter of the court were they still vaguely distinguishable. Four large spot lights illuminated the court for ambitious players after dark.

"C'mon. First one to score 10 points wins." I opened the door in the fence and gestured him to enter. The court may have lost it's shine over the years but it was perfect for a friendly game and some determined groping. "Which side do you want?"

Heero strategically chose the side with the sun shining brightly behind it, which would definitely blind me in attempts to even the score. It was not a dishonorable choice, just a smart one, made by a guy not willing to lose. No matter what. I could only respect that and honestly say I would have made the same decision. We had no trouble letting our ego's collide once in a while.

"Okay, then I get the ball first." I announced.

He nodded, concluding it to be nothing other than fair to have equal advantages.

We met at the center of the court - more or less as there were no markers - Heero obstructed my
way towards his half, standing close in front of me. His legs were spread for stability, his feet firmly planted. He shifted his weight from left to right, causing a sway-like motion to his body as he prepared to block me whichever way I would try to pass him.

In a regular basketball game I could pass the ball to a strategically placed teammate but during a one-on-one game that luxury did not exist. Yet I preferred it that way. One-on-one, like in real life, you had only yourself to count on, no one else to fall back on.

Me against the world.

I winked at Heero, but my cheap distraction left him unfazed and he kept his eyes intensely fixed on mine. I twisted my body to the left, feigning an attack from that direction, hoping he would turn his body as well and leave my right exposed to break through and score. I quickly twisted back and started to dribble the ball right, to pass him. Unfortunately it was another clear-cut trick that could not deceive Heero Yuy. With lightening speed he extended his left arm and hit the ball out of my reach before it could bounce back up to my hand. We both hurried to gain possession of the ball. Both our fingers touched it but Heero could put more strength into his fingers, having maneuvered himself into the perfect position. He successfully distanced the ball from me. It all happened so fast. By the time I realized the ball had not moved in my favor, Heero had already bypassed me and was quickly dribbling towards my hoop, almost as fast he could run, not hindered by having to dribble the ball along with him.

I raced after him, becoming competitive when I saw him near a score of 2 - 0. I rammed my body into him, unable to stop at the speed that I had built up, just as he threw the ball into the air. As the ball flew, we crashed to the ground. I landed half on top of Heero, reducing my painful impact with the concrete, but adding to his. I heard the ball go through the hoop but I paid no attention to it. I removed my weight from Heero's frame, hearing him suck in a lungful of air. My heart throbbed with guilt and worry. I knelt by him and rolled him onto his back. More painful pangs of hideous guilt when I noticed the scrape on his chin and his difficult breathing.

"I am so sorry! Are you okay?" Subconsciously I stroked a hand through his hair, pushing his bangs out of his face, fully exposing a slight grin and victorious twinkle to his eyes as he whispered with a coarse voice, still out of breath:

"Two - zero."

I sighed in relief. If he was okay enough to brag, he was fine. "Okay show-off. Up on your feet." I got up and reached out a hand for him.

Heero accepted the offered hand, gripping it tightly and allowing me to hoist his light weight off the ground and to his feet.

The game continued and I didn't hold myself back because of the foul tackle and neither did Heero. If he was in any pain, he never showed, just as eagerly tackling me to the ground. We both turned the game into a crossbred of full-contact football and the actual game the court was designed for. But we could both handle the abuse and enjoyed - or at least I did - showing off our strength and agility. It was "Basketball for Gundam pilots". I also used the moments after a tackle to my advantage, using it as excuses to grab his hand or playfully touch him, grateful that he never pulled away from me or avoided the contact.

Not long after Heero's first two points, I made an impressive throw and turned the score to 3-2 in my favor. But Heero returned by scoring two times in a row, making me growl at the fact that I had only half his points at 6-3. Heero narrowly evaded my tactics and made it a brutal 9-3. Fuelled by my competitive nature I was damned to let him score again. I balanced my position as offender and
defender equally and managed to excel at both, nearly evening the score by reaching 9-8 with two remarkable throws. I hadn't kept track of time but we were both sweating from the exercise and the sun had started to burn our skin and bake the concrete. I was determined to finish the game, either way and I knew Heero wouldn't want to quit on the account of the heat either so we kept going as the front and back of our shirts got soaked along with our bangs, plastering to our foreheads. We were both dirty but I loved it and the sheen on Heero's golden skin started to distract me as I spent more time playfully holding on to his shirt while guarding him than actually paying attention to the ball. Then, suddenly, we were right by my hoop and Heero made the shot.

I held my breath as I watched the ball soar. I felt sorry the game would come to an end and to lose, but Heero never missed.

Until then.

The ball hit the backboard with too much force and overshot the hoop, coming back into the playfield.

He missed. Oh my God, I thought, he missed...

Heero, apparently, was as shocked as I was and I managed to compose myself a fraction faster than he did. I ran back and snatched the slightly bouncing ball off the court and dribbled it to the far end. Heero was right behind me but he would not be able to catch up and block my shot. It was all about the aim, but I didn't have much time to carefully aim my shot with Heero hot on my heels, so I kept running till I was right by the hoop and then jumped up. I was too short and not nearly athletic enough to slam dunk, but with my body high up in the air the distance the ball had left to go was greatly reduced and therefore the aim need not be so accurate. I threw the ball towards the hoops as my body was guided back to earth by gravity. My feet landed but my spirit soared, ecstatic.

10 - 9!

"Oh yeah! Who's your daddy?"

Heero stared.

I laughed at his slightly perplexed features "It's just an expression." My words were breathless as I panted heavily. I doubled over, holding my hands against my legs just above the knees. Heero was considerably less exhausted but also took deep, audible breaths. I straightened myself back up and asked Heero, who was the only one of us wearing a watch, what time it was.

He brought his wrist up to his face and pursed his lips in dismay as he read the time. "I'm late for work." He stated. "It's nine thirty."

We had been playing for just under two hours, apparently well matched on the court. More so than I dared to believe.

"You can't be late for work Heero, it's Saturday. It's the weekend." Unfortunately his definition of "weekend" stopped at "regularly on Saturday and Sunday" and didn't include: "a weekly rest period from one's work." The weekend was merely the time he used to do everything that he didn't get done during the week and since there would always be a never ending string of perceived threats to the Earth Sphere Unified Nation, his weekends would never be for resting. But maybe, I thought, I could engage him in an activity other than work that we had yet to find time for.

"Don't go to work. They can miss you one day."
His skeptical expression implied that they couldn't and I was inclined to believe him, I was also inclined not to care about their needs, but more about ours, as human beings, as friends, and possibly, someday, as lovers.

"Please? I really need your help with something, I can't do it without you."

"School?"

I stuck my tongue out at him. "No, not school. I may not have memorized the wide array of textbooks like you, mister Anal Retentive, but I am not stunted in my cerebral growth." I chaffed. "I need help with the office. I didn't have time to paint it yet. I really want you to help me." We started exiting the court.

Heero took the ball with him, playing around with it a little.

"Please?" I continued, batting my eyelashes at him in mockery.

"Hn." He finally agreed.

"Great. Thanks buddy." I flung an arm around him, not bothered by the sweat and neither was he. "Wanna jog home? Take a detour through the park?"

Heero nodded, welcoming the actual work-out.

"Okay than." I took the ball from him so he didn't have to carry it. After all, it had been my decision to buy one and so, if I couldn't pay for the purchase, I could at least carry it so he wouldn't have to. It was awkward jogging with the ball in my hands as usually my arms moved independently of each other, moving back and forth in the opposite direction, but holding the ball they had to move in unison. I quickly found my stride however and I jogged at a good pace, with Heero a heartbeat behind me. I guided him along the paths, taking us further away from our apartment, in the direction of the pond. I wanted to show him everything the park had to offer.

Heero jogged behind me in step the entire time. Occasionally I looked over my shoulder to catch his gaze. One time, I grinned at him and I called back to him: "Enjoying the view?"

"Hn?" He responded.

Oh you heard me, I thought with a smirk.

Once we had passed the pond, I took us straight back home, realizing it was way too hot to be jogging, especially after an intense game of basketball. I couldn't even bear to get myself up the stairs so I pressed the elevator button once we had arrived back at our building. Heero seemed to have the energy to climb the stairs, but he came to stand by me, balancing himself with one hand against the wall while he pulled up one leg at a time, stretching the muscles, as we waited for the elevator to descend.

We stepped out on our floor and I practically had to drag myself through the narrow hallway to our front door. I would be fine after a cool shower but no sooner than that. I fished the key out of the deep pockets of my cut off sweatpants, the pant legs threading at the knees after I attacked them with a simple pair of scissors.

It was warm inside our apartment. I reached for the remote of the AC to turn the air-conditioning on. With a hum the machine came to life and started blowing blissful cool air into the space.

Heero, in the meantime, had gone into the kitchen and emerged with two bottles of water. "You go
shower first." I said, halfway through my bottle as Heero threw away his empty bottle in the plastic recycle bin.

He nodded and left for the bathroom.

I placed my water on the dinner table and strained my muscles in a final effort, clearing the office of furniture so we could safely move around and not spill paint on anything important. It was a surprisingly short and simple task. The bookcase I tilted on it's back and dragged out and both our desks - with everything on it - were dragged out just as easily. My pen cup fell over and colorful pencils spilt all over the floor, other than that the removal went without a hitch and before Heero had returned dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a white shirt, I had emptied the entire room, leaving it with an echo. A lonesome bucket of paint in the center of the room was all there was.

I instructed Heero to cover the edges of the wooden floor of our office with old newspapers and then took a long shower to cool my burning body. I turned the faucet to frigid and after the initial scare when I stepped under the spray, violently shuddering, I thoroughly enjoyed it. The water silenced my muscles' protest, melting away the aches and pains. Soaked under the hard cascade of cold water I undid my braid and combed through it with my fingers before lathering it richly with shampoo and then conditioner.

I took my time cleaning myself but not drying myself. I braided my hair while it was still damp, almost wet, and water immediately soaked through the fabric of my shirt when I put on some old clothes, but it felt fresh against my back, in particular in the cooling air of the apartment.

Clean and proper and stepped out of the bathroom and went back to the office. Heero had splayed out all the equipment that I had bought before, but had stored for later use. The bucket of paint was at his feet and he was looking down at it with what I interpreted as trepidation - based on the few signs I had to go on with Heero's face being an ever frozen tableau. His arms were tense, his hands balled to loose fists, his head hung meekly, allowing himself some privacy behind his haphazard bangs.

The bucket of paint looked like a bucket of blood.

I tried to lighten the mood with a cheery smile, scolding myself for not thinking about the color more carefully. I was certain though that once it was dry on the wall, it wouldn't have such a resemblance to the spills of war anymore. "You don't like the color, buddy?"

"Hn." Heero tore his eyes away from the paint and reached for a roller.

"Nuh uh, buddy." I handed him a roll of tape. "First we tape off all the edges, the window sills and the doorframe and then we do the corners with the brush."

He obeyed my instructions and lined all the woodwork and the corners where the walls met the ceiling on one side, while I taped off the other side with a second roll of tape.

I finished earlier because I was much less of a perfectionist. Instead of trying to tell him that "sorta straight" would be fine too, I let him line the paper with a focused eye as I prepared two trays for us to work with and unwrapped two brushes. When he was done I handed him a tray with a little bit of paint on it, the thick consistency of the paint showed on the tray and made it less reminiscent of blood, fortunately. "Corners. Everywhere the roller can't reach without painting something we don't want painted." Heero took to his own side with his orders and I took to mine, often turning back to look at him as he balanced himself on the seat of one of the dinner table chairs to reach the ceiling, one foot propped up on the back of the chair. The sex was definitely coming, I noted as my eyes lingered lengthily on his ass, where the jeans fit him a little tighter. I waited patiently for him
to finish the wall he was working on, not at all minding the view of his body from a lower area. The angle accentuated his long legs and the curve of his behind. I felt like touching him, not sexually, but just reach out a hand and touch his leg, or his arm, just to reassure myself he was actually there, with me and that this was real, because it didn't feel real, it felt too good to be true.

But I knew I shouldn't randomly touch him. He wouldn't like it. Yet.

"Looks good." I said, appreciating his handy work as he climbed off the chair. I looked at his front and whereas his crisp white shirt was still perfectly clean, I had a read smear across the "TAMPA" of one of my school shirts, wipes of red paint on my forearm and, I knew, a smudge on the side of the bridge of my nose where I stilled an itch with fingers wet with paint. Mischief got over me. I was still holding my wet brush in my hand. Before I knew it I reached up my hand and swiped the brush right by his face, catching his nose.

The soldiers mask was disgraced by a red, clown-like nose tip and for a moment, the soldier shrank, withering back inside of embarrassment and left Heero wide eyed and with raised eyebrows.

He is so cute. I thought, before deciding on another bold move. I leaned forward, tilted my head and kissed him. A sweet and tender peck to his lips. I could feel the wet tip of his nose against my cheek, marking me even more. A mark on my cheek to mirror the mark he had left on my soul, his fingerprints on my heart, the only evidence of his crime of passion. I had nothing else to show for our relationship other than the wild beating of my own heart whenever he permitted me to come close. Somehow that was okay. Pictures could come later, if not, I had these memories that I would treasure and keep vivid by reliving them everyday with him by my side.

I broke from his lips and from my own sentimental train of thought. I smiled at his thoughtful expression as he labeled and logged the sensations and emotions I was making him feel for future reference. I pressed my face forward and brought our noses together, making sure mine would end up as red as his. When I pulled back, Heero's hand tentatively appeared in front of my face and with it he wiped the red of my nose.

"You look ridiculous." He stated firmly, furrowing his eyebrows as he concentrated on the task of making me less "clownesque".

"You look adorable."

He moved his hand to rub the paint off his own face. He rejected "adorable", caught in a box that didn't allow men to be adorable or cute, only manly, invincible and impassive. It was a box of which he would have to free himself. One of many faulted beliefs that if not shaken, would impair him, cripple him in life like a paraplegic was crippled in a triathlon.

To break the uncomfortable silence that had fallen between us and was especially hard on Heero, I handed him a roller to start work on the large surfaces. Instead of each of us working on our own side, with our backs turned to each other, we worked side by side. He definitely had a distracting effect on me.

I noticed the paint didn't take to the wall evenly, some places were darker than others. I realized that it would probably need another layer, then at least it would be less noticeable. With neither of us skilled at decorating, I wasn't surprised. The lighter colors in the other rooms didn't show uneven coverage as much as the dark red shade. I knew it wouldn't bother me. I had a way of seeing imperfections as something pertaining of character. For example, I loved the way the color of my eyes were uneven, one having more violet in it than the other and I used to love the big scratch Deathscythe had on the left side of it's face, something that I had never gotten fixed as it
posed no threat to the mechanics or inner workings of the machine. And I loved Heero, as unwilling as he would be to admit it, he was imperfect and should never have to apologize for it. Every single imperfection humanized him and distanced him from the mold of the soldier.

We finished early in the afternoon, perfect timing for lunch. I sat Heero down at the dinner table and prepared him lunch, a hearty sandwich with lettuce, chicken, tomatoes and cheese. We had never had lunch together before, so I had no idea if he would like what I had made for him. When he was done with it, I still didn't know if he liked it. He ate the whole thing in silence and with a blank expression.

I asked him a painful question that was weighing down on my heart. "Would you rather be at work?"

As always, Heero gave my answer lengthy consideration. He never answered a question lightly or dishonestly. "No."

My heart felt feather light and fluttering through my chest. The words "flirting butterfly" came to mind as my heart behaved erratically in my body. I knew for sure then, with a light smile, that I wasn't just Heerosexual, I was a total queer, but I was just as sure that in spite of thinking things like "flirting butterfly", having a braid and being experienced with men, Heero would be the only one to have my heart, ever. He may have wiped the paint of my nose but there was nothing he could do about the other marks he had made, that initially tore into my flesh like searing bullets - a favor I returned quite literally - but now warmed me comfortably.

After lunch we applied a second layer. The description on the side said we were supposed to wait four hours, but I was eager to get the job done and Heero was eager to have anything to do at all. My drive wavered however when I caught the sight of him stretching his body as he moved the roller up and down the wall. I would have never guessed painting to be such a sexual activity, but I was definitely interested in the movements of his body and the modest exposure of skin when he fully stretched up and a line of his toned abdomen became visible as the shirt hiked up. His elongated body with his back arched was enough to make me feel something that exceeded jealousy of his physique.

I blushed slightly when I finally noticed Heero had caught my stare a long time ago and was looking right back at me with a quirked eyebrow, the roller in his hand, frozen midair.

"Nothing..." I muttered and continued with my small piece of wall.

We were done an hour later. The paint was still a little uneven, but only visibly so when it caught the sunlight and we usually had the drapes lowered to minimize glare on the screens of our laptops anyway.

I moved to stand by Heero and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. He immediately tensed up and leaned a little to the side, away from me, but he didn't remove himself from my casual embrace.

"I think we did a pretty amazing job." I appreciated, scanning the wall with a much less stern expression than Heero was. He just remained silent. "How about a drink?" I asked, I had worked up a sweat myself, in spite of the air-conditioning.

Together Heero and I walked back to the kitchen and from the refrigerator I got two bottles of beer, twisted the caps off and handed him a bottle. It immediately dawned on me that he probably never had alcohol before so I advised him to take it slow, but didn't take the drink away from him, curious to see his reaction to his first taste.
Heero held the opening of the bottle under his pointy nose and carefully sniffed.

"It's beer." I said. "Everybody drinks it."

"I know it's beer." He snapped. Still, he took his time analyzing the beverage before taking his first sip, whereas I was already halfway through my drink. He gingerly brought the opening to his lips and tilted his head back for a drink. He quickly straightened his neck and held the bottle away from his mouth, struggling to hide his negative reaction to the strong and outspoken taste. His lips became a thin, taut line.

I chuckled but stopped when he gave me a slightly angry look. He did not appreciate my mockery. "Sorry. You don't like it, do you?"

"It's very distasteful." He spoke honestly.

I nodded and took the final gulp from my own bottle. "Yeah, most people sort of have to learn to appreciate it."

"Why?" He frowned deeply, for his standards, "Didn't you say taste was most important?"

I smiled, happy to have confirmed that he had actually been listening to me all this time and that my words hadn't fallen to deaf ears. "Well, yeah. But everybody drinks beer, it's normal for guys to drink beer, it's like a rite of passage. And once you get used to it, you really start to like it. I like it. Maybe not so much the taste but... it makes me feel relaxed."

Heero looked at the label on his bottle. "Relaxed?" He asked, in search of clarity and understanding.

"Yeah... Uhm..." I didn't know how to explain the benefits of alcohol to him.

"Won't you get intoxicated from the alcohol?" He asked, as his eyes fell on the "5% alcohol" logo at the bottom of the label.

"Not from a bottle or two. Besides, it's not terrible to get a little drunk once in a while."

That, the soldier in him did not understand. "Why?" He asked, only seeing the downsides of being drunk: less aware of your surroundings, lulled into a false sense of security, weakened, sluggish...

"Because when you get drunk... you know... you just feel... happier and uninhibited, carefree." My words only added to his confusion, I could tell. It went against the rules. Always the rules. 1) The mission has priority. This first rule makes your own happiness secondary to anything that is even remotely relevant to the mission. 2) Be inconspicuous. People who are uninhibited attract attention with their loud voices and crazy antics. 3) Never let your guard down. This, by definition, conflicts with being carefree, on top of that alcohol impairs the reflexes. Getting drunk would be like tying and gagging the inner soldier. Heero relied too heavily on him to have him fully restrained and silenced.

I took the bottle from him with an understanding but sad smile and emptied it in the sink. Of course I wasn't sad that he didn't like beer, I hadn't expected him to, it was saddening to be reminded of the deep rooted power of the soldier. His leadership over Heero was as true and undeniable as the words of God to me. A deranged soldier is a frightening persona to obey as your God. Under his reign a bucket of red paint would always look like a bucket of blood, filled by the drops that fall from our stained hands.

We tore the tape of the doorframe and the window sill and removed the pages of news that covered
the floor. Words of natural disasters and colony malfunctions that had caught droplets of red paint. I ignored the news articles as I bunched up the paper to make it fit in the garbage bin. The horrors they referred to were on the other side of the world, or in space, there was a time that we would answer a call of distress from any location and raced towards there faster than the speed of light. Now everything except our own lives was out of our hands, out of our reach of power.

It was difficult to accept sometimes, other times, it was relieving that you could just turn the page and the trouble would be gone.

The office was quickly redecorated and the red paint looked good with the dark furniture and the light floor. I sealed the left-over paint in the bucket and stored it under the sink just in case. On the walls it didn't remind me of blood anymore, I hoped Heero felt the same. He didn't appear to be uncomfortable in the room with the screaming walls, he sat himself down behind his desk and booted up his laptop. I took my cue and let him be, he had had plenty of exposure today and it would be best for him to be able to withdraw and privately reflect on today.

I started work on an early dinner, figuring we could eat a little sooner after a day filled with such activity.

We had dinner and afterwards I popped in another classic DVD for us to see and hopefully enjoy. I had so many comments to the movie the credit should have cited me as a narrator. Heero either ignored me and focused on the movie, or ignored both of the input. He didn't say a single thing and his face didn't twitch towards an expression, not even once.

After the movie had finished Heero took another shower by way of habit. I remained on the couch, watching as the movie scrolled through it's credits and faded to grey snow. I wished everyday could have been like that day. It didn't matter if he was the soldier or not, if he saw buckets of blood or not or if he was being quiet and hesitant or not, I loved simply being in his presence and watching him live. Every breath he took brought me joy and relief. I pitied myself for the fact that good days as these would be rare, at least for the time being, but I hoped he knew it was what I wanted and that he would eventually want it too.

The fall of water stopped so I started turning off the lights and joined him in the bedroom.

I walked into the bedroom just as he pulled down his shirt and I was startled by the sight of his bruised stomach. His skin had turned a hideous shade of yellow and purple over the lowest ribs of his left side. He had possibly even cracked them. I didn't think when I landed on top of him that morning and he was bragging soon after that his injuries could be so severe, broken ribs seemed extreme for a tackle to the ground but I had been found guilty of not knowing my own strength intimately before. Maybe, after the all the time that I have known him, I should have known better. But attuned to him as I was, even I was flawed when it came to diagnosing wounds on a patient that wouldn't even cringe when you thread a needle to his skin to suture a cut.

He froze and looked at me. Questioning me with his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I gestured at his abdomen.

"It's fine. It's nothing." He said, getting into his bed.

I said the same thing to Aston after I had fallen during a basketball game, but that had only concerned a bloody scrape. Broken ribs were worth mentioning!

His eyes challenged me to go all mother hen on me.
Instead, he - ironically - made me chicken out and keep silent, but I was worried and plagued with
guilt, for hurting him and for not noticing it sooner. I changed into my nightwear, still modestly
hidden behind the closet door.

Fully dressed I closed the door but instead of walking over to my own bed, I walked over to
Heero's, where he was rigidly lying on his back, his eyes fixed intently on me. I leaned over with a
reassuring smile and placed one hand carefully over his abdomen. I could feel the taut muscles
through the fabric of the thin sheet and his shirt and felt the muscles tense up nervously, I stroked
back and forth with my thumb in an attempt to ease his mind and show him my care and worry. It
was hopeful - at the least - that he would be able to deduct all this from a single touch, but hopeful
was the kind of person I had quickly grown to be, to thwart the affects of constant disappointment
in life.

"Goodnight, Heero." I said and united our lips briefly. Heero barely moved his lips with the kiss.
When I parted us, he remained passively on the bed, staring up at me with calculating eyes. "Thank
you for your help today." I said and then went over to my own bed, crawling under the sheets with
a content sigh.

"I love you." I whispered sentimentally.

He was silent for a long time, deceiving me into thinking he had fallen asleep, but then he said: "...I
love you too."

I wasn't sure if he truly meant it the way I had, but either way it was uncharacteristically thoughtful
and romantic of him to say, even if he just meant as a friend, or even if he just said so to please me.

The details were left to my creative interpretation, but one thing was clear: His innately kind heart
cared for me.
Kissing Heero goodnight became part of the routine. I kissed him goodnight every night, with passion but it was never requited. He remained passive and when I would part our lips he didn't chase the contact and follow me up. He would always merely look at me with his big eyes, seeking guidance or reference. The confusion in his eyes told me he was unable to find either, inexperienced at reading me and taking cue. He did not yet understand what was expected of him, so the abrupt darkness when I switched off the light would be followed by a forced "I love you", wry and alien. I wish I could tell him he didn't need to say it. I knew he loved me, regardless, there were more important ways to show love. Yet I could not tell him so. The more I heard him say it, the more I realized I wanted it. In spite of being awkward and mechanical, those three words in his deep voice was the most amazing thing I had ever heard and I had become addicted to the sound. Whether or not he meant it then, he would mean it soon. I knew that. I had faith that one day his own words would spark understanding and enlighten him.

I woke up, tired and exhausted, for the last day of school before spring break. I hadn't even realized how drained I had become. Life as a "regular" teenager was harder than I had expected. Emotionally draining for the most part. Especially as at school intricate plots had been developing, plots of revenge brewing by the lockers, in the girl's restrooms and measured out in short encrypted notes passed through classrooms without the teacher's knowing.

Something was on the horizon, but for the life of me I hadn't been able to figure it out. My deductive skills as a Gundam pilot appeared to have dwindled fast and relentlessly. I decided to simply focus on school and try to get the drama to slide right off me like the coating on our Gundams. Still, I had the ominous feeling I was involved in these schemes without me knowing, without me approving of it and without me wanting to participate in it.

I sent Heero off to work in our regular silence. I hadn't worked my way up to a good morning kiss yet, but I would.

I dressed comfortably, the weather outside was hot and humid and it would be particularly uncomfortable as I had a history test in the late afternoon.

I took with me the heavy book on the world wars that I had borrowed from the library and held it under my arms as it was too big and too heavy to fit into my bag along with the other textbooks. Outside I held it tightly against my chest and walked leaning forward slightly, to protect the delicate, old paper from the steady drizzle of rain and the humidity that smacked me around the head when I stepped out the door. At school I found most of the girls to be dressed in inappropriately revealing clothing and, I imagine, making the day only hotter for the male students as they redefined "short shorts".

Arms flung tightly around my neck. I tensed up rigidly but managed to suppress any other, considerably more lethal, militarized reaction to the sudden, restricting contact.

"Good morning, Sookie." I said, without even looking over my shoulder.

She released me, her heavy black bracelet scraping across my shoulder. "How did ya know it was me?"
I shrugged. "Just be grateful I did. Anybody else I would have killed."

She laughed as though I made a joke and I left her kindly deceived. She playfully punched me against my shoulder. "Weirdo."

I finally looked at her and noted she was probably wearing the shortest shorts out of everyone, hidden underneath the length of her loose fitting tunic. If she even was wearing shorts, I thought, inconspicuously trying to tilt my head to look under the fabric of the shirt. Fingers with black nails grabbed my chin and aimed my gaze upwards at her grinning face.

"Aren't ya supposed to be gay?"

"Maybe." I replied casually. "My motivation was purely fashion related. I was wondering where you had left your pants."

"Wow, ya really are gay." She joked, then hiked the tunic up and revealed a pair of shorts that might have been intended to be worn as underwear. I would never know. I didn't pretend to have any experience with or knowledge of the matter, so we dropped it and agreed to meet at our regular table during lunch as we parted ways for our separate classes.

My classmates hated the timing of our math class, as the first period in the morning. I preferred it actually. I agreed that math could be quite tiring, especially for those who were troubled in this area, but the early hours served a higher purpose, for the most part still being fresh and not yet fed up with the day. Of course the prerequisite for that mind set was a good night's sleep and from the faces surrounding me, I assumed not many of them had enjoyed that luxury. But I did not pity them. There had been a rave last night and they could have easily denied the invitation. Whispers in the hallway had been that not going was considered "social suicide" and the prevention of that, even the night before a test, was a valid enough argument to attend. But as someone previously announced DOA in the social scene, this reason did not register with me. I was in bed at ten thirty, being peacefully lulled asleep by Heero's kiss lingering on my lips.

"Very well done, Duo." The math teacher praised as he handed me last week's pop quiz, adorned by a big, red "A+".

I smiled, accepting his compliment. Being in the back of the class, I had been the last to receive the result of my test, but apparently it gave the teacher the welcome opportunity to kneel by my table and take a little longer.

"I was wondering if maybe you would be willing to tutor some fellow students, who are running the risk of flunking this subject." His words were soft and kind but did not appeal to me. I already had someone to tutor, who took up a lot of my time, but would be worth the investment.

"No." I declined

He didn't force me into anything other than guilt by blatantly displaying his disappointed attitude.

The class went on as usual, but at the end I was approached by a short figure, shuffling towards me with small, rushed steps.

I looked up at Aston and greeted him politely, even though I dreaded the attention he was giving me.

"Are you going to be a tutor as well?" He asked excitedly.

I shouldered my bag and answered his question truthfully as I walked away.
Aston followed me with his short, hurried steps. "Why?"

"Busy."

"Oh."

When he was still behind me by the time I had reached the next class, I abruptly pivoted on my heels to confront him with an agitated: "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No."

I narrowed my eyes at him, upon which he started to squirm and fumble with the hem of his cardigan. "Shouldn't you go to class yourself?"

He shook his head, his blond hair whipping around his head in wisps. "I have the period off."

"Fantastic." I could not hide my sarcasm, maybe for the better. I didn't want to give him the wrong impression. "So what, you're gonna join me in physics class? Aren't you in the advanced class?"

He nodded. He visibly shrank away before my eyes, making me feel guilty.

"I gotta go." I said, before guilt would make me apologize and offer him false hope.

His interest was disconcerting to say the least. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I had to make clear to him somehow that I wasn't interested. It wasn't his fault, who could compete with a Gundam pilot who saved the world and my ass on several occasions for that matter? During the next classes I calmed myself down and convinced myself not to overreact. It was just a little crush and while I did not have any experience with crushes, I was certain it would be non-threatening and therefore I was not required to bite his head off and make him feel awful about himself.

Then I spotted him occupying the seat next to Sookie at "our" table and my good intentions and my resolve to live up to them where trampled by my angry footfalls somewhere between the entry to the cafeteria and our table.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, making him nearly choke on his sip of milk from the tiny carton.

"Eating?" He offered meekly.

"No." I furiously shook my head.

"Technically I was drinking..." He tried.

I rolled my eyes to the heavens. "Aston, I don't feel comfortable with you inserting yourself into my life like this."

"What do you mean?" He questioned innocently, clearly convinced that he had done nothing of what I accused him of.

"You were waiting for me by my locker Monday," I started, "and you came into the locker room when my class had just finished P.E. and you watched me get changed! And."

"I think he gets it, Duo." Sookie interrupted me as my voice really started to sound angry and dangerous.

With a softer but still annoyed and dead serious voice I said to Aston: "Part of me is really flattered.
But most of me is just freaked out."

Aston looked into his own lap while his finger nervously played with the straw sticking out of his carton of milk, jostling it around and pushing it in circles.

Guilt was a damn thing. My anger deflated and I sat myself down across from him. "Aston," I gently said.

He looked up at me with pleading eyes.

"I have a boyfriend." I said. From the corner of my eye I could see Sookie starting to smile sweetly. "I love him very much." Whereas Sookie smiled bigger and brighter, Aston hunched over more and more, trying to disappear into himself, morbidly embarrassed. "I didn't want to be mean, but I also didn't want to lead you on."

Aston nodded, but he was fighting against stinging, bitter tears, not eased by the sweetness of Sookie's empathy as she gently stroked his back in soothing circles.

With a sigh I left. I didn't understand Aston's infatuation and I didn't know how to deal with it. Being in a relationship with the perfect soldier I thought would be the most complicated romantic involvement I would ever engage in, but it was proven to me that day, that every day life - the life we were never allowed to live before - had its own unique challenges. Challenges that I was as unsuitable to handle as Heero.

Being with Heero was actually easier, I realized. Not because in a way our relationship is less messed up than the one I could hypothetically have with Aston, but because the two individuals in the relationship are equally messed up. I was a soldier of war and massacre, just like Heero, it created an understanding between us that I had previously underestimated. I suddenly felt invigorated and empowered, masking my guilt at not being able to requite a young man's desperate need for affection. I reconciled my conscience with the assertion that Aston would find someone else, someone infinitely more suitable than me. He was smart and hidden behind thick glasses, grey cardigans and kaki pants was an attractive boy. But, I realized grimly, he was too friendly for me.

I needed Heero, as a coarse and rough personality, to sand away the sharp edges of myself.

I passed Sookie in the hallway later on the way to my History test. She seemed upbeat and assured me Aston would be fine. She emphasized "just" and drawled out "fine", which added to my suspicion that something was going on right underneath my nose and Aston what the final, odorless ingredient to this brewing mix that I failed to understand the implications of. I asked her if there was something she needed to tell me. She shook her head, grinned and walked way.

She may not believe there was something she needed to tell me, but I knew for certain there was something I needed to hear.

I made a mental note to tackle her later and question her thoroughly. After a couple of months inserted into this "regular school-going life" I realized that though tabooed, military tactics were not out of line, nor unnecessary if you're intention was not to be fooled with. High school was rough. I had a newly found respect for the regular kids who dealt with all this without torture- and self-defense training. It would certainly come in handy.

I concentrated myself during the test. I could argue that grades did not matter, I wasn't going to college. I could perfectly pass with a C for every subject, but I did not want to. It's a pride thing.
The questions were relatively easy. The final question required an essay like answer in which I always excelled. Not necessarily because I was so apt at history, English, or literature for that matter, but I could talk my way out of an OZ standoff, so I had no concerns.

History was my last period of the day. I looked around for Sookie for a little while, but I didn't find her. Other students were talking about Aiden's party, which was that night. I was stopped in an abandoned hall by a warm, large hand on my shoulder.

"You're Duo, right?"

I turned to face Hunter. A heartbeat behind him was Danny, glaring at me, but I had been on the receiving end of much more intimidating glares by the master of death-glaring himself. Danny was a mere rookie. His attempt at a discerning, evil glare was on the brink of amusing. "Yeah." I looked up at Hunter, who was an inch or three taller than me. I was currently in a drastic growth spurt however, fast leaving Heero - of Asian descent - behind me. I smiled when I thought I might just get to grow as tall as Hunter. Fun.

"Was Aiden right, are you gay?"

I surprised myself when I answered: "Yes."

In the background, Danny froze, his glare melted away for something... disgusted.

Hunter smiled. "Wow. You're okay with that?"

I shrugged. "Everyone should be. Unfortunately the world doesn't work like that."

"Yeah." He mumbled and scratched the back of his neck. "You going to Aiden's party tonight?"

I snorted. "No." I didn't elaborate, I figured he would understand, especially considering the rumors about him that Sookie had whispered into my ear. Based on his demeanor, I judged the rumors to be true. I wasn't shocked by this at all. Statistically, it would have been more surprising if I had been the only gay male in a school of over seven hundred students.

"Too bad. You look like you could be quite the party animal." He flicked the end of my braid as he sported a charming and confident smile. He walked past me and Danny followed in silence, still stunned at my casual confession.

I almost felt violated by his invasion of my personal space, touching my hair without my permission, but I didn't let myself escalate the situation and just watched him go. I sympathized with him. It was hard for me to come to terms with my sexual orientation and then being open about it, I realized it might be harder on him still. I lived in a quite unconventional universe with no traditional upbringing or protective parental figures to tell me being gay was wrong. I was free to explore it with only my own morals and values, uninhibited by the preconceived and outdated notion that only man and woman could truly be together with the acceptance of God. Hell, my universe was so unconventional, I could, out of the blue, kiss my best friend and even he would be like: "Oh hell, why not?" - I'm paraphrasing.

Hunter did not have the same freedom - unexpectedly brought on by the war - he was constricted by the whole package of social norms, misunderstanding parents, religion and peers - who never made anyone's life any easier.

In a weird way the day was only getting better.

When I got home, the day just got weirder.
I opened the front door and froze in the doorframe when I noticed the clutter in our living room. My whole body tensed up with fear and concern, a reaction so instinctual I found it hard to calm myself down even when I noticed what I was looking at was not the result of an out of control fight, but rather the arrangement of our office furniture in our living space. Still frozen by the door, I called out Heero's name, afraid of memories repeating themselves.

"Hn?" Heero came out of the office, he was wearing his cheap but well-fitting jeans and a basic, disposable shirt. There were red stains on his hands, wet and glistening.

"What's going on?" My voice betrayed a fear I would have preferred to keep to myself. "What are you doing home so early?"

Heero looked at his feet.

"I don't mean..." I started, when I realized I might be giving him the impression that I didn't appreciate his early return home. I was just confused by it. "I like having you home early. I also like knowing what's going on."

He looked back into the office. "I'm painting." He stated and then went back into the office.

I was relieved, but berated myself for even letting my thoughts trail so far into darkness. Paint, of course, I told myself silently. Just red paint.

I closed the door behind me and followed him, still carrying the weight of my backpack on my back and the keys making noise as they dangled in the loose grip of my fingers. When I stepped inside I noticed the walls were wet from a third coat of paint he had apparently added. I looked at him, confused.

"I wanted the color to be even." He explained, his narrow eyes and the shadowed frown between his eyebrows clearly indicated he was not yet satisfied with the result.

The uneven tones were mostly amended. However, when I looked closely I could still see some faint discolorations. It scared me that it had bothered him enough to abandon his regular and prized routine and do all this work by himself. "You could have told me. I would have helped you." I said. I was startled at the sudden fixation of his intense eyes on me. They narrowed further and questioned my comment.

"Would you?" He emphasized.

"Yes, of course."

His eyes searched me for answers but found me to be an illegible book. "You don't think it's weird?"

I did, I admitted, but only to myself. I didn't want to discourage or insult him. "What?"

"It's okay that I want the walls to be even?" His question sounded like a challenge, like he was expecting me to forbid him from ever painting them again.

"Sure." I tried to sound unconcerned and added a smile for the sake of it. Truthfully, his obsession with the walls being even surprised and confused me, it made me think bad things, like maybe there was something wrong... with him. I felt sorry for him. Why do walls matter? Why does everything have to be even? The answers dawned on me. "Heero, the walls don't have to be perfect." I waited for him to look me in the eye again. "You don't have to make everything perfect. You are already perfect to me." I raised my hand to touch his cheek gently and noted with a clench
of my heart the flaring of his nostrils and the widening of his eyes as he followed the movements of my hand. He relaxed only after our skin made soft contact.

"I want the walls to be even." He said, almost stubbornly.

"Okay." I pulled my hand back and smiled at him. "That's okay. I'll help you. One more layer and it should be fine."

He nodded and seemed reassured by the fact that I didn't proclaim him to be mental, which he obviously feared and accused himself of being.

I didn't know for what the walls were a metaphor, but I knew he didn't want them to be even just because the discoloration disrupted the décor.

I sat us down in front of the TV. It was too early to eat and we had nothing else to do while the paint dried on the walls. I skipped past many news broadcasts and sentimental talk shows, ending up at a history channel that covered the construction of the first colony, L1. I was intrigued so I put down the remote. Heero watched coldly as he always did.

"Doesn't even look anything like it, right?" I commented as the screen showed the steel, skeletal shape of L1 against a backdrop of dark space.

Heero was silent.

Feeling daring and needy of contact, I inched closer to him, waiting every time I closed the distance by a little, to judge his reaction. He didn't shy away from the contact when I finally made it, aligning my thigh with his, pressing our legs together. Even through the two layers of thick, coarse denim I could feel the surge of electricity that he passed to me. In the sizzling aftermath I noted Goosebumps on my skin. I looked at him with a smile, but his eyes remained fixed on the screen. I wasn't deterred by him ignoring me, I leaned in and whispered in his ear that I loved him. His whole body tensed up, I could feel the muscles in his thigh trembling with the strain. I waited for him to relax. It didn't take long. He looked at me and I smiled and repeated: "I love you."

He nodded, but he didn't say it back. He only ever did when he was in bed, right after I kissed him goodnight, hidden in darkness. I felt guilty that maybe I was forcing it out of him, but I reminded myself not to underestimate Heero's strength and own willpower.

I eased up on him, separating our bodies reluctantly and I offered him a drink. "A beer, maybe?" I joked, but he surprised me by taking me up on the offer. I rose to my feet and retrieved two bottles of beer from the kitchen, no glasses to save time on dishwashing later.

I watched, bemused, as he put the bottle to his lips and tilted it, his face scrunched up again at the taste, but he corrected himself quickly. Every other drink he took afterwards it didn't appear that he actually let any of the fluid into his mouth. The beer touched his closed lips and when he straightened the bottle, it just drained back in. Fifteen minutes later I had finished my drink, but his beer was still full to the neck of the bottle.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable by letting him know I had caught onto his ruse. It was heartening to see him try so hard to be normal, for my sake.

I cooked us dinner and when we finished eating I joined him in the office and took a second set of roller and paintbrush to add another layer to three previous ones. In the meantime, as we worked, I whistled the tune of an old song to fill the silence as Heero debunked my every attempt to start shallow conversation. Heero didn't like to talk unless there was something meaningful to say, in
sharp contrast to myself, for whom words were filler for an awkwardly silent world. I didn't mind though, maybe he was right, words should be used more carefully and more profoundly.

When I went into the chorus for the third time I stilled as my whistle echoed. But even as I stood with my mouth gaping wide open in nothing other than shock, the song continued in a light whistle. A smile finally broke my flabbergasted face and together we finished the song. I didn't even know that he recognized the song. As I pondered, it dawned on me that maybe he didn't, but was able to memorize and replicate the monotonous tune after hearing me whistle the first half. I was inappropriately proud, like a mother who had just watched her son take his first steps, but Heero was definitely not my son.

I turned around, he was busy painting and busier still pretending nothing happened. "You know the song?"

He shrugged. "Maybe." He absentmindedly dragged a brush heavy with red paint down the surface of the wall.

He sounded earnest; he really didn't know.

The shrill cry of the telephone broke the rare serene moment between us and I cursed it for all I was worth. I didn't move, honestly just wanting people to leave us alone.

"Duo, the phone is ringing." Heero alerted, not willing to answer it himself. He never did, afraid that the person he would answer to was someone he had nothing to say to - a salesperson or someone from my school.

"Right." I jumped off the chair that I had been using to reach the higher corners and sprinted towards the phone by the front door to answer it before it stopped ringing. The screen indicated the caller had turned off the videophone function. "Hello?" I answered, not making an attempt to hide my dismay.

"Duo?"

I barely recognized Sookie's voice as it came through the telephone line cracked and distorted and there was a lot of indiscriminate talking in the background. "Yeah? Sookie?"

"Yeah, sorry to call ya, I know it's late."

I looked at my watch, apparently it was late, I hadn't even noticed. "The line's really bad. Is something wrong?" From the corner of my eye I saw Heero standing in the doorway of the office, looking away and trying his damndest to hide his curiosity.

"Can ya come pick me up someplace?" She was almost shouting into her phone, probably her cell phone, which I knew to old and malfunctioning.

"I don't have a car." I didn't know why she would ask me, she knew I didn't have a car. I told her almost every day that I wished I did.

"I know. Can ya take a cab?"

"Can't you?" I realized I wasn't being very helpful, she might actually have been in trouble, but considering the red flags that had been waving in front of my face all day, I was inclined to be cautious. I didn't distrust her in the sense that she might would lure me away and murder me, I was afraid she would find a way to suck me into school drama.
"I don't have any money with me. I called one and said I would pay him at the destination, but he left."

I sighed, I caved at her hurried and seemingly distraught voice. "Fine, where are you?"

"Forth and Maple... number ten..."

"Forth... and... Maple..." I mumbled as I wrote it down on a piece of paper "number... ten... Wait, ten?" I groaned. "Ten as in Aiden's house?"

"Yeah, that would be it." She replied innocently.

"What are you even doing there?" I was angry and it was noticeable in my voice.

"Can ya please come pick me up? I'm sorry."

"Fine. But you better not be up to anything." I warned seriously.

"When am I ever?"

I knew I was falling for some sort of trap, but I couldn't risk the chance that she actually did need my help. I said a hasty goodbye and then immediately dialed the number of the taxi service. As I waited for the cab to come pick me up, I changed into a clean shirt that wasn't dotted with red - suspiciously blood-like - stains. I didn't want to show up at the house of my "arch enemy" and look like I was on a killing spree.

"Where are you going?" Heero asked, joining me in the bedroom and watching me change.

"That was Sookie, she apparently needs me to come pick her up. You know taxi's nowadays, want to be paid up front."

"Aiden is the girl from the gym." He pointed out.

"Yeah, I also know her through school."

"I don't like her."

I smiled at him. "Good, you're not supposed to." I stuffed my wallet into the back pocket of my jeans, I had some cash left that Heero always gave me for the groceries. "Wanna come?"

He frowned. "Why would I want to go to the house of someone I do not like?"

I nodded. "Exactly. Sookie is definitely up to something."

His ears perked at that, the soldier kicked in. "Up to something?"

"Yeah, haven't you heard? She is the leader of an anti-colony sleeper cell, planning the disintegrating of ESUN with the assassination of prime minister Sutherford."

Heero blinked. My sarcasm was lost on him but he knew better than to take me seriously.

"Relax. I'm kidding." I laughed at my own joke. "Only if she was planning to kill Relena would I let her." I swear I saw the corner of his mouth twitch with something that would have been a smile if he had let it. The phone rang again, the taxi was here. I promptly planted a kiss on his lips and on my way out I called: "I'll be back in like thirty minutes!"
During the drive to Fourth and Maple number Ten, I felt a nervousness in my stomach at what Sookie, or anyone else for that matter, might be up to.

I heard Fourth and Maple number Ten before I saw it. Booming, loud music and excited, drunken shouts. The lights of all the other houses in the neighborhood were switched off but I doubted anyone on that block was getting any sleep. Number ten was brightly lit, not just by regular lights, but also disco and strobe lights. The nice suburban home had been transformed into a packed club, taken over by stumbling teenagers who seemed to have the hardest time not spilling their drinks from their plastic cups. The taxi stopped in front of the house and on the lawn I spotted two figures not swaying from intoxication or dancing to the music.

I turned to the driver. "Can you wait for me here? It'll only take a second. Grab and go."

The man, reeking of cigar smoke, nodded, making eye contact with me through the rear view mirror.

I got out of the car and walked towards the two figures. One I had already presumed to be Sookie, the identity of the other surprised me, to say the least.

"Hi, Duo." Aston said with a big smile.

I swallowed and did a double take. Aston looked nothing like I knew him to look like. His hair had been cut and styled modernly, his glasses appeared to have been replaced with contact lenses and his cardigan and kaki pants had made way for a silk button up shirt and dark, form fitting jeans. "Hi."

"Am I good or am I good?" Sookie cut in.

I fixed an angry gaze on her. "Sookie, you better be in real trouble, 'cause I don't want to be here..."

"Let's go inside." She suggested with a wicked grin.

"Sookie..." I turned to Aston, "Look, I'm really flattered but-"

"Oh please!" Sookie interrupted. "He's long over you."

"Really?" I was skeptical.

"Totally." Aston confirmed.

"We're teenagers, Duo. We're not like you and Heero. We have crushes and then we have new crushes." Sookie explained with a smile. She gestured at the house, she wanted to go inside.

"I doubt you're invited."

She snorted. "Duo, the front door is wide open!" Sookie gestured back at the gaping doorway. "I don't think anyone will be verifying invitations or anything." She already started dragging me towards to entrance, Aston following us.

"Why are we even here?"

"Hunter." Sookie answered. "I really want to introduce him to Aston."

Ah, realization. "You want him to come out of the closet at Aiden's party." I started speaking louder and louder as we neared the source of the loud music. "What do you need for me for?" By the time we reached the front door, I couldn't even hear myself anymore. Sookie's lips were
moving, but she stopped and smiled, probably realizing the music was too loud for her to be heard. She mouthed: Come on.

And then we crossed the threshold and stepped into the hallway.

The stereo was blasting in the family room off to the left, to the right there was a den, a dining room and further back into the house a kitchen. Every square footage of the property was being used for inappropriate conduct, young teens drinking, smoking cigarettes and rubbing up against one another with the pretense of "dancing". I added it to my list of things teenagers did that I would simply never understand, as my head already started to hurt from the music. I was quickly becoming agitated by the amplified aural stimulation. Sookie dragged me to the kitchen, where her words could be heard coherently.

"I thought ya would wanna see. Don't ya wanna get even?"

The sixteen year old boy in me did, but I was better than him, more mature, so I vehemently shook my head. I just wanted to go home and spend the rest of my evening with Heero and suppressed any curiosity regarding the "payback".

Sookie smiled at me when several seconds later I was still standing there, long after she had let go of my hand.

Maybe I did want to get even...

Sookie and Aston were scanning the crowd. It wasn't a challenge to spot the tall Hunter, the top of his head stuck out in the crowd. They moved over towards him and I unconsciously followed them, letting my curiosity and my childishness - both of which I knew to be wrong - get the better of me. I argued there was nothing wrong with someone my age acting a little childish from time to time, even though I had long ago acknowledged my childhood had ended and maturity had kicked in at the age of ten. Pushing our way through the crowd we ended up in front of Hunter. Sookie beamed a greeting that Aston matched, though shyly. I just jerked my hand up and hoped it could pass for a wave.

He said something, looking directly at me, but I couldn't hear a word.

"What?"

With a grin he leaned into my personal space, his mouth so close to my ear I could feel his breath as he repeated: "I'm glad you came."

I decided not to explain the details of my visit to him. As Hunter kept shamelessly ogling me Sookie poked me in the side and gestured to someone staring at us from the corner of the room. Aiden stood with her back rigid and her arms crossed in front of her chest. Her face expressed a mixture of anger, shock and fear, contorting and twitching almost comically. When I focused my attention back on Hunter, I reared back when I realized how close his face was to mine. "Have you met Aston?" I stepped aside and directed Aston to stand in front of the tall basketball player.

Hunter smiled at him and seemed polite. They shook hands and Aston blushed when Hunter ran a hand through his newly styled hair.

Sookie gave me the thumbs-up but her joy had been premature. Seconds after the introduction, Hunter joined me again in my personal space, obviously missing the "NO TRESPASSING" signs clearly indicated by my crossed arms, leaned back posture and a face with the promise of violence. The basketball player scored no points of reading body language when he leaned in again and
asked me if I wanted to dance.

My eyes darted around myself, interpreting "dance" as it was obviously meant in the current context: Vertical dry-humping.

"No thanks."

Hunter just stepped in closer, really pushing his luck.

"What's with the sudden interest?" I backed away but he followed suit. Sookie, to my dismay, didn't intervene, enjoying the smoke coming from Aiden's ears at Hunter's "romantic" pursuit.

"I didn't know you might be."

I quirked an eyebrow. "What makes you think I'm interested?"

He seemed confused but quickly restored his predatory grin. "You are gay, aren't you?"

"So?"

He chuckled confidently. "Well so am I. I didn't want to... pursue because I wasn't sure, but when I heard Aiden got suspended over some email, I checked my inbox and I was very pleasantly surprised."

His voice was sly and dripping with unrestrained teenage hormones but I wasn't intimidated. As soon as I would see fit to end it, I could, but I postponed a fist fight for the sake of keeping up appearances. I was supposed to be normal kid after all. Normal kids - especially the gay ones with the girly hair - aren't supposed to take on six-foot-plus jocks and win. All I could think of as he tried to engage eye contact was: why me? You're outed and all of a sudden you are a magnet to all that is gay and sexually frustrated? "I'm flattered." I said sarcastically, hoping it would create distance between us.

"You should be."

Oh good God, I thought.

"Seriously though, let's dance."

"You don't mind people knowing?" Sookie interjected, hopeful.

Hunter didn't even take his eyes off me as he answered her. "Not really. Aiden would but... I don't really care anymore." He finished with a seductive tone.

"Hunter, that's great, but please get away from me." I balled my fists at my sides.

"Why?"

"I'm not interested. I have a boyfriend."

Hunter snorted. "Is he better than me?"

"Yes."

He seemed a little angry as the insult registered. He felt the sting but he just kept closing the distance between us. Pressed flush against other people as it was, I couldn't back up further and decided to give him till one before I'd remodel his face. Five... Four... "I'm warning you..." I said as
He didn't let up. Three... Two...

Hunter suddenly seemed to disappear, janked back by a strong hand that had gripped his shoulder and a short figure inserted himself in between us.

"Heero?" My face broke in a wide smile, though not at all pleased with being the damsel in distress, I loved the idea of him as a knight in shiny armor, riding in on his noble steed - also known as Tampa Taxi service.

Heero's whole body was tense but his demeanor was calm, deadly calm, the clenching and unclenching of his jaw was the only clear threat to release the strength he had managed to contain so far.

Hunter straightened himself and was clearly unimpressed by the short Asian boy. Heero was a good head shorter than Hunter but he looked like he was going to kill him. And he could. Easily. I've seen him kill bigger men than Hunter, but Hunter didn't know that and stepped forwards fearlessly.

"Who are you?" The tall kid demanded.

"He's my boyfriend." I answered, glowing with pride - the immature nanananananana-kind-of-pride but I allowed myself to be filled and consumed by it.

"Oh my God," Sookie squealed, "Yer Heero?"

Heero didn't respond but nevertheless my friend felt the need to point out:

"Yer a hottie!"

"Jesus!"

Everyone turned our attention to Aiden after her profound shriek.

"Is everyone gay nowadays?" She stomped off angrily; huffing, puffing and screaming.

Hunter ignored her drama and started laughing at Heero, causing a new surge of anger that made every tendon in his body stand out. I would be lying if I didn't admit to the fact that I was turned on by my protective and aggressive boyfriend. "What are you going to do, shortie?" Hunter stepped in closer to emphasize his height. He literally towered over Heero but Heero has stood in the shadow of greater men and had ways of turning his disadvantage into an advantage - some important parts of the male anatomy were actually quite conveniently located for someone his size and Heero was not above a below-the-belt tactic.

However much the adrenaline pumping through my vain craved to see some action, I reminded Heero not to get us into trouble. "Don't hit him, he's not worth it."

Heero heard me, even with the loud music still booming he could, but he didn't answer me, instead he kept staring down Hunter. With his back turned towards me I couldn't gauge his glare but I knew it to held promises he could live up to. He kept challenging Hunter until finally the ego of the taller boy altered the situation for the worse. Hunter pulled his fist back, arming it like a coil and then unleashed his fist with his best shot. In a split second his knuckles contacted Heero's face, twisting his head to the side with the force. Though I didn't understand why, it was obvious Heero allowed himself to be hit. Maybe my immediate response was his intended goal: "Now you may hit him!" I yelled.
The crowd redirected it's focus to the fight but was to be disappointed, in a blink and a heartbeat it was over and Hunter was left sprawled on the hardwood floor, groaning in pain from a single, hard kick to his ribs. He should consider himself lucky.

"Let's get out of here!" Roaring with giddy laughter I grabbed Heero's arm and dragged him out of the house. Sookie stayed behind to reap the spoils and assured me she would make it home just fine. She had plenty of money with her for a cab. I was too pumped up to be angry at her previous lie.

Outside the cool air of the night struck me like a bat but I kept running to the cab, still parked at the curb. I was surprised he hadn't left already, but also grateful. I ripped the door open and ushered Heero into the back, casting one last look at the vibrating, illuminated house before crawling in after him. I leaned forward to the driver and instructed him to take us back home, only then did I realize it wasn't the same taxi driver as the one I had talked to before. Apparently my taxi had left, it had been Heero's taxi driver who had had the courtesy to wait.

As the cab pulled away I sat back with a sound a marriage of a sigh and a chuckle. "That was one hell of an evening." I looked at Heero at my side and instantly felt concern when even in the dark I noticed the twin trails of blood coming from his nose and leading to his upper lip. "Are you okay?" I scooted closer to him and carefully wiped away some of the blood with my hand.

"I'm fine."

"Lean your head back." I instructed seriously, drained from adrenaline and excitement. I cupped the back of his head and tilted it back to stop the flow of blood.

"He has quite the left hook." Heero muttered.

I laughed. It took me a full second to notice Heero's lips, dirty with his own blood, were curved in a genuine smile. The exquisiteness of it rendered me silent.

He continued, bemused: "He hit me harder than you did that time..." His brows furrowed, the smile vanished momentarily, only to reappear with greater merit. His eyes rolled to the side to look at me and they were lit with child-like mischief as he spoke. "Duo, you hit like a girl."

"Well, excuse me for being a mere mortal." I quipped, regaining my voice when I passed the phase of "utterly dumbstruck". "Mister I-can-bend-steel-with-my-bare-hands." I added in a low voice, as to not arouse suspicion in the driver.

After a few moments of quiet, only the sound of traffic drifting through the windows, his smile left his lips and the twinkle left his eyes, but for the few seconds that it lasted I was grateful and it renewed my hope in Heero and in us.

"You were totally jealous back there, weren't you?" I teased.

Heero straightened his neck, looking forward, the bleeding had stopped. He wiped away the last of the blood with his sleeve. "No."

I laughed but didn't say anything, no matter how much he glared at me. I didn't tell him then, but Heero was a lousy liar.
Part XII - You don't want to know

Warheads

Part XII - You don't want to know

Our apartment reeked strongly of paint, it burned my nostrils as we stepped inside and contrasted the cool fresh air we had enjoyed outside, waiting by the door to our building after the taxi dropped us off. Before we came inside we had enjoyed powerful lungfuls of crisp air but as I stepped through the front door I felt the urge to hold my breath. When need for oxygen started to burn, I decided to breathe shallow. The thick scent of the paint heavied the air and made the environment almost toxic. In the humidity of the evening the paint had barely dried. The apartment felt stuffy in comparison to the outside world, instead of turning on the air-conditioning, I moved over to the bay window, leaving the living room engulfed in darkness and opened the window wide.

Being on the third story I felt comfortable leaving the window open, even through the night. I checked back with Heero, he said he didn't mind either. I sat myself down on the window sill and watched Heero. He switched on the lights in the kitchen and moved out of my view. Seconds later I heard water running in a disrupted stream, he was probably washing the residue of his own blood off his face. When he appeared again his face was clean but wet, water dripped off his chin and soaking the front of his shirt. I watched, shamelessly mesmerized as his hands reached down for the hem of the T-shirt and lifted it, exposing his flat abdomen and defined chest as he used the fabric to dry off his face. There was still an ugly bruise on his body, proof that he was more fragile than we both liked to believe. The fall on the basketball court had left me unscathed, but then again, I did land on top and wasn't forced to take the brunt of someone else's weight.

"Let's go to bed." He said and led the way.

That instruction wasn't anywhere near to meaning what I hoped it someday would, but I followed him nevertheless. Heero and I got dressed side by side in front of our open closet, occasionally our elbows bumped and our hands met as we reached for clothes. I waited for Heero to lie down in bed and get settled before I approached him. His eyes haunted me as I leaned in and I closed my eyes to ignore the lack of passion and pleasure on his behalf as I locked our lips in an innocent kiss. A mere matter of pressing our mouths together, but Heero - consciously or unconsciously - coaxed more action out of me as he started to move his lips against mine, actively engaging in a serious kiss. We seemed to become desperate for each other. I licked his lower lip upon which he parted his lips to grant me access. For the first time our kiss deepened and Heero responded favorably to my teasing. Even though his inexperience showed, my heart burst with happiness and my whole body enjoyed a wide variety of sensations. Unfortunately my lungs quickly started to crave oxygen again and even though that craving could not match the intensity with which my heart yearned to disappear within him, primal instinct to survive overrode all other brain functions and with a now-or-never jerk of my head I separated us. I smirked when he raised his head off the pillow, his lips searching for mine. Tendons standing out in his slim neck as he lifted his head. His eyes were still closed, but they fluttered open quickly when he became aware of the vulnerability he had exposed. He lowered himself back, his dark hair fanning out over the light pillowcase. He glared up at me, his eyes like daggers, stabbing with blades forged of blame. I could see the accusation in his eyes: Look at what you have reduced me to! Look how weak you have made me.

That wasn't Heero, that was the soldier. I knew a second kiss would not be answered kindly, so I straightened myself up and left for my own bed. Once I was snuggled in deep under the covers I reached for the light switch with one arm and with a practiced flick of my hand, the lights went off.
My heart beat more wildly with every second the darkness remained a silent void.

For the first time since he started, he didn't say that he loved me.

I wondered what I had done wrong.

It had been an intense day so I managed to find some sleep. I was surprised that the room was basked in sunlight the next time I opened my eyes, it felt like I had just closed them, fighting back childish tears that I could not identify with, but plagued me either way. I quietly got out of bed and dressed in the same clothes I had worn the day before, wincing at every rustle of fabric that seemed so rude and loud in the early morning quiet. I stood at the foot of Heero's bed, leaning against the closet so I could look at his face. I frowned. He looked... peaceful. An innocence had come over him that I never knew him to express during waking hours. What are you dreaming about? I asked myself.

I didn't want to risk waking him so I cut the moment short and went into the living room. I immediately noticed the bay window had been closed. I could only sigh and store the feelings for later contemplation. I didn't want to pity Heero because he would resent me for it, but it was fast coming to that. And right on the heels of that was pity for myself. Poor Duo who had to fall in love with a twisted product of modern warfare. But I shouldn't allow myself to think like that. I nodded determinedly. I was just as wrangled and beaten up as he was, right? That likeness, after all, is what I attributed responsible for a mutual trust we had shared since we first met. I smiled at a memory that seemed to belong to a different lifetime, or a different life altogether. Well, I admitted to myself with a grin, hearing a gun fire twice in the back of my head, maybe not since we first met. Maybe since the second time.

I stepped outside and the heat whipped around my ears, a red, hot blush crept to my cheeks and even at my relaxed pace, I started to sweat. I really didn't care for the hot, humid summers of Florida. The atmosphere felt confining and suffocating.

I was handed two bagels with usual enthusiasm and made my sloth-slow way back home. I opened the front door to the sound of running water. Heero was already out of bed to catch up on the shower that he had skipped last night. I leisurely prepared breakfast, maybe hoping that he would walk in and see me and perhaps thank me for my efforts. I had a distinct feeling, though, that I had already cashed in on merry progress and should not expect him to quickly respond to the next push. But there was no reason not to consistently apply pressure to his back in hopes of inching him forward.

"Good morning." I said lightly when he exited the bedroom. He was dressed in his uniform, just finishing with his tie, looking very formal and official, but his damp hair, darkened and weighed down by water fell haphazardly around his chagrin face.

A curt nod was all I was going to get that morning.

I pushed the plate with his bagel his bagel. He started eating quietly, taking it in his hand along with him to the coffee machine.

As always, I watched him, reminiscing.

When he first brought home the newly issues Preventer uniforms, the day before he would start his nine-to-five, I was appalled. The black slacks passed with their simplicity, but had to be taken in to fit his narrow waist. It was comical the first two weeks, watching him constantly hoist up his poorly fitting pants. Luckily the length did not need to be altered, though short overall, Heero's impressive, long legs, that I ascribed to genetic manipulation, had a sufficient length to reach
through the pipes perfectly. No, I had no trouble with the pants. I had difficulty with the button-shirt. And intense shade of moss green, combined with a tie of the same color - moss green on moss green. I joked that they had tied plain white button-ups and ties in a bucket of an interesting concoction of snot and other namely unhygienic bodily fluids. Heero, of course, never once laughed. Neither did I after first saw him wear it. back than the pants were still loose but a tight belt held them up and accentuated his slim built. Ever since that first time there has been a certain desire to touch the shirt and feel his skin underneath the cheap fabric of the button-up. I couldn't explain it.

"Long day today?" I asked, pulling myself out of my increasingly sexual musings. I had my back turned towards him so I didn't catch any facial expressions or body language, so I was left in the dark when he didn't answer me, seemingly ignoring me. I turned around, leaning against the dinner table, watching him critically with my arms crossed before my chest.

Only a questioning flick of his left eyebrow as he looked at me sideways, more interested in the cup of coffee he had to his lips.

"Nothing." I lied, intently studying him.

He finished his bagel and threw the last of his coffee down the sink. We made eye contact for a moment and it was his way of saying goodbye. I watched him go out the front door. The door fell shut and I felt like it sliced a piece of loneliness out of the narrow hallway and pushed it inside for me to deal with. I don't know how long I stood there, gazing longingly at the door, wishing he would come back in. It was a Saturday after all.

But he didn't come back.

I occupied myself with moving the furniture back into the office. The walls were perfectly even, Heero would be pleased, but I just felt powerless. Heero liked his walls to be even and, I realized, carrying a desk lamp to it's designated spot, I was uneven. I was discolored, blotchy and an insult to the décor. I was as he was and he hated that about himself, so why wouldn't he hate it in me?

"Be gone, depressive thoughts!" I ordered, snickering at myself, but feeling sad regardless.

After I had furbished the office I used the space for homework, even though we weren't given any assignments during the week off. I worked several weeks ahead, drowing myself in work, giving myself a purpose in hope that time would move faster if I just worked my brain tirelessly enough. But time crept by agonizingly slow, pacing itself and sticking it's tongue out at me. The last forty minutes I wasn't even working, just staring at the open Geography book, reliving last night but not experiencing the same joy as I had at that moment, tearing it apart in search of meaning, in search of reason. Wishing to extract a premise of that evening that I could replicate with the same heartening result: a smiling Heero Yuy.

I jumped at a shrill beep coming from the intercom. Cautiously I approached the machine attached to the wall, suspiciously gazing at it when it produced yet another alien sound. I took hold of the phone and asked: "Who's this?"

"Ya always answer yer phone like that, Maxwell?" The Southern girl at the front door whined.

"What are you doing here, Sookie?"

"Lemme in, will ya, it's damn hot out here. Crank up the AC."

"Y-yes ma'am." I hung the phone back on the receiver and went downstairs to let her in. When she
saw me her face cracked into a smile.

"Hey."

"Hey." I copied, letting her pass me as I held the heavy door open for her. "So...?"

"I thought I'd take matters into my own hand, seeing as ya suspiciously postpone inviting me here."

She stomped over to the elevator and impatiently pressed the UP button, again and again.

"We could take the stairs." I offered at her obsessive pressing of the button.

She quirked an eyebrow at me. "Yer kiddin' right? It's like a thousand degrees out there."

"Well, you're off by about nine hundred and two degrees, but..." My words died out and we waited for the elevator in silence.

Sookie walked in before the doors had even fully opened, urging me inside as well. "Which floor?"

"Third."

She pressed 3 and the elevator jerked into motion. "It's a nice building." She said idly, looking at her own distorted reflection in the stainless steel doors. My equally disfigured form next to hers.

"Yeah, I suppose..." When the elevator doors opened on the third floor I stepped out first and guided us to the door to Heero's and my apartment. Behind me she seemed giddy with excitement. She probably thought she would gain an infinite amount of insight by entering my home, but honestly it was as personal as a page in an IKEA catalogue. The door was open and I remained in the hallway, looking over my shoulder at Sookie as she looked past me, taking it all in.

Disappointment slowly formed on his face in the shape of a delicate frown and tightly pressed shut lips. "Come on in." Together we walked inside but then halted in the middle of the living room. She kept looking around herself with hopes of spotting something significant. I was sure she wouldn't until her eyes fell pointedly on the two twin bolt on the dresser against the back wall of the living room, beautifully drenched in warm sunlight coming through the bay window. One bolt - my bolt - glistened in the rays, the other - Heero's - looked dull and the sun did nothing for it, other than enhance it's deep flaws.

"What's that?" She walked over in long strides and with eager, greedy hands she plucked the clean, undamaged bolt off the dresser. "Oh, heavy!" She commented, expecting it to be steel when she picked it up, but Gundanium is almost three times as heavy. She touched the smooth surface and then rolled it into her left hand and with the right she lifted Heero's off the dresser. She stroked the damaged surface with the sensitive pad of her thumb, leaving her fingerprints all over it as her fingers searched for answers her eyes could not find.

I don't know why, but I suddenly felt uncomfortable with her touching them, especially Heero's. I felt as though she was invading in a space that was supposed to be only mine, sharing in a secret that was not meant for her ears.

"Why do ya have two? What happened to this one? What are they anyway?"

I answered only her last question. "Bolts."

She turned around and granted me the "duh"-eye-roll. "I know what a bolt looks like Maxwell, I used to help my father fixing the tractor and the combine." Her eyes became mischievous, "how in the world did they not figure I'ma lessie." She shook her head at her musing and then circled back on topic: "Where are they from?"
"A mobile suit."

Her eyes started to sparkle. "Really? That is so awesome! You found them after a battle or something?"

I sighed and left for the kitchen. "Do you want something to drink?" I called.

"Ice tea please!"

I frowned at the contents of our refrigerator. "What about orange juice?" I couldn't offer her a beer.

"That's perfect!"

I poured two glasses of orange juice, threw the carton in the recycle bin and then penned a sloppy "O.J." on a note stuck to the door of the refrigerator. I placed her glass on the coffee table, as she still had her hands full with the two bolts. I sipped at my drink gingerly, deciding what would be too much to tell her and what would be too little. Realizing that even the smallest detail would be too much, raise too many questions, but knowing less than the smallest detail would not be enough to maintain our friendship. I understood her curiosity and her need to know me better, I felt no resentment or blame, but honestly I wish she would turn and look the other way, even though that was unrealistic of me to require of her.

"So where did ya get 'em?"

"It's a long story."

"I love long stories."

"I don't." My voice was like nails dragging down a chalkboard, effectively having the same repulsive reaction with Sookie, her smile disappeared and she guiltily stared at the bolts in her hand.

"Why is one damaged and the other isn't?" She answered, her voice as meek as I had ever heard it.

Her girly fragility softened my gritty attitude, I answered, forlorn: "I wish I knew..."

She nodded, as though she understood and placed them back exactly how she found them. "Do ya mind if I look around?"

"Like I could stop you." I joked, offering her a genuine smile to ease the tension.

"Ya couldn't." She retorted with a grin and started stalking around the living room, taking her time to examine every empty shelf. She stopped at the casing of a rented DVD on the TV furniture. She picked it up and read off the cover: "James Bond?"

"Yeah, you know it?"

"No." She said with a chuckle.

"It's about a spy." I bit my lip. Even the smallest detail...

"Oh." She put it back and continued her tour, stopping in front of the office and gazing inside lengthily and then moving on to the doorway to the bedroom, her arms held behind her back like she was a drill sergeant doing rounds. She still at our bedroom. "You guys share a bedroom?"

"Yeah."
"Already?"

"We always have."

"Hmmm." She came back into the living room, sat herself down on the couch and picked of her glass of orange juice, sipping innocently.

"What? Is that weird?" I asked, concerned.

She looked at me over the top of her glass with merry eyes. She took the glass away from her lips to expose a sympathetic smile. "Yeah. A little."

"Well, it's a little unconventional but-"

"Duo. It's weird."

"Oh." I guess I always knew that to some extent, but even though it was apparently considered "weird" - synonym to "abnormal" - it falls into the exclusive category of things in my life that made sense to me and made me feel alright and safe. Made me feel normal. So society would have to stretch her bounds to accommodate these sleeping arrangements because I wasn't going to change it. I knew I would feel lonely without him and I had the hope he would be lonely without me too. I didn't know much, but what I did know was that I would never love someone the way I loved Heero. Whether that be good or bad. What we have saved me during the war and it saved me a little everyday. I should probably tell him that. "Not to say I don't like the surprise but," I started, biting my lip with brief hesitation, "what are you doing here?"

Sookie finished her orange juice but held the glass cupped between her two palms. She looked down at the carpet, which I knew not to be very enthralling, but she kept her eyes on the weave as she said: "To apologize."

"For last night?" I was surprised, she hadn't made any indication before that she felt sorry about what happened. She was the one to set me up after all.

She looked up, her eyes were honest and troubled. "I really thought ya would wanna be there. I didn't think Heero would get in a fight with Hunter- Is he alright by the way?" She added with hurried words.

I smiled reassuringly at her. "He's fine. Believe me, Hunter is the one you should be sorry for."

She grinned at the memory. "He immediately doubled over." She tried but could not contain her slightly sadistic pleasure at the other boy's pain.

"His fist is like a chainsaw to the trunk of the tree."

"Isn't he supposed to be like a techie though? Where did he learn to fight like that?"

"Well..." Damn, I thought, she had me in a corner. "You know, he grew up in a dangerous neighborhood." Not a far stretch from reality, I noted.

Sookie frowned. "Didn't you say he's from L1?"

"L1 has dangerous neighborhoods too." I snapped.

She quit her questioning at my tone of voice. I apologized for my attitude but that only fuelled her courage to question me further.
She started blabbering: "And how did ya guys meet? It doesn't make any sense. Ya say yer from L2 and Heero's from L1 and I know passenger transport between L1 and L2 is heavily restricted, so did ya meet on earth? But you said that you came to earth like three month ago and you were already living with Heero by than and ya said ya were friend for a long time, but three months isn't a long time..."

She continued on, exposing - consciously or unconsciously - all the inconsistencies in the lies I had fed her. But the truth I couldn't tell her. It shamed me to admit it, but I didn't trust her enough to tell her. It sounded so stupid, she was just a high school kid, trying to be my friend, trying to understand me and get to know me. If anything, she should not trust me, I was the strange boy from L2 with conflicting background stories who is in fact a former terrorist. But I was scared of her blabbering mouth, the way G admitted to being scared of my blabbering mouth.

"With all the words you say boy," he used to say to me, looking down at me on the floor where I lay after he hit me till I couldn't stand any longer, "something is going to spill out that should not be said." And with every following whip of his belt, leaving welts on my back, he would hiss at me: "Secrets!"

Secrets. Secrets. Secrets. I couldn't stand them, but could not let go of them either. Maybe because it wasn't just me that depended on these secrets. Heero trusted me to keep them as well. And the paparazzi was out to get us, as were the anti-Gundam activists.

"It's none of your business." As an afterthought I added untruthfully: "It's nothing important."

She looked at me for a long time, her eyes slowly narrowed and her face looked disappointed. "Yer lying to me." She stated.

I didn't say anything. Afraid that more lies would spill out. Or rather, the truth.

"How can we be friends if I don't know anything about you?"

How can we be friends once you do know? Believe me, you don't want to know!

She's a sweet girl from the South. I'm a terrorist from outer space. She would not understand. She would be scared. Terrorist has a - deservingly - bad connotation: a rebel, a killer. Who would want to befriend someone like that? "I think you should go."

"Duo! Ya can tell me! Whatever it is... it won't-" She stopped herself. She must have realized she was about to lie. The gravity of "whatever" might be started to dawn on her. She might have been thinking things not nearly as bad as what I actually did, or maybe she was thinking worse. I didn't know, but she appeared in a state of shock and confusion and she stumbled to connect the dots. While she was lost in her own thoughts I guided her to her feet and by applying pressure to her shoulders, gently directed her towards the front door, repeating over and over again: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Once I had her in the hallway, her gaze met mine and they glistened with tears at the possibilities.

I'm from L2. I quit school for the war. Maybe she had seen the OZ broadcast of my capture. I didn't know how much she knew, but whatever she knew, I asked her not to tell anyone. No, I begged her. As I closed the door in front of her, I saw her nod. She promised me, she would not tell and as sympathy started to touch her face, I broke into tears, right after the door fell shut.

I hated myself. I absolutely hated myself and I wished against common knowledge that events of the past could be undone.
I cried the whole day. Darkness enveloped the apartment. I was surprised at the amount of emotion that came out of me with the taste of bitter tears. The faces of every person whose life I had taken flashed before me and I mourned their deaths. I had been so preoccupied with Heero, that I didn't even realize.

I prayed, for the first time in years, for all the survivors of the war and asked God to apologize on my behalf to everyone I had wronged, even though I didn't think I could still believe in God. Then I cried some more.

I silenced myself when the front door opened, many hours later. From my seat on the couch, I watched the door swing open and a dim light of the hallway cast an elongated shadow into the room. I couldn't see Heero's eyes but I knew they fell on me instantly, effortlessly pinpointing me in the dark. I let the tears flow quietly, unable to stop them. Heero seemed confused and didn't move.

"Heero?" My voice was hoarse and cracked and it embarrassed me.

He closed the door behind him but remained where he was, staring at me, his shoulders drawn up slightly with tension and uncertainty.

"Come here?" I asked softly. Intently not making it sound like a command, to leave him the freedom of choice.

He took several moments to think, to estimate what was expected of him. I could see the hesitation in his movements and was certain he would stiffly walk away and go to the office to lock the door between himself and the situation. Suddenly, he took a step. Towards me. At the second step his hands were at the sides of his jackets, pulling it off his shoulders. At the fourth step he discarded his jacket on a nearby lounge chair. With the fifth step he had reached me, standing by an empty spot on the couch next to me. Two whole seconds were wasted with careful consideration, then he finally lowered himself onto the couch, so close our thighs touched.

I smiled at him through the tears and then wrapped my arms around him in a tight embrace. Heero did not hug me back, but he did rest his head on my shoulder and let out a sigh that seemed to deflate him. Previous tension vacated his body and he heavily leaned into me.

We sat together. Hugging. Two lost figures. In his ear I whispered about Sookie's short visit and told him everything that she had said and what she had demanded to know, what I wished I could tell her, but what I knew I couldn't. I told him that I did not have faith in a lasting friendship, once she knew.

At the end of my sniffling monologue, I tightened the embrace and said: "I'm glad I have you."

Heero didn't say anything, but let me hug him as long as I needed to.

When I finally broke the embrace with a sheepish chuckle I noticed the confusion evident in his eyes, in which two moons shone as eerie twins of light in the dark. To ease his mind I thanked him for being my friend.

He cast his glance down. The carpet seemed to have been fascinating that day.

"Let's go to bed."

We dressed side by side in front of the open closet again. Heero postponed his shower till the morning. I liked to think he did that for me, because he knew I needed him. That he understood our closeness would save me. The closer he was to me, the further I was distanced from a dark,
bottomless pit of self loathing. I wondered if my closeness rescued him - in turn - of a similar demise. I wondered who Quatre, Trowa and WuFei had to rescue them.

We each closed one of the twin doors of the closet simultaneously and walked over to our beds. Heero still hadn't said a word and I worried I had frightened him with my unusual behavior. Heero's grasp on understanding me was fumbling and weak to say the least. And I could offer him no resolve. I didn't want to order him around and even if I did, I didn't know how to direct him. It was like the blind leading the blind.

Heero switched off the light, bringing us back into darkness. He said it again, "I love you.", but his words were more confused and hesitant than ever.

"I love you too." I whispered back. On my back, staring at the ceiling, I heard his sheets rustle as he turned away from me in bed, readying himself for sleep. My stomach felt empty, I hadn't had dinner, neither had Heero, but of the primal needs I felt sleep had priority.

However, some hours later, I woke up to the rumbling and growling of my own stomach. It sounded like an animal, starving for food, making alien calls. Before the whining and the other weird noises would disturb Heero's sleep I quickly got out of bed and tip-toed out of the bedroom. I squinted my eyes at the bright light pouring in from the kitchen. I recognized the sound of the refrigerator closing and I smiled, maybe it hadn't been my own hunger after all to wake me up. Maybe it had been someone else's.

I quietly rounded the corner into the kitchen and looked at Heero for a second or two, standing at the sink, with his back turned towards me, his hands moving over the counter, I didn't see what he was preparing. Finally, I made my presence known with a short "Hi."

Heero jumped and twisted his body around, his piercing eyes relaxed when they took sight of me and he lowered the blunt knife held in his right hand.

I chuckled, it was almost a laugh. He just looked so adorable when the soldiers face contorted with realization and then embarrassment. "What are you making?" I went to stand beside him and saw he was working on a simple sandwich. The knife he held was coated generously with peanut butter. "You like it?"

He turned back to his plate and started to smear the peanut butter onto the two slices of bread he had before him. "It was all we had."

"We have cheese." I offered, I always made sure we had a supply of slices of cheese for his breakfast.

"I don't like cheese."

His confession startled me. "But, you always had cheese on your bread during the war. And why didn't you say anything the last few months?"

"During the war it had nutritional value. The last few months..." He stopped himself, focusing on the task at hand, evenly spreading the peanut butter on the slices of bread. I laid a hand on his shoulder in hopes of encouraging him.

"I didn't want to be ungrateful."

I was dumbstruck.
At my flabbergasted silence he continued: "You make an effort to make me breakfast every morning. I didn't want you to think I didn't appreciate that."

My mouth was open but no words came out. In the end, I smiled.

Heero frowned at me.

"Well then, let's see if you do like peanut butter." I brought the blunt knife to his face, my hand covering his on the handle. "You have to try it like this." I leaned in and licked clean the side of the blade that was facing me, with one swipe of my tongue.

His frown deepened, but his curiosity was piqued. As always motivated to do what was normal, he slowly brought his face closer to the knife and then cautiously licked the tip.

I realized I wanted to kiss him badly, introduce him to the taste of peanut butter differently, but I refrained myself. I watched him assess the taste carefully and I urged him to be honest.

"It's good." He eventually concluded.

I let go of his hand and reached for two slices of bread for myself, dragging a large plate off a shelf. When I turned back I caught him in the process of licking the knife clean.

Sometimes it was easy to forget we were just teens, with all the grown-up shit we have been exposed to. We had to remind ourselves more often.

"Like?" I asked teasingly.

Heero nodded. "Yes." He sounded surprised at his own answer.

We took our plates to the living room and sat ourselves down on the couch for some midnight television. I stopped changing channels when I encountered a rerun of a popular comedy series; lighthearted entertainment suitable for two sixteen year old. Heero sat cross-legged on the couch, the plate resting his lap. With his hands he absentmindedly worked to tear off bite-sized pieces and bring them to his mouth.

He was so cute and he didn't even know it. Looking at him a smile touched my lips and I forgot about the drama of the day, enjoying the sight of my friend as he enjoyed his first peanut butter sandwich.

During the commercial I nearly choked on a mouthful of crust as erotic ads of scarcely clad women from all ages and ethnicities flashed provocatively on the screen. Hot Asian Pussy. Mature Women. Horny College Girls. Hot L1 housewives. Voluptuous woman hunger for big, black dick!

I glanced sideways at Heero and burst into laughter.

The motion of his hands had stilled. His lips were slightly parted, his eyes wide open and one eyebrow raised. Apparently the soldier was too exhausted to stop the shock from showing and had tucked in for the night.

Continuing to laugh I leaned over and wrapped one hand around his neck, pulling him close so I could plant a loving peck on his cheek.

Heero composed himself and fixated his gaze on the television, pretending not to be bothered or confused by what he saw, but I knew him well enough to be able to tell. The minute twitches of the corner of his eyes, his upper lip and left eyebrow betrayed disgust, bewilderment and an
embarrassed curiosity. He stated with brave hope: "That can't be normal."

I shrugged and watched as the commercials reeled on, noting how most women actually weren't all that attractive in the face, but I supposed I was the only one who would notice their faces when their breasts had seemingly erupted out of their bra's and their lacy underwear was around their ankles. I wasn't really the target audience anyhow. "Depends on your definition of normal."

He faced me, actually leaning in closer, obviously intrigued, eager to learn about the concept of normality. He sported that curious frown. He didn't need to ask anything, I could see the questions in his eyes.

"Well, you can interpret "normal" as something that is commonly accepted in a society, or you can interpret "normal" as something that everybody does, but is not necessarily accepted. For example, what these ladies do is fairly normal considering most people do something sexy and risqué in relation to their sex life, but it is not normal in the sense that it is commonly accepted by society. That girl," I squinted to read her name, "uh, Sugarly, doesn't go home and tell her grandmother about her day at work. Because other people would frown upon it."

He nodded and then came the imminent question: "Which kind of normal is the right kind of normal?"

I didn't know how to answer that, being a novice in regard to normality myself. "I don't know. I guess the one that is right at that moment."

"How will you know?"

"You don't. Most of the time you only find out after the fact if something was the right thing to do or not."

He seemed deeply troubled by this notion. "That sounds hazardous."

I smiled at him. "Maybe not hazardous, but not easy either. You're not going to get killed if you don't do the right thing, or the normal thing, it's just something you have to get through and make peace with for yourself."

"Forgive yourself?"

"Yes."

"Even if you failed the mission?"

I shook my head "They aren't missions Heero, but if you want to see it like that than yeah, even if you failed the "mission"."

He sat back, his curiosity satisfied. He mindlessly fingered the remaining bread on the plate but did not take another bite. I guessed the information had caused quite a lump in his throat and now a part of him regretted ever asking, because the answer was not one he approved of. He had rather not known.

Failing the mission was a terrifying thought for him to consider. Unacceptable. I could see his belief system had been shifted, he could not wrap his head around the fact that being normal meant being imperfect. We were all imperfect people, all except Heero, or so he had been thought to believe and indoctrinated to strive for. But perfection was not achievable in day to day life. There were no precursors to missteps and mistakes. Only after you twisted your ankle you realized you should have thought out your footing more carefully. It is this hindsight that I find valuable, to
learn and grow, but Heero could not see its value, only its sadistic irony.

I was done with my own sandwich and I suggested a return to bed. Heero nodded his head. We scraped the final pieces of bread into the garbage bin, rinsed peanut butter off the plates under a strong stream of hot water and then padded back to the bedroom, barefoot. It was dark but I could effortlessly find my bed. Once I was settled, I realized Heero was still standing in the middle of the room. Thinking of night blindness I offered to turn on the light, already reaching for the switch.

But he snapped: "I can see just fine."

I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure if we were solely talking about that moment, finding our way in the dark in the literal sense. I watched him as he moved over to his bed, but instead of lying down under the covers, he sat down on the edge of the bed, placing his elbows on his knees and leaning heavily on them.

"You okay, buddy?"

"What if being normal never gets easier?"

His openness and shared vulnerability took me aback. I swallowed and struggled for words, forming a lot of "uh's" and "Hmm's", but nothing coherent, nothing helpful. I saw him nod his head pathetically. With hope of offering consolidation I spoke softly: "Being normal is overrated anyway." (1)

"You don't want to be normal?"

I was caught in a lie. Again an awkward fumble for words ensued.

He nodded again, he understood.

We were silent for a long time. I didn't avert my eyes, keeping them on him as he stared at his own hands as he moved his fingers against each others, a novel, nervous habit. He stroked his left hand with his right and his right hand with his left, then suddenly started picking at the skin as frustration replaced innocent confusion.

"Go to sleep, you're just tired."

He suddenly blurted: "Is it really that weird that we share a room?"

My whole body tensed up, afraid that he would suggest - require - a change in the sleeping arrangements. The dread that commanded me was overwhelming and all I could think was: How am I supposed to know you are safe if I can't see you?

"I like that we share a room." He mused.

My whole body deflated with relief and I let out a nervous chuckle before saying: "I do too." I settled down, making myself comfortable as Heero also crawled under the sheets. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

And then five minutes later, after what I presume to be an epic inner battle between a boy desperately wanting to be a normal and a soldier equally driven to be perfect: "I love you."

"I love you too, Heero." More than anything in the goddamned world.
Part XIII - An Elephant Can Die From A Broken Heart

Warheads

Part XIII - An Elephant Can Die From A Broken Heart

Three days and three pleading emails later, I sat behind my laptop in the shared office, my fingers above the keyboard but they had not typed anything yet. I stared with tired, sore eyes at the blinking cursor at the top of the large, blank email, waiting for my fingers to speak words my mouth couldn't say, but my fingers were as silent as the rest of me. My eyes darted towards the bar at the left hand of the screen, in fat print were the names of the senders and the subjects of the particular emails already received in the inbox. There were four emails. The first, dating back a while, was sent by Aiden with subject: SHUN THE LEZ! I didn't keep it on purpose, I had just forgotten all about this school email service, until I had curiously accessed it that morning. I had been expecting responses from a teacher for whose class I had handed in papers and reports that week, but instead there were three meek emails from one source: ID6003886tampahigh.

I had opened them in chronological order. Each was short and if they had been spoken words, I imagine they would have been soft and breathless.

From: ID6003886tampahigh (sshaw)
To: ID6004443tampahigh (dmaxwell)
Subject: I miss u

Duo, I miss you. Please know that this - whatever this is - will not get in the way of our friendship.

XXX, Sooks

Then the next, sent later that same day:

From: ID6003886tampahigh (sshaw)
To: ID6004443tampahigh (dmaxwell)
Subject: Miss U

I don't understand what's going on. Please, I'm sorry. Say something? Sooks

And finally, at an hour late last night:

From: ID6003886tampahigh (sshaw)
To: ID6004443tampahigh (dmaxwell)
Subject: -

Please.

The cursor kept blinking, my fingers remained motionless. I tried to lie, but I couldn't. I tried to joke it all away, but it didn't work. We needed to talk, I knew that, but I dreaded, with a sickening coil of my stomach, the possibility that she would come over unannounced again. I didn't want this
to be the end of our friendship, but I was as confused as she was. I didn't know how much she knew and whatever the amount of information she had gathered, I wasn't sure with how much more information to supplement what she already knew.

I threw my hands up in frustration and let them land on my head with a hard slap, like I was trying to beat some sense into myself. I tangled my fingers into my bangs and dragged my hands back over my head, painfully tugging at my hair. With a blur of motion my hands were above the keyboard, stilled with brief hesitation and then typed in the blank space.

From: ID6004443tampahigh (dmaxwell)
To: ID6003886tampahigh (sshaw)
Subject: I need to tell you something

I don't want to scare you but... I was a Gundam Pilot

With determination I pressed my index finger down on the "DELETE" button at the top right of my keyboard. My words disappeared, swallowed back into the tangled mess of my thoughts and the cursor resumed it's monotonous rhythm of blinking at the top of the newly blank page. Just when I needed words most, they failed me. Like many constants in my life abruptly failed me right when I was in desperate need of their assistance. The repetitive irony of my life brought an ill smirk to my face, in contrast with the deep, displeased frown I had been sporting ever since Saturday. Long and obvious enough for even Heero, normally selectively blind to facial expressions, to notice and match my frown with equal intensity. Me being confused, added to his confusion and frightened him. At least one of us, at the helm of our "normal life" had to know which way to turn the rudder and steer the vessel.

At my own increasingly philosophical outlook I pushed my chair back from my desk and headed for the kitchen with lumbering steps. I got a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator and snapped the metal cap off using the edge of the kitchen counter, a sweeper's-habit that was hard to break. Even after only the few beers I had had, the counter started to chip where I used it for this particular application.

I sat back behind my desk, the half-drained - or for the annoyingly positive: half-full - bottle beside my laptop as I began another daring attempt to explain myself without hurting anymore feelings, mine or hers.

From: ID6004443tampahigh (dmaxwell)
To: ID6003886tampahigh (sshaw)
Subject:

The cursor blinked in the "Subject" box. I slammed my fist down on "TAB" and a pop up screen appeared to verify if I really didn't want to give this email a subject. I grumbled: "Computers infuriate me." I pressed enter and the cursor shifted towards the empty email. The cursor became almost like a character to me, the obnoxious clown at a primary school fair that wouldn't leave you alone even though you obviously didn't appreciate his jokes, or the salesperson who relentlessly tried to convince you that you could not possible continue your life without the certain product he was selling you, with comments which were easily interpretable as personal and insulting. Like them the cursor didn't leave me alone. I scolded myself for being so taken by a damn cursor.

It shouldn't be this hard to be friends with someone, I thought.
Indecisive I finally typed:

*I'll see you at school next week.*

Without granting it any more thought I maneuvered the mouse and clicked when I landed on "SEND".

"Oh come on!" I yelled as a familiar screen popped up.

Are you sure you wish to send this email without a subject?

"No," I replied sarcastically to the software, "The average life expectancy of a man is 82.4 years, what else would I do with that time other than reconsider my subject?"

With a final, frustrated, almost angry "ENTER" the email was gone. "There." I nodded to myself, pretending I didn't notice the regret I instantly felt. Questions came to me that normally would not bother me, but living as a teenager had started to affect my thought process and I was thinking things like: "what if she thinks I'm just brushing her off?", "what if she thinks I'm angry with her?", "what if she doesn't understand and comes over anyway?"

I silenced them by finishing my beer with an exaggerated, refreshed "Ahhh."

"Hello."

I must have jumped two feet or more out of my seat, flailing ridiculously with my arms, barely being able to bite back a girlish squeak as the identity of the voice registered. Once gravity had guided me back into my desk chair I turned around, wide eyed and told Heero: "You scared me."

"'s Alright. Just didn't hear you come in."

"I was being quiet." he explained matter-of-factly.

I chuckled breathlessly, my heart rate was still a little sped up. "You always are."

A frown appeared on his face that I had grown to find cute but also awakened the near-irresistible urge to kiss it away. Flatly, he spoke: "Why do you say that like it's a bad thing?"

I chuckled again. With my feet planted on the ground I dragged the chair over to him as I remained seated. Most of the wheels didn't roll fluently and I felt my thighs burn by the time I had reached him - we needed to work out again soon.

I placed my toes over his, through my soft socks I could feel the smooth leather of his shoes. I placed my hands on his hips, hooking my thumbs through the belt loops, pulling his hips forward. I diverted my eyes to his belt buckle, away from my direct line of sight, briefly I enjoyed the feel of hard hipbone under my thumbs, through his shirt and hard muscles of his thighs and ass under my fingertips, through the tentatively thin fabric of his expertly tailored slacks. I trailed my gaze up his body, jumping from button to button exposed by his undone tie. I studied the tendons of his long neck and the nervous motions of his Adam's apple before finally looking him straight in the eye and whispering with a teasing wink: "I like it when your vocal."

He didn't understand. He gave me a pathetic look, seeking guidance.
"Never mind." I smiled up at him and then tipped my head forward, leaning my forehead against his taut abdomen, my nose touched the cold metal of his belt buckle. I warmed it with the heat that raged through my body, even through the tip of my nose. Heero grew uncomfortable with the unorthodox embrace. With a sigh I let him go as he started to shy away from me.

He distanced himself from me, taking three steps back before he finally settled.

"You're home early." I usually withheld myself from stating the obvious, but it was an interesting phenomenon. It was only four thirty in the afternoon and I never expect Heero home before seven - and even with those expectations I'd get disappointed on frequent occasions.

Heero shrugged, looking around himself. "The job was done."

"Cool." What else was I supposed to say? After all this time, I still had no idea what "the job" was precisely. "Hacker" was a very vague, indiscriminate and consequently dissatisfactory job description but it was all I was ever offered.

He kept standing in the middle of the room, in open space, aimlessly looking around himself, waiting for my order, it seemed.

"Well, it's too early for dinner." I looked at my watch. When I looked back up at him I noticed his gaze had caught the sight of the empty bottle of beer and lingered. "Happy hour." I joked. Heero was not amused, but when was he ever? "We could go to the gym." Basketball, though an activity I preferred, was not an option as sheets of rain poured down the windows. Heavy drops disrupted the quiet as the wind threw them violently against the windows and the outer walls of the apartment and gravity audibly dragged them down to deep puddles and soaked concrete and tarmac.

"Okay." With this new purpose he pivoted on his heels and marched away to retrieve his prepared duffel bag from the bottom of his side of the closet. We used to have duffel bags prepared with military rations, bulletproof vests, hand-grenades, ammo and a spare rifle. The contents have grown more innocent over time: a change of clothes, a towel, a granola bar, tennis shoes, our membership passes and small bottles of liquid soap and shampoo.

I pretended not to be painfully aware of Heero's second duffel bag - with familiar content-, amateurishly hidden under his bed in the shadow that our small nightstand cast on the carpet.

Old habits die hard, I supposed.

I followed my friend - my boyfriend - into our bedroom, walking in on him changing into a pair of jeans and a sweater. Neither of us was embarrassed. I watched him, enjoying it shamelessly. With concern I noticed a sharp, black bruise on his defined chest, just off the breastbone. "What happened?" I tried to sound neutral, not like the mothering hen I could sometimes turn into.

He followed my stare down to look at his own chest and touched the bruise, the black center no bigger than the tip of his fingers, the surrounding circles of blue and yellow fanned out wide. He looked at it like he saw it for the first time. "I don't know." He said softly, reaching for the sweater he had spread out over his neatly made bed.

"Did you fall on top of something?"

With only a disinterested shrug Heero wasn't being very cooperative. "It's nothing."

"It looks painful."
"It's not."

I dropped the subject, detecting irritation in his voice. Maybe I was unwittingly being the mother hen again. I needed to remind myself to leave him his freedom and independence even though I wished to be allowed to smother him, hold his hand and never leave his side.

I dragged my bag out of the closet and slammed the doors shut, waiting for him as he finished zipping and buttoning up his jeans and pulling the black sweater over his head, leaving his hair adorably tousled, more so than usual. With a smile I dropped my bag to the floor and approached him. Heero eyed me, but not warily, a calm had taken over him as he had grown to trust my touches. I kissed him, softly and as I did I ran my fingers through his hair, smoothing wayward strands. His hair was soft and smelled like shampoo, the scent still fresh and strong like he had just showered. I breathed it in, the combination of vanilla shampoo and a scent that was characteristically Heero's; sultry danger - if Heero ever launched a perfume line, that's what it would be aptly called, I mused.

I parted from his lips reluctantly and guided him out of the bedroom towards the front door, where I snatched a large dark blue umbrella as it leaned, unused for weeks, against the wall. In a half-jog we descended the staircase. In the lobby I apprehensively looked outside through the wide open door. The rain poured like a monsoon in the tropical forests. Through the density of the drops I could barely make out the buildings across the abandoned street. "Wow." I appreciated. We didn't have rain like this on L2, with it's busted up rain simulator, the distribution system defect, in most areas there was only a slight trickle, but in localized places the water fell down from the ceiling in a thick stream, like when you turned open the faucet.

In Florida that particular day, water fell down from the heavens like thick streams everywhere. I snapped open the umbrella, the wind tugged at it but it wasn't strong enough to pull it out of my grip or turn the umbrella inside out. I took the first step outside and Heero followed me, staying close by me, under the protection of the umbrella. The rain hammered down on the canvas and fell down around us in a sheet of water that fully surrounded us and made it even harder for me to see. With the beating wind the legs of our pants got soaked in spite of our best efforts.

By the time we reached the gym, my shoes made a slushy sound with every step I took, my feet were wrapped in wet socks in a quarter inch of water that had gathered in my shoes. Luckily there was a dry set of sneakers in my, fortunately waterproof, duffel bag.

The receptionist looked at us bemused. "Awful weather, isn't it?" Her hair was damp, like she had recently made her own way through the rain as well.

I nodded and we moved past her to the men's locker-room. In the large, tiled area, flanked with rows of lockers and at the far side seven shower stalls, we threw our bags down on the benches that ran through the center of the room, in between the pale blue lockers. "Oh man." I whined and groaned with each audible step I took.

Two other men at the far end of the bench looked at me with slight frowns. When they caught my gaze they quickly looked away and resumed getting dressed.

We stuffed our belongings into a single locker, though I left my shoes out to dry, confident no one
would steal them, then we headed out towards the work-out area. It was busier than we were used

Heero claimed the last available treadmill and I hurried over to the weight-section. before
everything there would be spoken for. In between men twice my age and twice my size, I felt
uncomfortable. Scrunching up my nose as I smelled their sweat. The gym was too crowded for my
liking. I glanced through the sweaty, muscled bodies at Heero, he seemed comfortable enough
jogging at a high speed, sandwiched by two young women with bouncing ponytails, stealing peaks
at him as they jogged at a pace pitiful compared to Heero's. The former Gundam pilot easily tuned
them out and didn't even seem to notice the special attention they were giving him.

I pumped weights for a little while but eagerly joined Heero on the treadmills as the girl on his left
bailed, exhausted by her futile attempt to impress him.

"Hi." I said, turning up the speed-dial.

He looked at me and nodded his greeting.

We jogged in step with each other, I did not want to admit I had trouble keeping up the pace. The
broad rubber band passed beneath my feet in quick circles and the motor hummed loudly to the
background vocals of the other machinery. "Sookie emailed me." I started.

Heero didn't respond but by the minute changes to his face I could tell he was listening.

"She wants to talk. She still wants to be friends." It was hard to talk through the exertion, in
between words my lungs greedily sucked in oxygen. "I don't think she knows the whole truth yet,
but she'll want to." I looked at him with questioning eyes, but he didn't look back. "What do you
think I should tell her?"

Heero's brain worked to process my question but after a while he had to admit that he didn't know.

"It's not safe to tell her. She might tell others, on purpose or not." I stopped talking for a while,
thinking to myself, but I had been thinking about it for days with no success. I needed fresh insight.
Unfortunately my only remaining friend wasn't very insightful in the social dimension of life. I
stressed the importance of the issue by later adding: "I don't want to lose her. She's been a good
friend. I need her, you know? To figure stuff out. She's important."

Heero just nodded stiffly. He kept his gaze focused up ahead, through the window, staring at the
falling rain as nothing else was to be seen.

I looked around myself, to make sure our conversation had remained private. There was no one
close enough to have heard over the hum of the tirelessly worked equipment. During my swivel I
noted the inflated men with undoubtedly inflated ego's had vacated the sparring ring. Excited to
have a break from the monotonous rhythm of the treadmill and the thump of my footfalls I reached
out a hand and poked Heero in his upper arm.

He turned his head to glare at me.

"The ring is free. Wanna push each other around a little?"

He looked back, his long neck straining, to confirm the ring was unoccupied. Without saying
anything his slim fingers took gentle hold of the speed-dial and he slowly turned it back, decreasing the speed to nothing more than a fast walking pace. I copied his actions and after a few minutes of cooling down we both turned the dial back as far as it would go. My treadmill sputtered, giving a final cough and shake before it would halt.

We walked to the other side of the gym, where the crowd was dissipating as the fight was over. Heero used the provided, protective tape to wrap our fingers and palms, I took his cue, smirking at the dissolving crowd, mentally broadcasting: if you want to see a real fight, you should stick around.

"Kicking?" Heero asked.

"Sure." My ego was speaking, I was hoping to catch as much attention as the men before us. It was a pitiful, superficial desire, but I felt it nonetheless. "No shoes though."

Heero nodded, bending down to untie his shoes and take them off along with his socks.

I stared at his behind for a moment before I snapped myself out of it and took my own shoes and socks off. We simultaneously entered the ring, from opposite sides. The bulked up men were watching us from far away, expecting us "skinny kids" to make fools out of ourselves. The God of Death lurking within me grinned devilishly at their naive disposition. Don't judge a book by it's cover, nor by it's braid, I often had to remind the sweeper's crew. I turned back to Heero and shared my mischief with him through twinkling eyes. "Let's give everybody a good show." We came together at the center and knocked fists to signal the beginning of our fight. I darted backwards as at the contact of our friendly right fists his left came flying towards me. He punched the thin air in front of my chest.

"Sneaky little-" His right foot made me swallow my words as it powerfully connected with the hollow of my knee and nearly made my leg buckle. I had momentarily forgotten we had agreed kicks were allowed. Leave it to Heero to kindly remind me...

The tendons at the back of my legs ached from the low kick they had suffered. I ducked as his fist seared towards me. I seized the moment and punched his exposed abdomen, but halfheartedly, not putting all my strength into it as I was aware of the healing bruise from our basketball game, hidden under his shirt. But my care was not rewarded in kind, his hands came down with lightening speed and gripped my wrist. I feared the powerful vice formed by his hands would snap the bones of my wrist as he maneuvered my arm up and awkwardly over his shoulder, leaving me immobilized as I had to take care not to force my own bones to break. Suddenly, he flung me over his shoulder by the arm he held, pushing his back up to help get my weight across. He let go and for a brief moment, I was flying. Then I crashed back down on the padded floor of the ring. I groaned. It hurt like hell.

I scrambled to my feet and brought up my fists to protect my face and chest. At the sound of my body slamming into the floor, people had gathered around us but I didn't pay them any heed. "What the fuck?" I demanded.

Heero had murder in his eyes. I swore his next words were a sneer. "Am I doing it wrong?"

"Well, you're doing alright," I answered with frustrated sarcasm, "if you were trying to kill me!" I didn't understand why he would be mad at me. What could I have done wrong? Nothing to deserve this foul throw! My back burned all over from the impact. Letting my fighters-instinct override my concern for his feelings I charged forward and slammed my body into him. Together we crashed down onto the mat, with me on top. Instantly, I felt his arms circling me, but I managed to pry my hands out from in between our bodies and started punching him in the sides, upon which I got
myself a painful knee in the family jewels, making me cringe and roll away.

I realized this wasn't an innocent spar for the sake of a complete work-out when he didn't allow me time to recover. Staring up at the ceiling, gasping for air, his face appeared before me. He straddled my body. He had one hand over my throat but didn't apply any pressure, he pulled his other back in a balled fist, like a snake preparing for a strike. I squeezed my eyes shut tight.

One Mississippi, I counted.

Two Mississippi.

Three Mississippi.

I dared to open my eyes. Heero had lowered his fist back down, the hardness in his face was gone, his shoulders were sagged down, he seemed deflated. He refused to meet my eyes.

I heard the people around us talking.

With confusion I watched Heero rise and walk away. A trainer fought through the crowd and kneeled by my dazed figure, a tanned face came into view. "Are you okay?" She looked around, at the faces of the people in the crowd. "Where did that other guy go?" She asked them.

"To the locker-room." Someone answered.

"It's fine." I said before she would send someone in after him. "It's fine, I know him. We were just goofing around. It was a friendly fight." I sat up.

"Didn't look friendly." The trainer muttered beside me.

I left the ring and headed for the locker-room. My entire body hurt. What the fuck just happened? I asked myself. I stormed through the doors, angry with him but when I saw him at the far end of the room, my anger was gone and of my entire aching body, the thing that hurt the most was my heart, bleeding with concern. I slowly approached him. Heero was sitting on the bench, roughly pulling the protective tape off his hands.

Breathlessly I asked him: "What was that all about?"

Heero shrugged meekly, looking away.

I sat down next to him and decided not to say anything. We sat side by side in silence, we didn't even move. We were alone in the locker-room but outside I heard the commotion we had caused among the other patrons, they used the term "weird boys" a lot. I didn't consider it much of an insult, just yet another harsh truth we had to deal with.

"You should talk to Sookie." He said out of the blue. His voice was soft and wavered. He was trying to remain big and strong, to remain the soldier, but emotions were seeping through the barriers and he couldn't protect himself from them, nor keep them hidden. Nothing on earth, that included Heero, was safe from emotions or unaffected by the pain they inadvertently caused. "You should make it right." He added, cringing next to me, leaning forward further and further and turning his head away from me as far as he could.

Sympathetically I asked, my heart clenching as a pained twin to his: "Why? What's bothering you?"

"I'm not a good friend." He blurted to the wall on the other side of him, but I was sure he was still talking to me.
"Not a good friend?"

The back of his head nodded at me. "I can't help you with your "stuff". I never know what to do or what to say. What is right and what is normal..." He abruptly turned back to face me, his face was hard and angry, but the anger wasn't directed at me, rather, at himself. "I'm no good as a friend. I only know how to fight."

The confrontation with his frailty left me speechless.

"You don't need me. You need a good friend." His eyes were challenging me, expecting me to agree with him; that he was no good, that I needed someone better than him. He was wrong.

"I do need you." I told him with serious tone, hoping it would register. "You are my best friend and my boyfriend." I smiled through the tears I had unknowingly started to cry. "I love you."

His face momentarily contorted into the expression of someone who was on the verge of tears but he controlled himself and the heartbroken expression was replaced by a dishearteningly indifferent one.

We both looked away at the same time. We stared ahead for a while, preoccupied with our own thoughts.

Heero was the one to initiate eye-contact and break the silence. "I'm sorry I kicked you."

I smiled. "It was nothing."

"And threw you."

"I'm fine."

"And kneed you."

"Okay that one-" I paused, my smile brightened and I just said: "...Apology accepted."

I leaned in and placed a light peck on his cheek and tasted salt, from either his sweat or tears he had inconspicuously wiped away. I would never know.
We walked home, shielded under the umbrella. The only sound to be heard was the steady fall of the rain. Droplets hammered down on the dark blue canvas over our heads, on our shoes, on the street and on the sides of the buildings. The noise was deafening and drowned out even the sloshing of my shoes - I saw no point in getting the second pair soaked - and passing traffic. Cars were nothing more than twin pairs of white and red lights as they traveled through the cascade of water. We walked close to the buildings, out of reach from jokers who liked to speed through the deep puddles by the side of the road and get us wetter than we already were, creating tidal waves on the sidewalks.

Heero was holding the umbrella this time, dutifully. He didn't seem to mind the contact as we walked shoulder to shoulder. He embraced his task of holding up our shield against the rain and no doubt felt protected from uncomfortable conversation by the loud roar of the early spring rain.

I was lost in my own thoughts, thinking about our relationship, trying to see things from his perspective, trying to visualize his take on the world and on me. I realized with a throb of my heart that I was all he had. He had no veritable "Sookie", someone who truly understood what this everyday life was about, he could only turn to me for guidance and advised, but I was poorly suited for the job. I was as lost as he was, just more adapted to convincingly conceal it.

We reached our apartment building after a long, slow walk, fighting through the weather. I used my keycard to open the door to the lobby and stepped inside first as Heero had the umbrella. He collapsed it and shook it a few times to dry it as best he could. Lazily we took a stand in front of the elevator and waited for it to meet us on the ground floor. I looked at the row of numbers over the doors, one by one a number would light up in descending order as the elevator came down. The stainless steel doors reflected a blurry vision of us, I could only see the vague blue of his jeans, the black of sweater, the golden tone of his skin, the chocolate of his hair. The color of his eyes were lost in the distorted image. It was a disturbing sight.

Ding! The doors opened, we stepped inside and with automated movements I pressed the button for our floor. The sound of the rain was gone and left us with only the eerie screech of the pulleys as the elevator slowly worked it's way up the shaft.

Once we were back in our apartment I headed for the bathroom to retrieve a fresh towel. I had hastily dried my hair after showering at the gym, normally it would air-dry on the way home, but the humidity would not allow it. My braid was damp and cold along my back, making me shiver. In the bathroom I also took off my shoes and placed them in the bathtub upside down. I draped my wet socks over the edge of the sink. I looked at myself in the mirror of the small medicine cabinet. I looked very tired. I rolled up my sleeve and touched the bruised skin of my wrist. I wasn't angry anymore though. There was no room for anger as my heart was crowded with love, but also sadness. When I looked back up at my reflection, I saw Heero had joined me, quietly staring at me. It was unnerving.

Through the mirror I smiled at him.

He left.

My smile disappeared with him.

The decision on what we would have for dinner was always on me, so I decided on Japanese take-out. After staring at the menu for a long time with a look of deep contemplation on his face, he
chose with a point of his finger the vegetarian Tjap Tjoy and I called in his order along with my choice of Kongpo Beef. As we waited on the couch in front of a TV barely audible over the rain I innocently asked: "Do you like Japanese food?"

Heero shrugged.

"Would be kinda strange if you wouldn't, huh?" I lightheartedly joked.

Heero's head jerked to face me. "Why?"

Incredulously I stared at his exotically slanted eyes, delicate nose, pointed jaw line and golden skin tone. "Well... Because you are Japanese." I assumed this wasn't novel information to him.

"Maybe." He said, though his intense blue eyes begged to differ, the plenty Asian features didn't allow for any doubt. "How Japanese can I be? I don't speak Japanese and I've never been to Japan."

I smiled brightly at him. "Maybe we could go there sometime."

"Yeah?" He sounded intrigued.

"Sure!" My mouth started rambling as I started vocally pre-planning our future, hypothetical trip to Japan.

Heero allowed for my blabber, his gaze never leaving my face. I started adding enthusiastic hand gestures to my excited storytelling and bouncing up and down on the cushion of the couch as I made references to old movies - of which he had of course never heard - taking place in Japan. I noticed a smile tugging at his lips and tried to coax it out further with exaggerated expressions and mimicking hands, but he caught himself and fixed his mouth back into a taut line.

I was interrupted by dinner when it rang the doorbell.

We ate in silence, as we always did, watching the sci-fi channel. I enjoyed the stupid notions most of the shows were based on and laughed at the scientific inaccuracies they presented as fact. We watched a large spaceship embark on epic journey through outer space, picking up supplies and additional crew during a short pit stop at the L2 spaceport. It was optimistic of the producers to think that L2 would still be in existence that many years into the future. L2 residents would tell stories of the contrary. As a street rat I remembered sitting up in the middle of the night, rigid with fear as the structure of the poorly maintained colony moaned under the pressure of space. Load clangs and creaks echoed off the buckling walls.

"Hey Heero, what's L1 like?" I asked suddenly.

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently then later added: "New." With a displeased tone.

I thought about that for a moment, wondering what he meant, L1 was one of the earliest colonies, of course perfectly maintained, it should be far from new, being close to 200 years old. In search of clarification I pressed: "New?"

He didn't take his eyes of the screen, watching blue light come out of the space-ships rear thrusters as the vessel prepared for supersonic speeds - also not yet achieved in reality. "Just new. When something get's old, it is replaced." He furrowed his brows and paused his eating to think carefully, summoning his distant memories of his former home. "There was a park where the trees never got old." he searched for words to express himself. "Every three years they would uproot all the trees and replace them with young ones." He seemed uncharacteristically sullen at the memory.
"Maybe, after Japan, we could go to L1?" I suggested in hopes of cheering his up.

"I don't want to go back to L1." He spoke decisively and then continued to eat.

At the opportunity my curiosity perked. I had never seen an invitation to ask him about his training with J, but at the moment it seemed he had turned the conversation in a particular direction that made those questions inevitable. I bit my lip with hesitance, not sure what kind of reaction I would receive, perhaps he would be volatile, perhaps he would shut me back out and every inch I had taking inside the barricades surrounding his heart would be made in vain; wasted attempts at an impossible goal - one step forward, two steps back. Finally, as my mouth was bored with the deep contemplation going on in the brain, I just sort of spewed the words in rapid, near incoherent succession, as a security measure, to leave myself with the ability to deny I had asked.

But of course Heero's sensitive ears picked up on each word and his brain worked to assort them in an understandable fashion: What happened on L1? His eyes turned momentarily incredulous, but he fixed them back with a blink. He stared into the cardboard box of Tjap Tjoy in his lap for a moment before he looked at me, twisting his head in a single jerk and I saw his eyebrows were deeply furrowed. His relaxed demeanor vanished, his back became straight and his shoulders tense, the index finger on his right hand started to involuntarily twitch - subconscious activation of the trigger finger was always a bad sign. The boy with whom I had enjoyed a sweet dinner, made way for the Soldier with whom I shared a sour dessert. "Why?" Was the single word that fell from his taut lips. He appeared annoyed and that somehow his fortress had been invaded against his wishes. It was like I had been able to sneak myself inside but now I had set off the alarm and red lights were flashing and something was ringing in his ear that caused the mask of the soldier to mimic an annoyed expression.

"Why?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Why do I want to know?" I was merely buying myself time by repeating everything he said. By now, alarms were going off in the back of my own head, but instead of "DANGER! Intruder!" they blared: "DANGER! Imminent air strike!" I heard the vague echo of bombs exploding as they dropped from the hull of a carrier to the defenseless ground below, falling to earth to kill and pollute like acid rain and kill every small thing that had been struggling to live and survive.

His eyes narrowed, he was not fooled, nor amused, by my transparent strategy.

I laid my warm palm over his hand with the attempt to soothe his anger and still the twitch caused by the military wiring of his nervous system. I felt the hand tense under mine, clawing at the fabric of his dark jeans. I scooted in closer, to alleviate the sudden animosity that had grew like a virus between us. I saw the turmoil in his eyes - crashing waves of a rough dark sea - slowly subside. "I didn't mean to pry." I whispered. I leaned in closer and added: "You can tell me whatever, whenever."

The ocean stilled, the surface became smooth and calm and inviting. Staring into his eyes, I appreciated the full range of beautiful colors and the thick, long lashes by which the orbs were framed. With every passing moment I observed him, it came increasingly plausible that he was indeed a test tube baby. I had never experienced any as perfect as he was. But then again, whose fingers were best suited to create perfection? A scientist or God?

He opened his mouth and finally spoke again, the threatening tone had abandoned his voice to leave it will the comfortable, familiar monotone. "I just want to forget about that."
I nodded, I was disappointed, but I understood. I realized it was going to take more than a question, I would have to sacrifice some of my own secrecy, if I ever wished the right to expect anything in return. Hopeful and willing, I asked him if he minded me sharing a little about my time on L2, with G. It surprised me to see he had to think about this offer before deciding he could accept.

When he nodded, I took a deep breath.

"My name is not Duo," I started, gauging him, he seemed unsurprised and unimpressed by the bit of information, I supposed it was rather obvious, "I named myself after my best friend, his name was Solo. Though I doubt that was his real name. I met him at an orphanage when I was eight, he was twelve. In that orphanage, you normally didn't socialize with the other kids, but Solo and I shared a toothbrush, because they didn't have enough for everyone. We didn't really talk to each other. We just stood side by side, on the tips of our toes, at the sink, waiting for our turn. One day I was punished, I refused to say grace before dinner. It was a highly religious orphanage, not saying grace was like slander, but I told the miss that I didn't understand why I had to thank God for that one meal a day, that didn't even taste good. First she whipped me, but I could handle that. Then she sent all of us to bed, but she took away my pillow and replaced it with a thick, old Bible and forced me to sleep on it. My neck burned with strain, my back hurt from the welts, I was on the verge of tears when Solo called my name. I didn't even know he knew my name. He offered to share his bed, his pillow. I was too tired to refuse, even though I was aware of the possible consequences. Of course the miss found out and after she whipped us both she told Solo that if he pitied me so, he could exchange his pillow for the Bible. And he did. He gave me his pillow and placed the Bible at the head of his own bed. He slept with his head on that thing for two weeks. He stood up for me every since and ever since I happily said grace before dinner, but I did not thank God for the food, I thanked Him for giving me a friend."

I was surprised at my own calm throughout the story. I almost felt detached from this hurtful history, like it had happened in a different lifetime, or not to me at all. The pain couldn't reach me when Heero was near me. The protective aura with which he surrounded us both was impenetrable.

A silence fell between us. I didn't know what I had hoped for or expected. Heero remained impassive, I caught a sliver of disappointment within me but ignored it till it went away. I noticed his hand, which I had still been holding, had turned warm and his palm had turned sweaty. He had shifted his gaze down to the carpet and kept staring at it pointedly.

"Heero?" I waited for him to look me in the eyes. I smiled kindly and reassuringly at him. "I still thank God everyday for giving me a friend. But I don't thank Him for Solo anymore. I thank Him for giving me you. You make every welt I ever suffered worth while because eventually my life brought me to you."

His breath hitched. He looked away again, avoiding me.

I rubbed his hand gently, I hoped he understood what I meant to convey, that whatever he felt now was okay, even if he felt nothing. I loved him regardless. It was impossible for me to hate Heero Yuy. He could beat me to the ground and spit on my battered body and I would still gladly and honestly proclaim my love for him, because I knew the hateful fists belonged to the relentless soldier and there was nothing the boy could do about them, even though I knew he loved me back.

In my life I had learned to have faith and though on many occasions the master plan of the universe seemed to put in a collective effort to prove me wrong, Heero had never disappointed me. My faith in him was never misplaced and so I continued to rely on it. Sometimes faith was all I have. Other times he offered me glimpses of a reward for my faith and patience. I didn't think thank moment would be one of those when he opened his mouth and strangely stated:
"I'm not religious."

I frowned, but didn't ask for any elaboration, I knew it would come once he found the words. Communication was hard on everybody.

"But if I believed in God, I would thank him for you too."

It was the most honest, most real, most touching thing I had ever heard him say. A kind of reverence washed over me. I wanted to thank him for saying that, but thought it would sound stupid if I did. In return I gave him the brightest, happiest, most genuine smile I had ever given anyone. I didn't know if he appreciated it, or if he even understood. He quietly observed me and I thought nothing was going to happen, I thought the moment would slip from our fingers and I would be left hungry for the next soon. But then something flickered across Heero's face and with what was obviously strained effort, the corners of his mouth drew up the smallest, near imperceptible bit and for as long as two heartbeats lasted he was smiling back at me. It was awkward and noticeably uncomfortable. He tried to smile like a fish would try to walk on land, the result was uncoordinated and amusing if I wasn't as moved. He didn't smile because he was happy, because he wanted to smile or truly felt he had anything to smile about. He smiled for me.

It made his gesture all the more endearing.

At the third beat of my heart the muscles in his face relaxed and the smile fell from his lips. But I had seen it and I would continue to see it for a long time, every time I would close my eyes.

My whole being felt light except for my fingers, heavy with the growing desire to hug him and touch him. My lips began to tingle with hopeful anticipation. I wanted to kiss him. Before reason could stop me from doing, so, I told him that.

He moved his mouth to nip at his lip nervously. He caught himself and stopped the anxious habit, he tried to master his blank expression, but his eyes could not lie, they livened with intrigue and curiosity hidden behind shy innocence.

I sat on my knees on the couch, facing him, Heero took my lead and copied my position, expressing his willingness to cooperate and explore. I inched closer to him, feeling the cushions dip under my weight. I stared lengthily at his face. I noticed all of a sudden how young he looked and was reminded, almost with a start, that we were young. I kept forgetting, with all this seriousness between us all the time. A stupid, devilish grin formed on my face. Heero tilted his head slightly and arched one eyebrow inquisitively. I wink at him and then darted forward to plant a light kiss on the tip of his nose and then I retreated back into my own personal space, watching his intently, searching for a reaction.

He seemed frozen solid for a while, his eyes slightly off mine. He caught himself and stopped the anxious habit, he tried to master his blank expression, but his eyes could not lie, they livened with intrigue and curiosity hidden behind shy innocence.

I sat on my knees on the couch, facing him, Heero took my lead and copied my position, expressing his willingness to cooperate and explore. I inched closer to him, feeling the cushions dip under my weight. I stared lengthily at his face. I noticed all of a sudden how young he looked and was reminded, almost with a start, that we were young. I kept forgetting, with all this seriousness between us all the time. A stupid, devilish grin formed on my face. Heero tilted his head slightly and arched one eyebrow inquisitively. I wink at him and then darted forward to plant a light kiss on the tip of his nose and then I retreated back into my own personal space, watching his intently, searching for a reaction.

He seemed frozen solid for a while, his eyes slightly off mine. He blinked and his eyes focused back on mine, there was a thin line of confusion between his eyebrows. He licked his lips, most likely subconsciously and let a long time pass before he concluded nothing was going to happen: I wasn't going to initiate anything. His eyebrows twitched together in a split-second frown. There was undeniable disappointment in his voice when he asked: "That's it?"

I smirked. "Yup. Your turn." I was feeling bold and curious to see how he would respond to being left in charge.

The hesitation that quickly multiplied and spread across his face made me question my strategy and after seven Mississippi's I was certain I had wasted an opportunity and he would be confused and awkward with physical contact for days, but hope sparked when he leaned forward, only an inch, his eyes half lidded. But suddenly he froze and he sat himself back on his calves, looking
away, searching for answers in the thread of the carpet. He sported a look of deep, personal
contemplation. I decided to be patient and hoped to be rewarded.

Suddenly his face hardened with determination and he adjusted his position so he wouldn't lose his
balance. He quickly leaned forward, his lips connecting with mine and he pulled back as soon as
the firing of the neurons registered in his brain. The look he was giving me was distinctively
challenging and teasing as he said: "Your turn again."

Interested at the development of our spontaneous game, I accepted his challenge and closed the
distance between us, pressing my lips against his and moving them once to create friction that send
jolts of shivers and electricity down my back. I pulled back with a cheeky smile.

Heero appeared to be frustrated. He leaned in for our fourth kiss and lingered deliciously. The
gentle kiss lasted for several sweet seconds before he slowly separated himself from me. He looked
proud of himself, even a little cocky. The success of this game, I realized lied in the deduction he
was making that not kissing me would be cowardice and that a good kiss would be the kind of
perfection he strived for in every aspect for his life. Now that I had him driven and motivated, it
was hard not to use the situation to my advantage. The next kisses we shared lasted progressively
longer and with joy I noticed Heero become more tempted with each kiss as he started to enjoy the
sensations.

Finally, we shared a kiss that changed everything for me and elevated the situation far above a
mere game. I had lost count, call it the umpteenth time, it was Heero turn. He had shed all his
inhibitions and uncertainty's and leaned into each kiss with strengthening self confidence and every
time we parted, he seemed a little dazed and a modest hue of pink had gathered on his high
cheekbones. I instantly knew the kiss would be different when I felt his hands leaning on mine. I
had my own hands splayed over my thigh as I sat back on my calves, like Heero. For the particular
kiss he placed his hands over my wrists for balanced as he came closer and right before our lips
connected, he closed his eyes, which he had done previously. The moment our lips touched,
something surged through me that made very hair on my body stand up straight, my skin felt
electrified and a chemical process was happening in my head that had a relaxing, intoxicating and
pleasurable effect equal to the best drug, if not exceeding.

The previous kisses had been innocently romantic, but when we came together for that umpteenth
time - the amount of times it took for Heero to grow comfortable - there was passion.

Recognizing it as "the real deal" I sucked in air through my nose, preparing for what I hoped to be a
lengthy kiss. I pushed back against him, strengthening - almost solidifying - our kiss. We soon
progressed from moving our lips against each other to sharing an open-mouthed kiss, licking and
sucking on upper and lower lips. Heero's hands vanished in the dark void that surrounded the only
existing universe and that was our lips touching. Perhaps he had grown nervous, but his mouth
didn't express anything of the kind. He hungrily kissed me back and mimicked my motions as he
tried - and succeeded - to make the kiss perfect.

I brought my hands up to hold his neck, enjoying the feel of his slender, vulnerable neck
underneath my strong fingers, loving the fact that he allowed me. His pulse was fast and furious
underneath my palm.

When I finally interpreted him ready to deepen the kiss he accepted me with the softest moan
which he would surely deny, steadfast, even under polygraph examination. My ahnds moved down
from his neck to his waist, I possessively wrapped my arms around his narrow waist, drawing him
up to his knees as I raised myself up to my knees, bringing our bodies together. I reveled at the
perfection with which our bodies melded together as our tongues fought for dominance neither of
us was willing to relinquish at first. I was lost in the moment and in the sensations and gladly so was Heero. His body felt relaxed, soft and warm. His arms were by his side, not yet participating in the scene. With a sigh it seemed Heero decided to submit, to experience the sensations differently, letting me take full control. He responded favorably and brought his hands up. His fingers were tentative at first, but then he took a strong hold of me and held me close, clinging to me needily.

I noticed with slight embarrassment that I was fast becoming aroused and my physical state belied this secret: my jeans became straining and tight in the front. I didn't know how Heero would respond once he would notice, if he hadn't already, but I couldn't think about that at that moment, my mind was preoccupied processing a sensory overload and a mantra of "ohmygodohmygodohmygod".

When my erection reached an embarrassing and obvious state it was brought to Heero's awareness as well.

His reaction was direct and sharp; he pulled himself away from me with a jerk, like he was scorned - like you pulled your hand away after burning it on a hot pan -, his body instantly grew tense. He cast his gaze downward again as he lowered himself back onto his calves, the distance between us a good two feet of cold, open space.

My shame reached a new peak and blood was redirected to warm my cheeks with a strong, red hue. "I..." I stammered a meaningless combination of vowels. The situation grew very awkward, very rapidly but fortunately it also solved my problem. The teenage body worked quick that way. After I had finally gained some composure I sat myself back down on the couch and offered a quiet apology.

I expected him to be meek and uncomfortable, but all of a sudden he straightened up from his hunched over position and looked me sternly in the eyes and posed the direct question: "Do you want to have sex?"

I nearly choked on my own spit, flabbergasted.

He kept eyeing me seriously, that telltale frown on his forehead.

With a shy smile I admitted, though not ashamed: "Yes."

He proceeded quickly, his blank expression revealed nothing: "Now?"

I chuckled sheepishly. "No."

"When?"

I shrugged "When it happens. You can't plan it."

"Shouldn't we get condoms?"

I felt a strange flirt of sensation in my stomach when he said the word "condoms". "Probably," I agreed, visualizing the pack of condoms that was already secretly waiting for "when it happens". I couldn't tell him that, I was afraid he would take it the wrong way, like sex was all I wanted from him. But Heero had much more to offer me, more important things than bodily pleasure. Though it didn't bother me to admit to myself I was excitedly anticipating it. I suddenly regretted not saving my virginity for that moment, but there was no point dwelling on the unchangeable past.

The conversation came to an abrupt and cold end when Heero reached for his Tjap Tjoy and took elegant hold of the chopsticks to eat the last few pieces from the bottom of the cardboard box.
A little confused I watched him for a while. He seemed comfortable beside me, now that he had ended the conversation and was back in control.

"Are you done with that?"

"Huh?" I blinked and looked up at Heero, who had risen from his seat and was pointing his chopsticks at my empty box of Kongpo Beef.

"Are you done?" He asked.

"Oh, yeah."

He cleared everything off the table, gathering the disposable items in the plastic bag our dinner had arrived in and he walked to the kitchen to throw it away.

I was dazed and wide-eyed for a long moment, but finally my face broke into a self satisfied grin. I realized I should have asked Heero if he wanted to have sex, but in spite of the encouraging event that night, i feared he would have an answer prepared that would not please me. So I decided to hold off that question for a little while longer, till I was confident he wouldn't freeze me over with a cold and calculating take on sex.

Now that I had heard him say "sex", it being strangely sexual to hear from him, I wondered how "making love" would sound in his deep voice, or how sounds of pleasure would spill from his lips. I stopped that thought, still being in a sensitive state. With a chuckle I decided to take a shower and even though I hadn't planned on it, I couldn't help but jerk-off as visuals from our heated kiss brought me back to a full state of arousal.

With slight embarrassment I traded the bathroom with Heero as he took his evening shower. I laid in my bed refusing the urge to peek around the corner of the wide open door. Clouds of condensation billowed out from the warm bathroom to the cool bedroom. I reached for the remote on the nightstand and turned off the air-conditioning. The naughty question was raised with me whether Heero ever masturbated in the shower. With I frown I wondered if the rigorous soldier ever masturbated.

Heero emerged with his tanned body damp and drops of water falling down from his bangs onto his chest. I looked away with a blush, biting back a stupid, childish smile when I noticed his nipples were hard, exposed to the cold. He had wrapped a towel around his waist with newly found modesty and dressed behind the open door of the closet, just out of my line of sight. Either he had truly become modest and self-conscious, or he was teasing me.

Dressed in his usual attire he crawled into bed, settling on his back.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

He switched off the light.

"I love you, Heero."

His belated response: "I love you too."

Minutes passed in total darkness and silent, but I sensed a conversation was still coming. I was staring up at my ceiling and hadn't heard Heero's sheets rustle to turn onto his side. He was still
lying on his back, sharing my fascination with the ceiling.

"Do you really want to know about L1... and J?"

I hadn't expected such a heavy topic. I swallowed a lump and replied: "Of course."

"Why?" This time his tone of voice wasn't mean or threatening. I imagined he sported that honest, questioning frown.

"Because when I know, I can help you."

There was silence for a long time, till eventually: "How can you help with something that happened in the past?"

I shrugged, my sheets moved noisily around my shoulders. "I can't change the past. But you past influences your future, the better you deal with your past, the better you'll deal with your future. I could help you deal... besides, I think it would be good just to talk about it and have someone listen."

"Was it good for you to talk this evening?"

Instead of immediately answering him positively with the intention of encouraging him to volunteer information, I decided to consider his question carefully, he deserved an answer that was true. It didn't matter, though, the result was the same. "Yes. It did feel good."

"How does it feel good?"

With a smile I noted he was very talkative this evening. Kissing did wonders for the boy. "I feel lighter. It's not a secret anymore, it's just a memory, just a story. And I'm happy my best friend knows about it."

A rustle to my right indicated the nodding of his head against his pillow.

"Would you like to tell something?" I held my breath in anticipation, the possibility of having part of mystery that is Heero Yuy unveiled was captivating and I was aware of the potential importance of this moment. It could well be a turning point.

"I don't know what."

"Anything. Anything you want to tell. Maybe something about your training." I suggested, because I was very curious about his training by J. I had my suspicions that bad things happened. Worse than what happened to me. It took more than beatings and cold water dunks to instill behavior like that of the Perfect Soldier.

"There was this bag." He started with a questioning tone.

"Yeah?" I encouraged.

"The choke-bag."

I shivered under the warm covers.

"I would cuff my hands behind my back with steel handcuffs and place a see through plastic bag over my head. With a tight belt around my neck, he tied it in place and waited for me to start suffocating." he paused for a moment, maybe to suppress emotions. He continued with a monotone voice: "The objective was to train me to be able to break steel cuffs. I couldn't, not for a long time. I
would pass out from lack of oxygen and woke up somewhere else later. The exercise continued for years, till I finally broke the cuffs when I was fourteen and took off the bag before I passed out."

I smiled sadly, eerily aware that there was no resent in his voice reserved for J, if anything he sounded appreciative, like J had taught him a valuable and necessary life lesson. Of course the ability to bend steel and cause it to snap at the welded joints would save his life and the lives of others during the war, I couldn't muster any bit of gratitude for J's teachings. There was a dark part in my heart reserved for hatred and it was filled with images and memories of G and J and the other, wicked, scientists. Deranged old men. I would never be able to thank them for their efforts. Even though they played an instrumental role in the freeing on the colonies and creating the peaceful Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

The God of Death shamelessly held grudges. That dark part of me wished I had personally caused their demise, having them pay us back in drops of blood on my hands.

Switched away from the sadistic thoughts that were not fitting for the new me. I needed to be free of the God of Death just as much as Heero needed to be free of the Perfect Soldier. I was simply ahead of him in the twelve-step program.

Even though maybe I would have been better off not knowing, as I became haunted with Heero's gasping face blurred through the material of the plastic "choke-bag", I thanked him for telling me. I meant it. It was good to know and bad to know at the same time. I didn't even try to comprehend that, I just accepted it.

The next morning I lathered two bagels royally with peanut butter, still smiling as I remembered that night when I found out Heero didn't like cheese. He had quickly become addicted to peanut butter. I scraped the last bit out of the jar and scribbled "PB" with a little, random smiley face on a yellow post-it that I stuck to the refrigerator door. My eyes shifted to the invitation to the ESUN ball, hosted by Relena. Time had passed quickly, the ball was next Saturday. It dawned on me Heero and I had no fitting attire for such a formal occasion. I grabbed the pen and added to the post-it: "TUX" Heero probably wasn't willing to invest in the purchase of a tailored tuxedo, I dreaded at renting one, but I would have to settle for that option.

I forgot all about arranging tuxedo's when Heero came out of the bedroom and made a B-line towards his breakfast of black coffee and peanut butter with a side of bagel. We stood together in the kitchen, eating. We ate like real young men, wolfing it down in matter of seconds. I grinned at our similar antics.

I didn't think about tuxedo's again till Heero had long stepped out of the house. But I wasn't angry with myself, it gave me a good excuse to call him at work. I dialed the number of the Preventers head quarters and a friendly receptionist patched me through. The phone started ringing again and for a long time. I looked at my watch, it wasn't lunch time yet.

I tapped the wall with the rhythm of a made up song, or maybe I had heard it a long time ago. The phone kept ringing and it seemed like no one was going to pick up, but I didn't relent that easily. Finally, someone answered.

"Hello?" The voice seemed perplexed someone was calling this number.

"Yeah, this is Duo, I'm calling for-"

"Heero, yeah, I know, this is his desk after all." The speaker seemed to be rolling his eyes at me,
there was a superior and sarcastic tone to his voice.

It clicked. It was the same snot I had talked to the last time I tried to reach Heero at work. I had failed to remember his name, so I played dumb and asked him whom I was speaking to.

"Reid Mixson," he replied uninterestingly, "I'm Heero's colleague and good friend, we talked on the phone before. You're his roommate, right?" He spoke degradingly.

"And best friend." I put an emphasis on "best" and decided to leave out "boyfriend", even though it would have been fun to hear his reaction to that. "Can you please tell Heero I'm on the phone."

"He isn't here."

I frowned. "Well, where is he?" I demanded, I had the feeling he was yanking my chain.

"I don't know. Probably a conference or a meeting. He is the best hacker you know."

Of course I knew, I spent many nights awake in bed in shared dorm rooms, frustrated at the ticking of his keyboard as he hacked busily. "Can you tell him I called?"

"He might be gone long."

I sighed and decided to be bold. "Put him on."

Reid became defensive. "I just told you he isn't here."

"Yeah yeah, a meeting or a conference. Well, I don't care, call him, say it's an emergency."

"I can't do that."

"Yes you can and you will."

There was a long pause, I focused an angry glare on the receiver, maybe it would have effect. Finally, his voice came through the line again: "Fine." He was not pleased at all and didn't withhold from letting me hear it in his voice.

He put me on hold and for a long time I listened to the same, old ballad being repeated over and over. It took such a while that I started to feel guilty. Reid probably wasn't lying after all, meaning he was now pulling Heero out of an important meeting for a question regarding something as unimportant as rented tuxedo's.

The music stopped and the phone was answered. The first thing I heard was a loud noise filling the background, it sounded like the drone of machinery.

"Hello?" I practically yelled into the receiver.

"Duo?" Heero was barely audible over the noise.

"What is that noise?"

He remained silent, I figured he probably hadn't heard me and repeated the question.

"The computers. I'm in the computer-room, they have to be cooled by fans or they overheat." (1)

"Can't you step out for a moment? It's really difficult to understand you."
"Why are you calling?" Heero obviously didn't take my request under advisement.

"Relena's ball is Saturday. We need tuxedo's. You should come home early so we can go rent two."

"I can't come home early."

I was afraid of that. "What about tomorrow?"

"I'll try. We'll go buy tuxedo's, not rent."

I was pleasantly surprised at that and almost thought I may have not heard him correctly through the noise. "Really, you don't mind?"

"I don't like wearing other people's clothes."

"Except mine." I said with a smile, visualizing him wearing my TAMPA HIGH shirt.

"What?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Never mind. I'll see you tonight."

"I might be late."

"Okay..." I said softly, disappointed.

"What?"

I shook it off and spoke loudly in the phone: "That's fine. Bye!"

He hung up without saying goodbye in return.

I was too excited about buying our own tuxedo's for the event to care and I was even more excited that we would be seeing the other pilots soon.

With a smile I said to myself: "I have a lot to tell them." I chuckled as I imagined their reactions.
He breathed so quietly. Like he didn't breathe at all. Like he was already dead. Like in spite of all my efforts, in spite of all my care, I had lost him. My eyes strained in the dawn, staring at his back. Sunlight barely filtered through the curtain but I could already tell it was going to a hot, sunny day. I watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he lay turned away from me. The silence with which he did everything sometimes took my breath away. I couldn't understand why he was always so quiet. Why he tiptoed through the apartment like a feline on the prowl. Why he put his empty cup of coffee so softly and delicately back down on the counter, to ensure it would make no sound. An eerie realization had come to me that I wished I could take back, that I wished I could forget: he wanted to go through this world unnoticed. He wanted no one to know he was there.

Maybe so no one would miss him when he's gone. When he leaves the world will just as silent.

My heart clenched and I rolled over onto my back, gasping for air, careful not to wake him. When he's gone... I thought grimly.

I reached for my alarm clock before the alarm could sound and I turned the timer off. I laid in bed a few more minutes, cocking my head to the side so I could look at him. It was easy to forget he had saved the world - twice - when you're looking at him while he looks so fragile yet calm in his sleep. Lost in his dreams. If J didn't choke those out of him.

I rose to my feet, got dressed in comfortable clothes and headed out for my daily bagel run.

"Fresh out of the oven!" The sweet lady announced with pride as she handed me a paper bag that felt warm to the touch. "Enjoy, my boy."

"I will, thank you." I could feel her watching me through her thick glasses as I left. Looking out for me, I liked to think. Halfway home I decided to open the bag, so the hot air could vent out instead of turning the bagels moist and soggy.

At home I remembered with a growl that I had emptied out the pot of peanut butter the previous morning and had neglected to do groceries since. I scoured the cabinets and the refrigerator, throwing away of pack of cheese that had gone bad as it had been forgotten. I decided on blueberry jelly, I had been given a free sample two weeks ago. The small glass pot was just enough to smear our two bagels. The taste was odd, nothing like anything I had tasted before. Not bad just... it wasn't peanut butter. I felt guilty towards Heero. I had had the entire week off and I didn't even do the groceries, too wrought with concerns regarding the dilemma I faced with Sookie.

I poured a second cup of coffee when the bedroom door opened and finished just in time to hand it to him. He took it with his right hand as his left brought the bagel to his mouth. He took a large bite, chewed, swallowed and then took a sip of coffee. This pattern he repeated till he was out of bagel and out of coffee. He never even reacted to the different taste.

I reminded myself not to get disappointed but instead; be happy. The reason he didn't say anything about the jelly was the same reason he didn't say anything about the cheese: he appreciated my efforts and didn't want to sound ungrateful. I boldly placed a loving kiss on his cheek.
Heero froze for a fraction of a second, then he moved over to the sink to put away his cup and his plate. Without a sound.

"Don't forget," I called before he could hurry out of the door, "tuxedo shopping and the mall closes at six O'clock."

"I'll try." He responded, shouldering his jacket.

"Heero," I pressed, walking up to him, "it's important. It's a freakin' ball, we need fancy suits."

He nodded. "I understand." Yet he did not make me any promises before he walked out of the door and left me alone for another day of busying myself warding off boredom and deep thought.

I used my time to catch up on the laundry which had not been my priority in a while and we were fast running out of decent clothes. I had toyed with the idea of neglecting the task sufficiently long that Heero would be forced to wear his old pair of spandex shorts again, for my entertainment, but seeing as laundry was one of the few contributions I had to make to our household, I could not stand the guilt of seeing the clothes pile and spill out of the hamper.

After the laundry I started to clean. I certainly wasn't the type to highly value a spotless environment, but I also was not the type to sit around. Like a true housewife I worked my way through the entire apartment, wiping the dust off every painfully empty surface and finishing my rounds with a halfhearted attempt to fluff the pillows of the couch, but it was hopeless. Heero's thrifty attitude had left us with a poor investment of a couch of which the cushions deflated and bore the impressions of our behinds on the seats and dents in the armrests where we leaned our elbows. It was pathetic, honestly. But I could not demand it to be any different than it was. It was Heero's money, it was only normal for him to be in charge of it. After all, it were his tedious hours behind a computer screen, both at home and at the office, that earned us every dollar.

I supposed it wouldn't be a bad idea if I found myself a part-time job, considering I was so far ahead with school work and found no subject a true challenge to pass. With those intentions I started surfing the web, but soon got sidetracked as I encountered news articles and life-style updates concerning the ball that Saturday.

There was a particular interest which set the base for all information regarding the two sources. The news articles' headlines mostly read: "Will Gundam Pilots reveal identity?" and polls with percentages of how many of the public would appreciate us doing so - frighteningly many. Other categories posed mundane and seemingly irrelevant questions such as: "What will Relena Peacecraft wear?" The frivolousness of those texts somewhat consolidated me, but still it felt like the whole world was frantically chasing our fading, shadowy footprints, trying to uncover who we were. Quatre was still a main suspect, but elegantly waved every question regarding his participation in the wars. Trowa was stoic, with his arms crossed in the background of most pictures of the blonde. I smiled knowing they had stuck together, like Heero and I had. Saving each other like we did, but I suddenly worried about WuFei, even though I never had a strong affinity with the fifth Gundam Pilot, seeing as we met only fleetingly. The same was true for Trowa, yet that was different. I assumed because he and I were connected through Quatre and Heero.

I curiously wondered who else would attend the highly publicized ball, whether invitations had been extended to brave, though anonymous fighters such as Hilde. I had my doubts. I strongly believed even we, as the Gundam pilots who saved the world, would not have been invited if the hostess hadn't developed a questioning crush on Heero. After all, when you strip away the Gundanium alloy, we were mere foot soldiers, readily sacrificed if need be. Heero's suicide attempt clearly illustrated that wry fact.
I shouldn't think about that any more, I told myself sternly, squeezing my eyes shut to erase the heart stopping images the screens in my Gundam had displayed, of Wing lighting up and bits and pieces - and Heero - being violently blown away.

I distracted myself with a much needed trip to the grocery store, where I was in luck, both the peanut butter and the beer were on sale; two for the price of one. I loaded the cart to make sure I would never again have to serve Heero a breakfast that might not be to his liking. The beer was starting to become a guilty pleasure which Heero still did not understand the appeal of. Though it still amused me to occasionally see him try when he accepted my offer of a sip of my bottle.

I was home just in time. It was four O'clock and Heero was supposed to be home any minute. I put away the groceries hastily, probably misplacing a large number of items. I waited by the door, anxious for him to get home and get to the mall, we had to take the underground train to the mall, that alone would take us twenty minutes.

It wasn't until four thirty that a keycard was sliced through the lock and the knob turned. The door swung open and even though I probably shouldn't have, I immediately berated him for being "so damn late". At his meek apology and downward cast gaze my heart immediately melted and anger dripped away to a soon forgotten puddle. I wrapped my arm around his neck and kissed him quickly. "It's okay, but we gotta hurry." I dragged him out of the apartment and down the stairs, which I figured would be faster than waiting for the agonizingly slow elevator.

We raced down the street towards the nearest underground station. When we descended the stairs into the fluorescently lit tunnel that bustled with human activity I was still holding his hand. I didn't even pay attention. I guided him down the escalator with a long, monotone string of "Excuse me. Excuse me." as we wormed our way through the static figures.

Overhead a computerized, though distinctly female voice announced with strange, misplaced tones and exaggerated articulation: "Ladies and gentlemen, the red line train of four forty will be departing from platform three in two minutes." We passed a downward tilted tunnel that read "Platform 1". I sped up our already frantic pace, even Heero had trouble keeping up with me, strangely. I could feel weight on my arm as I sometimes literally had to drag him along. Finally we reached a tunnel with an overhead sign that read: "Platform 3". In all my haste I had nearly missed it. We ran down the slope and I nearly stumbled. The red train was already at the platform. When we reached it I firmly placed myself in the opening of the door, hoping to be able to keep it open. Heero passed me and just as I followed him inside the doors closed with a beep and a screech. The train jolted away with a start, with both Heero and I losing our balance. As it built up speed we found ourselves the nearest seat and heavily sat ourselves down.

"Wow..." I appreciated after I had caught my breath. In the reflection of the black window I saw how red my face was. Heero looked alright, maybe that was why he had been straggling, because he didn't fully exert himself. "Just in time, huh buddy?" Only then did I release his hand to playfully punch him against his shoulder.

"Yeah."

Two stops later the tunnel ascended and the train naturally followed, creating a strange feeling in my gut, like I got when flying Death Scythe. Suddenly we were immersed in bright, blinding light. The train had come to a full stop by the time I could see. We had reached the above ground station of the mall, underneath a large glass roof, six stories above us, that spanned the size of a football field and allowed rich, late afternoon sunlight to pour in.

"Wow..." I repeated myself, as we exited the train. It certainly made for a dramatic first encounter. We were inside what appeared to be the main lobby, flanked by high glass walls on opposite sides
that housed the many department stores and fashion boutiques and on the other two glass facades to the outside world. In a transparent print on one of the outdoor facing facades was the shape of a crescent moon, because from a bird's perspective, that was the shape of the mall, with the glass section cutting it in two. Within the all-white space large trees grew towards the glass ceiling and crystals were suspended underneath the support beams with invisible wires, to create the illusion of brilliantly falling rain. "This is amazing." I commented as I stared around myself.

"I thought we were in a hurry." Heero deadpanned.

"Right." I took his hand again and lead the way, even though I didn't have a clue where to go. Fifteen minutes of wasted time later I found us the entrance to a luxurious men clothing store with an entire department completely devoted to expensive suits and tuxedos. Even though it was likely to be past our - Heero's - price point, we entered, not willing to risk wasting more time trying to find a more budget-appropriate store. We were instantly greeted by a helpful, if a little pushy, salesman who explained to us what was in style and what was more classic and demure. When he started talking tails and cufflinks he lost me and I interjected with a curt, bordering on impatient: "We just want to buy two tuxedos, or neat suits."

"That is fine, young sir." He guided us to a rack of suits that extended for several meters. "This is our selection of formal tuxedos and suits."

"Are these all different sizes or different designs?"

"Different designs." He was starting to get arrogant with us, casting annoyed glancing at my silent better half.

A dangerous glare from the master himself resolved that.

"We just want regular designs, nothing fancy."

"Color?"

Finally a question I could answer. "Black."

"Perhaps a dark grey suit for your friend, so you won't look identical. Besides, I really like grey on someone with such blue eyes."

I stared at the salesman incredulously. Was he flirting with my boyfriend right before my eyes? "Fine." I snapped, eager to get him to leave.

"I'll go get something in your sizes." He scurried away.

"What an ass." I whispered to Heero, fingering through the hangers.

"I thought he was very helpful." Heero said dryly, aimlessly looking around himself.

"Oh please." I reacted, still bothered by the attitude of the salesman, "Don't be so politically correct. Don't start. He's an ass. He was totally undressing you with his eyes."

Heero apparently did not understand what that insinuated and innocently replied: "Maybe that's part of his job description."

Laughter abruptly burst out of me "Well, you never know..."

The salesman returned, carrying in one hand a collection of dark grey suits and in the other
classical black tuxedos and some simple white button-ups. Draped over his shoulder was a colorful collection of ties, both regular and bow.

Oh God, I dreaded.

He escorted us both to the fitting rooms and sent us in with our respective sets. As I tried on the first suit I realized that in spite of the instant dislike I harbored for the man, he was expertly suited for his job. The entire tuxedo fitted me perfectly. I looked at the mirror. A sharply dressed adult looked back at me. We should be going to parties with our friends at the ages we were at, instead we were attending one of the most important social events hosted annually on earth. War or no war, the workings of the universe never ceased to be odd. When I stepped out Heero's curtain was still closed. The salesman started gushing over me, complimenting me on my physique and adjusting the suit on my shoulders even though it didn't require adjusting.

"An instant success!" He beamed at me.

"Yeah, it's good." I looked at myself in the mirror again, feeling alienated from myself. "How's it goin' in there, buddy?"

"Fine." Heero grumbled. It's not that he minded fitting clothes, it probably bothered him that the salesman had stuck around to observe. He ripped the curtain open. His face did not look pleased but the suit was perfect, only the jacket might need some minor taking in. The color was a dark anthracite that still contrasted nicely with the stark white of the button-up shirt and the salesman was right, the shade was a good combination with the deep blue of his eyes.

I had a goofy smile on my face and a twinkle in my eyes. Why was I suddenly envisioning a wedding? I snapped myself out of it and pulled him alongside me, so we could look at ourselves in the mirror. Together. There were two things I realized at that moment. The less significant one being that I had been quickly outgrowing Heero lengthwise. The second one was that I hoped to see us in suits again, for a very special day.

The salesman made the same observation that I had made, that Heero's jacket could be taken in a little. He pinched in the sides of the jacket, to illustrate what the end result would be. Heero did not like the closeness but contained himself. I told him we needed the suits by tomorrow, he assured us that it would be no problem, it would be done by morning.

"Now for the ties." He spread out the ties he had brought, along his arm, they dangled down like lifeless snakes.

"I have a tie." Heero commented.

"You're not wearing your Preventer tie."

"You're a Preventer?" The salesmen inquired with excited curiosity. "You seem a little young to be a Preventer."

"It's just a desk job."

"Still..." He wisely dropped the subject and tried again: "Ties! What do you prefer?"

As Heero made no comments I decided for the two of us. For Heero I picked a faded blue-grey, regular tie and for myself a black bowtie, simply because I thought bowties were funny and that ball was going to be serious enough as it was. At the same store we also bought fancy dress shoes.

Heero handed the cashier his credit card and paid the large sum of money for the high-end suits.
Yet we left with nothing. Overnight Heero's jacket would be tailored, both suits would be pressed and the shoes would be shined. I was to pick them up first thing in the morning. As we walked back to the station I commented proudly, looking at my watch: "Right on time." Around us shop doors started closing.

Heero grunted, disinterested.

"Are you looking forward to seeing the other pilots again tomorrow?"

He shrugged, not sure where to put his emotions.

"I'm really excited about seeing Quat again. You must have the same thing with Trowa."

"Why?" His adorable, genuinely questioning frown appeared between his eyebrows.

"Well, cuz you spent so much time together. And he saved your life and all."

"I should like him because he saved my life?" His tone became demanding.

"Well... Yeah, I think so." Before I could further explain myself he said accusingly:

"So you only like me because I saved your life?"

"What?" I stared into his angry eyes. I looked back kindly, lovingly and patiently, placing my hands on his shoulders, feeling the rigidity of his body. "What I meant was that you should at least be thankful. That creates some sort of bond. I am also grateful that you saved me. That you saved all of us. And maybe that is why I like you. But that's not the reason I love you."

"Then why do you?" He still sounded cynical.

"Because to me, you are perfect." I answered honestly and it appeared that I had struck a chord. I watched his eyes become vulnerable before they pointedly searched for something else to look at, avoiding eye contact.

"I am?" His voice didn't sound resentful anymore, just full of other, kinder emotions.

"Yes." I leaned in to kiss him, despite of the slowly diminishing crowd surrounding us and he let me. I kissed him, open mouth, with my hands cupping his face and I didn't care who saw us. In fact, I wanted them to see and I wanted to pause to announce that Heero Yuy, the one that personally saved all their lives, was the one that was accepting my kiss and then merrily continue. But I knew better than that. So I just savored in the small victory. The victory of overcoming my own concerns, the victory of Heero allowing me that opportunity. I realized, with a sigh as I parted, what a great day it had been. Even the memory of us running like crazy through the underground station suddenly seemed poetically romantic. And I could reminisce fondly about the red hotness of my cheeks and the sweat down my brow as we had stormed through the crowd like just any other pair of normal teens, late for their train. I told him sentimentally: "Thank you for sharing this afternoon with me."

Heero replied, confused: "You're welcome."

The red train arrived, heading in the direction we came from. We got on board and took a seat secluded from the other passengers. As Heero sat down next to me in the aisle seat, I warmly placed my hand over his thigh, my fingers briefly caressing the smooth fabric and the hard muscles underneath my palm. When we were almost home, Heero surprised me, caught me off guard. I had been staring out into the darkness, trying to ignore my own reflection, occasionally stealing glances
at Heero, stoically looking up ahead. Then I felt his hand touch mine. First just his fingers, exploring, finding my hand tentatively. He was purposefully looking away. I stared at him through the mirror image of the window. He covered my hand with his own, securing it in place.

The train ride back home was too short. Too soon we arrived back at our destination. This time when we walked through the network of wide tunnels we were in no hurry and there was no need for me to guide him, but I held his hand regardless. He never once shied away from me. I happily chalked another victory up on the mental scoreboard. A scoreboard I could not admit to keeping when the victories were so few and far between, but soon I prided it.

At home I cooked us a simple dinner, but set the table - though we usually ate in front of the TV to fill the silence - and poured us each a glass of wine, from a bottle I had carefully selected with the help of a shop clerk. I called Heero, who had quickly disappeared into the office after our arrival back home. Before he seated himself across from me at the dinner table he undid his tie but left it hanging around his neck. The fingers of his right hand worked to unbutton the two buttons and he stretched his neck as if he was freed. He spotted the glass of wine by his plate and his eyes turned questioning.

"To celebrate." I explained, elaborating as no comprehension dawned on his face: "That we are going to see our friends again."

Heero didn't say anything, but I thought maybe his silence had more meaning than words possibly could have.

"You're not excited to see them tomorrow?" I worried he was so obsessed with distancing himself from the war and becoming normal that he was having difficulty accepting them as characters in that very past he was trying to deny.

He thought about what to say, making sure to formulate his sentence carefully. "I just don't think friends is the right word."

My eyebrows raised involuntarily. "Why?"

Heero shrugged. Not because he didn't know, but because he didn't want to say.

I repeated my question, more pressingly, finding myself becoming defensive of the good characters the other pilots were, even though it was Heero sitting across from me and I would never defend anyone over him.

"I just don't know them. They are just comrades."

"But I am your friend."

"Yes but-"

"But?"

"You're different." He admitted, his index fingers touching the stem of the wineglass - especially purchased for the occasion - in a nervous gesture.

"Different?" I frowned, I didn't think "different" was a good thing.

"You're special." He answered quickly, like he didn't want me to think for a second longer that he thought badly of me.
I smiled, somewhat relieved. Special was good, right? I decided to ask.

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Yes. Very good."

That felt good to hear. My heart warmed and felt full with the abrupt inflow of happiness.

We ate in silence till Heero took his first sip of wine.

"Taste good?"

"I prefer water." That would be "no".

I chuckled at the irony, remembering the biblical story of Jesus turning water into wine. If Heero had been dining at that table, I mused with a growing smirk, he would have given the goblet of wine - magically created - back to the Holy Son and would have asked: "Excuse me, can you turn it back?"

"What's funny?"

I gave a short laugh. "You."

Though his face remained indifferent, his eyes lit up. He tried to hide it behind his bangs as he looked down at his plate, but I had seen it. He seemed to pride himself for being thought of as funny. It was normal, after all, for a teen to be funny from time to time.

We ate, I watched TV, Heero worked in the office, but left the door open and what I had always considered an annoying sound in the past - the ticking of the keys - I welcomed, enjoying it as a background to some obscure science fiction series that had me laughing at the costumes. It created a closeness between us even though we were in separate rooms, engaged in separate activities. Then we collectively decided it was time for bed.

I snuggled under the covers and breathed in the scent of hot, humid air as Heero showered, as always with the door wide open. I heard the water hit his body and the shower stall floor and focused on it like the fall of rain on the rooftop. Only it was filtered water falling on a fine specimen of mankind. I buried my face into my pillow and groaned, haunted by images that I had been dealing with for a while now, but Heero wasn't nearly ready to know of their existence inside my head; on my retina; in my dreams.

It was for the best, it was embarrassing anyway.

Again Heero dressed behind the closet door, while his hair was still damp and his body still steaming. When he emerged a tenseness shot through my body and I had the illogical fear that in his perfection he had acquired the ability to read minds.

He was wearing the spandex shorts I had been wishing for him to wear.

I was staring wide-eyed, ignoring all my inhibitions as I had the innate sense that I'd better look closely and remember it well, like the hyper-vigilance you apply when you are experiencing something that is "once in a lifetime". I don't know why at that moment I had a particular epiphany, as I had been watching him wear those shorts for many days during the war, but I suddenly realized he couldn't possibly be wearing underwear underneath the shorts without it showing. And nothing - of that sort - was showing.

Oh my God, I'm turning into a horny teen, I thought.
Heero's fine physique was then covered by his sheets, obstructing my view. He snapped me out of my hormonal rampage when he announced: "I won't be going to work tomorrow."

Excitedly - excitement of a different kind - I responded: "Really?" I had honestly expected him to stubbornly go to work at least in the morning and likely also through the afternoon.

"Yeah. It's not worth it going in for just a short period of time. Besides, I can't risk being late again, like today." His tone was matter-of-fact, like he had been rehearsing it.

"We don't have to leave till seven." I reminded, him, though obviously not with the intention of changing his mind.

"I know."

"Okay. Well, great then! We can spend the day together." I beamed a bright smile at him. When he looked at me with a blank expression I said: "Thank you for today. It was a great day."

Heero nodded and then rolled over, away from me.

I switched off the light and after the darkness settled I told him I loved him.

"I love you too." he replied without hesitation.

The perfect end to a perfect day.

Not going to work sadly meant working at home all day, I would find out. As I got out of bed at my regular, early hour, I accidentally tripped, stupidly over my own feet and the stumble had awoken Heero. Instead of going back to sleep like most people would, he got out of bed, got dressed in comfortable clothes and booted up his laptop in our little office. Even before I had served him coffee and peanut butter with bagel, his fingers were abusing the keyboard, his eyes narrow and serious as they focused on the screen, probably discerning a complicated string of code.

"I'm going to get breakfast." I announced after the longer wake-up period that I required.

He retorted with a mere acknowledging grunt.

It was going to be another beautiful day, I noted, walking outside casually, with my hands in my pockets. If I didn't know any better I'd suspect Relena of ordering the perfect weather for her perfect ball, but earth wasn't like the colonies. It was maliciously eclectic and uncompromising. I loved that about earth.

I reached the bakery and knocked on the door. Soon the elderly owner came shuffling over with a smile to welcome me inside.

"Duo! My sweet boy, come inside, please, come inside!" She practically pulled me along by her hold on the front of my shirt.

"Good morning." I said breathlessly as she tugged me along. She left me standing by the counter and then disappeared into the backroom. She came back a few seconds later with a paper bag larger than the one she usually gave me. As I accepted it, I noticed it was heavier too. I eyed her questioningly.

"I give you two bagels each today, yes?" The odd, old lady said, bearing her yellow teeth in a
smile. "Special day today."

I frowned "Special day?"

"Yes!" She smile wider, already ushering me out the door. "Special day for heroes! Special party for special heroes!"

My jaw dropped. Did she...? I had been pushed out on the sidewalk before I knew it. An old, wrinkled hand with short fingers reached out to me and I was introduced to the new sensation of having my cheek pinched, like I knew old ladies liked to do, if I were to believe the stereotypical view portrayed by holiday movies.

"You are a good boy. Good boys shouldn't have to pay for bagels. Have a nice evening!" She released my cheek and closed the door, soon disappearing in the back again.

Dazed I walked back to the apartment. All thought processes were frozen with astonishment. When I reached home and went inside, I stood in the doorway to the office till Heero finally asked me what was wrong. With a lasting perplexed expression I said: "I think the woman from the bakery knows we are Gundam pilots."

He arched one eyebrow, he seemed surprised but not concerned. I didn't know yet how I felt. Still deep in a dumbstruck state I prepared breakfast. I brought Heero his plate and a cup of coffee. He thanked me, that was new, but I could only process one flabbergasting fact at a time. I seated myself in the windowsill with the breakfast I had made for myself. The gravity of it started to hit home as I remembered the many news articles and broadcasts determined to unearth our identity, even willing to offer a reward to the wily detective that was capable of uncovering the truth. Evident from the blatant lack of paparazzi and news vans outside the apartment complex, the old lady had not sold us out, even though she could have. Even though it would have earned her monetary gain. She did not rat us out. It was stunning. She had known all along and still found the love in her heart to provide us free food and keep our heavy secret. She had found the love needed to shelter and support killers, rogues...

I felt like I could cry, though the tears welling up were not tears of sadness, but tears of happiness and gratitude. I decided to express myself differently. I walked into the office and wrapped my arms around Heero from behind, joining us in a strong embrace. His fingers stilled over the keyboard after he had clicked away the screen of confidential information.

"Duo?" He asked eventually.

"Yeah?" I mumbled against his shoulder, slightly rubbing my cheek against the soft cotton of his thin shirt, feeling the warmth of his body underneath.

"... Why?..."

I sighed happily, breathing in his scent. "She knows." I said, elated.

"Yes?" He still did not understand.

"She knows and she doesn't hate us." I whispered.

Heero said nothing, I think because he didn't know what to say, still not sure what this all implied and why I would react so emotionally. But he let me hug him and honored me by not ignoring me and continuing his work. He sat still in his seat till I relinquished my hold on him.

Once I had regained composure I sat myself down at the desk across from Heero and booted up my
own laptop. It hummed to life with eerie cries of an animal near death, panting on the sun baked earth of the savannah whilst vultures picked at it. I opened the school's email service and logged in. I clicked "new mail" and typed without hesitation the simple but meaningful words:

*I'm sorry too. We'll talk. I miss you too. Duo.*

I scrolled through the list of recently used email addresses and in the short list quickly found: **ID6003886tampahigh (sshaw).**

A weight was lifted off my chest when I sent the email. I nodded reassuringly at myself and then announced I would head to the mall to pick up our suits. Heero didn't offer to tag along with me, I don't know why I had expected him to. His focus on the screen was like that of a bloodhound on a scent-trail. I left him alone, furiously typing away at his laptop, not even responding at my last call of goodbye.

I leisurely walked down the street, still thinking of the sweet woman and then thinking bout Sookie. A stranger's acceptance of our past made me hopeful Sookie would be accepting as well. She was, after all, a friend and not someone to conform to the rules of society. I should have had more faith in her from the start but I realized there was no use regretting the time that had been wasted. I simply looked forward to seeing her again, though it created a slight, nervous knot in my stomach, I was eager at the prospect of having "the situation" resolved and excited about catching up on lost time: telling her about the progress between me and Heero. She was really the only one in my life with whom I could share that news and have her share in my excitement. I had missed that. I missed it more with every step I took.

I just missed the train I was aiming for, so I took a seat on one of the metal benches lining the platform and patiently waited the fifteen minutes till the next. The arrival of the red train was announced by the mechanical voice from the speakers overhead, but her words were drowned out by the rumble of the approaching train, magnified to a deafening pitch by the enclosure of the tunnel walls.

It was a quiet ride to the mall. There were barely any people in the coupe with me and they all whispered to keep their conversations private.

I was prepared for the blinding light that time around and as a precaution I squinted my eyes when I felt that familiar feeling my stomach as the train reared upwards, back towards the surface of the earth. The mall was much more crowded than it had been the evening before, but that was to be expected of a Saturday. I wormed my way through the bodies that seemed to be aimlessly moving around, lost in the wide open space. By memory I found my way back to the store and was helped by a saleswoman who took the receipt we had been given yesterday and disappeared into the back. I waited at the counter, by myself. The area was void of people, the only customers were in the casual men's apparel section in the front of the store, there was no one in the suits and tuxedo section. I observed wives picking clothes and dressing their husbands like they were the dolls they used to play with as children, from a safe distance. I noted I had behaved quite the same way when I had went shopping with Heero that one time and I berated myself for doing that.

"Sir?"

I turned around to see the saleswoman had returned with our suits, ties and shoes. The shoes she handed over to me in two large bags, the suits were hanging from a hanger and were draped with protective plastic. I fumbled to find an efficient way to carry it all. She stressed that I should not fold the suits or they would wrinkle. I wasn't really bothered by a few wrinkles but I took her advise nevertheless and exited the store, with one hand held at shoulder-height to keep the suits straight and off the ground and the other dangling heavily with the two large bags containing
cumbersome shoeboxes. The overall unwieldy total package created extra difficulties maneuvering through the crowd, but I managed and after dancing through the people and the constant "Excuse me"'s I dropped myself down on a long, marble bench by the platform and waited for the train. I carefully draped the suits over the back of the bench and protectively placed the two bags between my feet. I noticed people were looking at me, I could read the questions in their eyes: "What is a young teen doing with tuxedos?".

This young teen is to attend the most prestigious ball because he happened to have saved the world. I rolled my eyes at them. With a smile I said to myself: I happen to be a special hero. Never before was I as tempted as I was at that moment to scream from the top of my lungs that I was a Gundam pilot. Sometimes I just felt like my efforts during the war should have earned me some respect which I had never been granted because of all the veils of secrecy. Of course this egotistical view did not erase my awareness of the fact that the secrecy was to protect us, but sometimes it felt cruel to have done such an amazing thing and not even be thanked for it. Heero probably wasn't plagued by such selfish emotions, even though he made the biggest sacrifices of the five of us.

I instantly felt guilty.

The train arrived and I went back home.

I killed the afternoon by preparing a grand lunch for Heero and I. He paused his devotion to his work to emerge from the office and share a warm lunch with me. I figured we'd better eat well in the afternoon since we would likely not have enough time in the evening to have a proper dinner. That's what the extra two bagels were for.

Time soon came to start preparing ourselves. I had growing nerves in my stomach, they were excited nerves, but also a little anxious, afraid things would not live up to my expectations. I called into the office that Heero should get ready. He replied with his classic "Hn."

I got dressed in front of the full length mirror on the closet door, watching myself become someone different and familiar at the same time. More mature and static but also the tuxedo was really no different from the armor my Gundam used to provide. It served as protection, as way for me to become invisible and unbeatable. I experienced mixed feelings regarding the fact.

"Heero!" I yelled when I was struggling with my bow tie and Heero had yet to leave his laptop.

"Hn?"

"I - Jesus!" I jumped a foot high up in the air when I had looked over my shoulder to shout something and he was suddenly standing right next to me, like he had appeared out of thin air. "Don't do that." I pleaded.

"Sorry." His tone was flagrantly unapologetic.

"Get dressed." I said when a few minutes later he was still staring at me with his discerning eyes. "Your suit's there." I nodded towards the package of plastic hanging down from the other, ajar closet door.

"I noticed." He walked around me and raised himself up on the tips of his toes to get the hook of the hanger off the top of the door. He spread it out over his neatly made bed and zipped open the plastic cover, then he started undressing himself.

I stubbornly directed my attention at the task of tying my tie, but sometimes couldn't help but steal glances as he stripped down naked, put on a new pair of underwear and then started dressing into
the suit.

First he hoisted the pants up his long legs and fastened it around his narrow waist. They fitted him as perfectly as the tailored slacks he wore to work everyday. Then he casually donned the white button-up shirt. By then I was shamelessly staring as I saw his shoulders disappear underneath the thin fabric and then watched the muscles move underneath as his arms worked to button up the shirt and tuck it into his pants. There was something about watching him stuff his hand down the front of his pants - if only to tuck in his shirt - that was obscenely erotic. He slipped his strong arms into the jacket that was expertly tailored to suit him and then turned to face me.

"You look great." I appreciated breathlessly, amused by the way his haphazard bangs contrasted the tidy, sleek look of the suit.

"You do too." He said without looking at me, buttoning up his jacket. He reached down for his tie but I grabbed his wrist and stopped him.

"Let me do the tie, please?"

He frowned and pointedly looked at my loose bowtie. "You can't even tie your own."

"That's a bowtie, that's different." I grumbled, already wrapping the faded blue tie around his neck and moving it around to create the desired knot.

As soon as I was finished, though I made sure to take my time, Heero reached up his hands and did my bowtie. I reveled in the exchange.

"There." I said softly as he finished adjusting the bow in front of my throat.

"There." He repeated even quieter. He lowered his hands back down to his sides.

The moment became intimate, with an understated romance and understanding between us. I didn't say anything, for fear of shattering something that I wish not be broken, that I wish to last forever and cherish forever. Looking deep into his eyes - never failing to be stunned by the wild color variations in his ever changing irises - I felt he, too, respected that delicacy and handled it as best he could with fingers not yet suited to cup something fragile.

But in the end, it dropped. He broke our gaze to look at our feet, at our socks. Then he looked back up at me with a clear, mundane question.

I was disappointed, but I did not let it show. I was just appreciative of the small moment. "The shoes are in the living room." I said and together we walked to the couch, sat down and started tying our shiny shoes.

When I was done I walked over to the refrigerator to retrieve the invitation that had been staring at me for the past month every time I opened the door for a snack. At the bottom of the letter, in the same, fine calligraphy, were the more technical aspects of the event; a time and a location where we were expected. The address I did not recognize, but it was still in town. I knew for a fact the nouveau-Victorian castle - Relena's favorite for hosting lavish parties while discussing world problems like famine and natural disasters - was several miles out of Tampa. I naturally figured we were required to meet up with an escort at a point of rendezvous and they would bring us to the ball.

Nervousness fluttered in my stomach like butterflies. It was an alien, but welcome feeling. I called a taxi to take us to the location. As the driver rang the doorbell to signal his arrival, Heero and I met at the front door. I looked at him and he looked back. Holding his intense gaze I extended my
arm out, my hand blindly searching for his. When our fingers met, the touch was brief and shy, an open invitation. My heart burst with feelings of obscene happiness - I never thought I could be as happy as I was then, or even should - when his tentative fingers curled around my own.

We walked out, hand in hand. It was perfect.
The night was crisp, almost cool as the warmth the sun had left as a present, on every grain of sand, blade of grass and leaf of the trees, was ascending back into space, carried along by a gentle breeze. I looked up, but there were no stars to see, only tall buildings lighting up the air, preventing the light from the stars to reach my eyes.

The polite taxi chauffeur held the door open for Heero and then walked towards the other side and held the door open for me, closing it as I pulled my leg up into the vehicle and then the bearded man took the drivers seat in front of me. I noted with a secret smile the Hawaiian bobble head doll on the dashboard and the beaded rosary dangling down from the rear view mirror. In an exotic accent, living up to all stereotypes, the driver asked us where we were heading. I told him the address, immediately earning a frown.

"That's industrial area, only offices and factories." He spoke, eyeing our expensive suits through the small mirror, adjusting it with short, stocky, dirty fingers to peer at us even better.

"I know."

He smiled an ugly, but inexplicably endearing smile. Of the three teeth he had left - that I could see - one was gold, another was a black, the last was a faded yellow. I suddenly became aware of the heavy smell of nicotine smoke that hung in the air. Smoking was an outdated but persisting habit. I worried the scent might get caught in our suits, but I realized I shouldn't fret, I had no time, we had to leave. The man eased his foot onto the pedal and the car slowly started moving, pulling into the traffic. It was silent for a while till he smiled his smile again and made eye contact with me through the mirror. "You kids wear tuxes to raves nowadays?"

Knowing he may have just offered the only reasonable explanation why two young men were heading into an industrial area on Saturday night in high-end tuxes and more importantly: not willing to argue with the man or explain the situation as it was, I consented.

He chuckled. "I am getting old." He proclaimed, barely minding the traffic as he weaved the car through, from lane to lane. He was running red lights and cutting in front of other cars. Even from the perspective of a former Gundam pilot, his driving was reckless and dangerous, but as Heero said nothing, I kept quiet too. "We, my generation, I mean, used to go to raves in torn jeans and shimmery shirts..." he looked at his watch, completely ignoring the honks of cars, "much later too."

"Times change." I offered absentmindedly.

"They sure do, young man. They sure do." He seemed wistful. "It's a different world now. Especially since the war came to an end."

I felt my limbs stiffen a bit, afraid the topic would spark his memory of the event that was hosted tonight and that he might connect the dots.

He didn't. He continued to talk about the old days, which he referred to lovingly and with the occasional dramatic hand gesture, sometimes letting both hands off the wheel. I didn't really listen to him, feeling like that wasn't the point. He didn't need me to listen, may not have even wanted me
to, he just wanted to talk and relive his youth. I cast glances sideways at Heero. He was looking out the window. The yellow hue of the streetlights gave his face a warm glow. Wisps of hair were dancing around his sharp, exotic features, moved by the wind streaming in through the ajar window - to aid the smell, I presumed. He had his eyes narrowed to protect the intense orbs from the draft.

He looked stunning, I shamelessly admitted to myself. I wanted to sneak my hand across the seat and take hold of his in the darkness, but I was afraid our chauffeur might notice and might disapprove. I resisted the urge with difficulty. Suddenly I wasn't looking forward to the festivity any more. I wanted to go home, change into comfortable sweatpants and shirts and just sit on the couch together, shoulder to shoulder.

I would have to consolidate myself with the fact that Relena would absolutely hate seeing us together, I thought with a smirk that felt familiar on the face of the God of Death.

The traffic diminished, till we were all alone on the road, surrounded by dark, concrete buildings. The light of the streetlamps was an eerie blue.

"Here we are." Our driver announced, parking the car at the curb across the street from a large elevated parking lot. He nodded towards the heavily set building that seemed to rest on the earth's crust like a terrible weight. "That's it."

I peered through the window. Five thick slabs of concrete, one suspended over the other by thick support beams of moldy concrete. The gated entrance was locked with heavy chains. The building had obviously been long abandoned. I narrowed my eyes to read a sign by the entry, white letters on a red background: NO TRESPASSING. DEMOLITION SITE. The desolate scene that was being created caused a lump in my throat. Doubt welled up inside of me. Was still really the address? Maybe I had misread it? My train of though screeched to a halt as I heard a car door open to my right and I looked just in time to see Heero confidently get out. Composing myself, feeding off my partners determination, I paid the driver, giving him a generous tip because it was appropriate to do so and then got out.

The sound of my door being thrown shut echoed off the buildings lining the abandoned street. I followed Heero, taking a stand by his side as he studied the old parking garage. The yellow cab started to roll away and then disappeared around a corner.

We didn't have to wait long.

No more than a second after the taxi was out of sight a man appeared, emerging from the shadow of one of the thick pillars supporting the second floor of the parking garage. He stepped over the low concrete barrier circling the ground parking lot and crossed the street, approaching us with a steady, manly gait. He looked very official in his tailored, black suit and with dark sunglasses - that seemed quite counterproductive considering the sun had almost completely set - on his large nose. His face was square and angular and as he got closer I spotted the earplug in his left ear, with a see-through coiled chord going to the back of his neck and disappearing into his stiff collar. The man was a giant with long legs, muscled torso, wide set shoulders and a thick neck. He stopped several steps away from us and asked with a heavy voice: "Mister Yuy? Mister Maxwell?"

I bit my tongue before I could jest: "No, I'm the fairy godmother and this is Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer." I just nodded, awkwardly.

"Come with me." He turned on his heels and walked back with the same large strides. To keep pace with him I was jogging more than I was walking. We crossed the street back to the parking garage and climbed back over the low barrier. I figured a car was waiting for us somewhere deep
within the shadows.

We disappeared into the darkness and I was acutely aware of the many tons of condemned concrete. over our heads. I spotted holes in the pillars, walls and ceiling. Holes drilled for the explosives that would come later. To calm myself down I started doing equations in my head, calculating the amount of explosives - of several kinds of explosives - it would take to make this building crumble and kneel. We stopped in front of the steel doors of the elevator, making me frown, obviously my car-getaway theory had been premature.

The agent brought his wrist to his mouth and spoke something to the end of his sleeve. Seconds later the building came to life with a hum; the lights switched on, one of them sparking ominously, like in a bad horror flick, and the overhead display indicated that the elevator was on the third floor. We waited for it to come down and then stepped inside.

The inside was completely stripped. The control panel was disfigured beyond recognition but the elevator started moving without the agent ever pressing a button. I noticed that next to Heero - who shrunk daily in comparison to me - the agent was impossibly tall.

"So what's your name?" I asked to kill the silence as the elevator slowly moved up.

"Agent Levelt." He answered curtly.

"Preventers?" I innocently inquired.

"Yes."

I turned to Heero. "You know him?"

Heero shrugged. "I read his file."

Of course he did. "So, agent Levelt," I continued, "is this a typical Saturday night for you?"

Finally the stiff agent turned to look at me. His eyebrows disappeared behind his sunglasses as he frowned deeply at my misplaced attempt to make small talk. "My typical Saturday night is confidential."

I quirked an eyebrow. Was he messing with me? Was I missing a pun or was he being serious? I didn't ask, I simply accepted his answer, albeit mysterious and leaving me curious. I was not surprised, I had expected a "confidential" to pop up, seeing as it is Heero's favorite word to describe what he does as a Preventer.

Silence fell between us as the elevator climbed agonizingly slowly. Agent Levelt turned away from me, I couldn't see anything but his tall, broad shoulders. The man was built like a tank but I had a feeling it was just a macho charade, inside beat a tiny heart.

"So what's with the glasses?" I asked with a grin.

Agent Levelt didn't respond but I noticed a red hue tinting his ears.

I didn't say anything more, just quietly snickering.

Finally the doors opened. Fresh air rushed in. We stepped out onto the top slab of concrete, five stories above ground, underneath a clear sky. The red sun was at the horizon, barely casting any rays on this hemisphere. Somewhere else on earth, dawn was breaking. I always thought that was pretty amazing.
I smiled when I spotted bright stars dotting the dark blue cloak of the night. On L2 they simulate everything from sunshine to snow, but they can't simulate the stars. Stars are a privilege exclusive to Earth. I looked back down, around myself. All the parking spots were empty. The possibility of a car-pick up was fast becoming an improbability. I was about to ask what we were waiting for when a nearing rumble answered every question I might have had. It wasn't lightening, it was too monotonous and grew louder and louder, to a deafening roar. I scanned the skies but the sun came to no aid as it shied away behind the horizon. I didn't see it until it was so close my jacket was whipping around my body and in the wind and I could feel my braid moving wildly, tugging at the back of my head.

The black silhouette of a large military helicopter hung overhead, the rotors circling loudly and dangerously. I felt a strong hand land on my shoulder and pull me back a few steps as the chopper started to descend onto the concrete flooring of the garage. Normally a helicopter had several flashing lights and a bright front light, to ensure it would be seen in the dark sky. All of those were absent as this machine was clearly meant to go unseen, but not unheard.

The side door that read PREVENTERS was swung open and a man in a black flight suit and helmet with shaded front gestured us to come closer. The hand that was still on my shoulder guided me to the helicopter. I ducked my head, even though the blades were too high to ever hit me. As I raised my right foot and planted it on the metal floor of the helicopters cabin I realized that in spite of all my adventures, I had never been on a helicopter. I climbed into it's belly, awkwardly and took the seat that was appointed to me. Heero climbed in effortlessly, making it look elegant. He sat next to me. We moved our hands to strap ourselves in and then the guy on board handed us headphones with a little mike at the front. Then he moved back to the door and exchanged some word with Agent Levelt - who did have to duck his head to prevent scalping. Levelt looked at us, waved and then walked back. The door was shut and immediately the blades were sped up to create more lift.

I looked at Heero, grinned at him and gave him the thumbs up. He seemed completely comfortable. When I looked out the window we were already far above the ground. So high the ground looked like the starry sky had: dark blue with a few bright lights.

Through the headphones - that not only protected our ears from the noise of the engine and rotors but also served as communication - I heard the cracked voice of the pilot welcoming us on board. And he added "Long time no see, Yuy." The other guy that was in the midsection with us was smiling at us.

I knew better than to ask Heero how they knew each other, expecting nothing more informative than a: "That's confidential."

We headed North, I recognized, even though I knew Relena's favorite mingling-mansion was to the South. It was a standard procedure to check for any tails and shake if necessary. Ten minutes into the flight we started to turn. We didn't fly back over the city, but around it to avoid detection.

Beneath us the world momentarily turned pitch black as we left the city behind and passed over surrounding forest and countryside. To the far left I saw a string of equally interspaced lights, piercing through the blackness in a straight line. In the night the lights of the highway were like jewelry on the black velvet surface of Mother Earth, like an elegant pearl necklace draped across her regal neck.

"We're almost there." The pilot sounded in my ears. "I'm going to make a hard left turn for my approach, if you look out the window you'll see the castle."

I felt the chopper turn as indicated and my intestines turned with it. "Hard" was a modest
description for the sudden change of course. As the pilot had announced, through the window the modern built mansion - aptly referred to as "The Castle" - with a classical facade appeared in soft lights like the gentle flame of a candle. The helicopter turned forward again and the mansion was out of sight. We remained at a high altitude till the aircraft came to a halt, hovering in a single spot and then began a rapid descent. I looked at Heero, then past him, out the window, where I saw the mansion once more.

The landing was careful and precise by any standard, but still felt like a sharp jolt.

The patch of grass in which the pilot had expertly maneuvered his craft was not a space I had felt comfortable landing in, in something as delicate as a helicopter. The open space was encircled with tall trees that looked like menacing ghouls in yellow spotlights to a backdrop of blue moonlight. We were in the back of the expansive botanical garden that stretched out behind the mansion, like a little secret it kept behind it's back, while at the front paparazzi had flocked in hopes to capture the event.

The agent opened the side door, where two more agents were waiting, beckoning us to come outside. As I crawled out, I handed my headphones to the agent on board. I was careful not to damage my suit on any of the sharp metal edges. I had come this far, I'd be damned to ruin the suit. Heero wouldn't be pleased either, certainly he expected these suits to last our lifetimes. Cheapo, I thought with a smirk.

Heero jumped out after me and though I'm sure he was not impressed, as he almost never is, I took my time to appreciate the building. The mansion was built up of large stones, set heavily in the landscape. All the windows were high and arched and had details of glass-in-lead. Along the entire length of the house was an elevated stone terrace where the festivities were centered. White Chinese lanterns were strung down from the trees and the walls creating magical lighting. As far away as we were, I could hear the collective mumble of the crowd.

I was suddenly nervous, standing there as nothing more than a fancy dressed street rat. I felt dangerously out of my element but I knew better than to let the men of stature intimidate me. They were nothing more than fancy dressed hypocrites after all.

The two agents on the ground escorted us to stone steps at the edge of the grass clearing. The steps led up to a long stone pathway that would take us to the terrace. The banisters were wrapped in Christmas lights.

Once we were up on the pathway I noticed a slim figure had come to greet us.

For the occasion Relena had donned a long black dress, with boat-neck and high side slit, exposing her left leg as she walked. The outfit of course wasn't complete without the addition of a large satin and velvet, pink flower pinned just under her right shoulder. Her hair was up in her Queen-of-the-world-'do. Her eyes were murderous as they fell on me.

She stopped in front of us, batted away the death threats with long, fake eyelashes and welcomed us sweetly. "Heero, Duo... It's so nice you both could make it."

Neither Heero or I offered her a hand to shake or extended an invitation for a hug and Relena - surprisingly - knew better than to force the niceties.

"Please," She turned back towards the mansion, revealing the low cut back of her dress, "follow me."

We did and behind us the helicopter took off.
"So," She started, with her back towards us as we followed her down the path, "you two live together?" She looked over her shoulder with an unreadable expression.

"Yeah." I didn't elaborate because I knew wondering about it would drive her crazy.

"That's nice."

"It is."

She looked back at me and was visibly displeased with my smirk.

I didn't know when the animosity between Relena and I had started. I don't think there is a specific point in time to name. Maybe it had been a first-sight kind of thing. She had been very annoying. Of course, that all seemed paradoxal know. If Relena hadn't been there, blocking my shot, I would have likely killed Heero before I learned of his identity and before I had the opportunity to grow to love him. In a way I had Relena to thank for everything that was allowed to spark and develop between us and indirectly her role in the war was more substantial that I had thought. Yet I could not bring myself to like the girl. Even though rationally I had no convincing reasons to dislike her, aside from her brazenly obvious superior attitude and the way she shamelessly flaunted the wealth she had inherited by blood, rather than earned. The street rat in me opposed this, was disgusted by it. The rational part of me could only submit.

She does have a nice ass though. I thought with a chuckle, stealing glances at her black-draped curves.

With two final steps up, we were on the terrace. The crowd paid us little heed and I was comfortable with that. I looked at their faces, they were all unfamiliar.

"Are the other pilots here yet?"

"Yes, they are here. But first I want you to meet someone."

"You" she didn't mean in the plural sense, but I followed her anyway as she took Heero by the hand and dragged him to a particular man amidst the others. He was old with a grey beard and receding hairline, but his eyes were wise and his body was tall, strong and proud. Other older men had gathered around him and seemed enthralled by every word that fell off his lips in between his tiny sips of expensive champagne.

"Prime minister Leighton!" Relena said, injecting herself into the circle that had surrounded the man, pulling Heero along and I entered in their wake. "This is the brave young man I wanted you to meet." She presented Heero proudly.

Heero looked uncomfortable and stiff, I wish I could help him but I knew we had to suffer a few of these moments during the evening. There was no escaping it.

"Heero Yuy." Her voice turned reverent and breathless with admiration.

"Heero Yuy?" The man repeated. He reached his hand out, extending it into the empty space halfway between Heero and him.

Heero looked at the man's face with a stoic expression, then down at his hand with his questioning frown, then back up at his face again. He said nothing.

Relena chuckled, trying to brush Heero's strange and impolite behavior off as a joke. "Heero this is Charles Leighton. Prime minister of ESUN." She chuckled again. "Listen to me introducing you,
Charles! Of course you are a man that needs no introduction! I think the same goes for Heero." She gave Heero a nudge, urging him to say something.

"Hello." My boyfriend said monotonously and very much unimpressed with the company he was in.

"Hello." Charles Leighton said back and he smiled.

I instantly decided I liked him.

"I owe you a well-meant thank you, young man," Charles spoke, "You are the reason why ESUN was possible. You laid the foundation of all the wonderful work we have been able to do, uniting Earth with the colonies and creating peace."

Relena nodded.

Heero just looked at him. He never liked to be thanked for what he did, because he knew of the horrible secrets surrounding the Gundam Pilots - and him in particular - that had been swept under the rug. People continuously seemed to forget that to obtain that peace that they reveled at, we had to kill sons, brothers, father and also daughters, sisters and mothers, with our bare hands.

You don't thank for that.

"You must be Duo Maxwell." Charles turned to me and we shook hands. "It's a privilege to meet both of you."

I was somewhat prided to be recognized, even though I felt like my contribution paled in comparison to Heero's.

"Do you follow politics?" Charles asked us both.

Heero didn't answer, he seemed frozen with discomfort. I just shrugged. I did, but it would start a conversation that would earn me angry glares. There were many aspects of ESUN - in general a good political head to lead the colonies and earth - that I did not agree with.

Charles however caught on that there was something behind my casual shrug and inquired about it. Relena's eyes turned wide and crazy at the first word that I gingerly threw out there.

"Well..."

All eyes fixated on me.

"Speak your mind, young man, you can be honest."

Oh boy, I thought as words started to form in my head and worked their way to my sharp and decidedly apolitical tongue. "There are some hypocrisies in the administration that I don't agree with."

The air turned thick with the smoke that was coming out of Relena's ears. "Maybe this isn't the time or the place to discuss this." She insisted.

Charles waved his hand. "Nonsense, this is exactly the place. Where better to discuss politics than at a gathering of all the prominent politicians in the world?"

Relena chuckled. "I think Duo's political insights are perhaps more suited for the school's amateur
debate team. You did go back to high school, didn't you, Duo?"

At that many men lost their interest in what I had to say and turned away, but I made good use of
the small audience that remained.

"Yes, I did. Why didn't you?" I turned to look at her. "I mean, you haven't finished high school,
correct?"

She turned red but tried to talk her way out of the insult. "Well, that hardly seems necessary, I have
been studying at the best institute, which is politics. As the official ambassador of ESUN I have
learned a lot. That is knowledge that can't be taught in the school benches."

"But basically you are a student." I concluded. "A political student and already you have such a
high function." I chuckled like Relena had, self satisfied and arrogant. "Personally I feel very
uncomfortable knowing this. Like I would feel uncomfortable sitting in a bus and the chauffeur is a
sixteen year old student-driver."

She sputtered something incoherent and then fired back: "You should know that I have made many
valuable contributions to the ESUN administration!"

"I'm sure you have," I replied sarcastically, "like this party, with the champagne and lobster and
caviar that is being served on silver plates by high-end waiters. I'm sure the starving children of L2
would be very appreciative of all your efforts."

Some more "But"s and "Uh"s passed her rosy lips. I had her cornered and something primal and
resentful prevented me from stopping myself.

"Let's face it, Relena," I said with a sympathetic look, "you are about as useful to ESUN as an
umbrella made of toilet paper in the pouring rain. It looks convincing on the surface at first, but
you do a poor job at making anyone's life any better."

It wasn't nice of me. I honestly didn't know what had taken over me. But I sincerely wanted her to
just shut up and the God of Death had a fool-proof solution for her incessantly verbally expressed,
belittling sense of superiority. "If you will excuse me," I said to the men curiously eyeing me, "I
would really like to find my friends." I triumphantly spun on my heels, grabbed Heero's wrist and
stomped away.

Heero started tugging insistently on my hand, but I ignored him and held on till we were far out of
Relena's sight, separated by the crowd dressed in tuxes and extravagant ball gowns. Finally,
stopped at a banister overlooking the mysterious garden, I turned around. Heero's face was blank,
even though I had expected it to be a little angry.

"That wasn't very nice." He stated.

I sighed. "I know." However, I refused to apologize. I turned back towards the garden, letting the
soft wind caress the heat off my face. The guests may now very well think me to be mad. I wasn't
sure yet if that bothered me. I looked back over my shoulder at Heero, who instantly looked down
at his feet. But I had caught a glimpse. A glimpse that made me doubt my own eyes, doubt the very
firing of the neurons in my brain. Trustworthy or not, the image I had captured was one of a
bemused smile, gracing his lips, accompanied beautifully by a mischievous spark in his eyes.

"Were you smiling?" I asked the face that was hidden behind bangs, incredulously.

He looked up, his mouth was stiff and his eyes dead serious. "No."
I grinned at him and pointed an accusing finger. "You were smiling."

He shook his head but a hue came to his cheeks. "Don't flatter yourself. It wasn't even that funny."

"Not even a little bit?"

He stared at me for a long time. The corner of his mouth twitched but it became nothing. "Well... maybe a little." A smile tugged at his lips and there wasn't a damned thing the soldier could do about that. As Heero smiled shyly his eyes drew away from me, embarrassed, but I feasted on the sight shamelessly.

I opened my mouth to tell him what I had thought in the cab - that I wished we were at home, just the two of us, together, but my name from someone else's lips made the words die halfway between my heart and my mouth. My eyes automatically moved towards the source.

The first thing I saw was the white, crisp tuxedo.

The second thing I saw was the platinum blond hair.

"Quatre!" I called, excited to see my friend from a time that seemed like a different life, or a life that didn't even belong to me.

Quatre closed the distance with his arms extended to the side and I walked into his embrace.

"It's so good to see you." His words were muffled against the shoulder of my suit.

"It's good to see you too!" I squeezed him extra hard and behind my closed eyelids I briefly saw us sitting together in a barely furnished room, admiring cracks on the walls and rips in the bedding. The scene I remember is different in hindsight, but at the moment - as we presumed Heero to be dead - it had been his wake. It had been one of the worst moments of my life, even now, but Quatre's mere presence had made it bearable.

We parted and Quatre directed his attention to Heero. He didn't hug him or shake his hand, he knew better. He curtly nodded his greeting.

I noticed with a painful clench of my heart that Heero wasn't smiling anymore, and I remembered the concerns he had shared with me about meeting our "friends" again. I wish I could make Quatre see that smile, the most beautiful thing in the world. I don't know why exactly, maybe just to prove it was real and not just my mind playing tricks on me inspired by my apparent desires.

"Hello." Heero said. His tone was no warmer than when he was introduced to the prime minister; a total stranger. I supposed strangers they were, because the soldier never allowed anyone to meet the real Heero and he also never allowed the real Heero to meet other people.

Except me, I reminded myself and my heart warmed anew.

"I overheard your little speech to Relena." Quatre said with a snicker.

"You did?" I rubbed the back of my neck.

"Yes, you evil genius."

"Oh Quatre," I said in a posh voice, waving my hand in mock modesty, "I wouldn't say I'm evil."

"I wouldn't say he's a genius." Trowa interjected. He handed Quatre one of the two glasses of champagne he had been holding and then shook my hand.
"Trowa, good to see you."

"Likewise." He nodded at Heero and Heero nodded back. "I didn't bring enough." He said, holding up his glass.

"That's fine, I don't care much for the expensive stuff anyway and Heero isn't much of a drinker." I smiled but Heero was not amused. "Is WuFei here too?"

Quatre nodded as he sipped from his glass. "Yes, he's right there." He pointed at a lone figure standing at a high table right by the edge of the azure blue pool. "We'd better go to him. As you all know, the mountain refuses to come to Mohammed."

The three of us walked over to the stubborn loner. I just said hello, unsure of how to act around him.

"Maxwell. Yuy."

An awkward silence ensued. Trowa, Quatre and WuFei could hind behind and busy themselves with their drinks but Heero and I had no such awkwardness-proof shields. As soon as a waitress walked by, I called her to order a drink.

"What would you like, sir?"

"Martini. Shaken, not stirred." Even if I did say so myself, my Bond impersonation was dead on. I looked at Heero but he shook he head, he didn't want anything.

When the waitress had left with my order WuFei dryly spoke: "I didn't get that."

The other's nodded in agreement, except Heero of course, with whom I had watched many Bond movies.

"It's from an old movie." I explained.

And then the silence fell once more, pregnant with implicit distrust and estrangement.

To have anything to talk about, I started: "I hear the press have been giving you trouble, with the whole Gundam-pilot-identity matter."

Quatre nodded and placed his glass on the table. "Yes, they are very speculative. It makes me a little guilty that they will never have the satisfaction of being told they were right all along. It was quite an accomplishment after all, for them to figure it out. What about you guys?"

"No one knows." WuFei said bitterly and then took a large swig from his drink.

It made me wonder if he even had anyone to tell, should he want to.

"No one knows about us either. Well..." I corrected, "our baker knows."

"You told your baker?" WuFei's voice was accusing.

"Of course I didn't tell her. She just knew. Maybe more people know but they don't mind, so they don't tell."

"It's possible." Quatre said, but he didn't sound convinced. "I heard Relena say you went back to school." He tried, desperate as I was to keep the conversation going. It was a difficult task, aside from the war, which we all refused to talk about, we had little to nothing in common. We were five
very different individuals.

"Yeah." I said, not ashamed about it around him.

"That's good, it's normal for kids our age to be in school."

I smiled, those had been exactly my words, again from that other life, maybe we had more in common than I thought. I stole a loving glance at Heero.

"What do you do, Heero?"

"Preventers." He answered gruffly.

"Oh, are you an agent?"

"It's confidential."

I rolled my eyes. "He's a hacker." I said.

Heero lowered his eyes.

Silence once more.

Where is my drink? I wondered impatiently, stretching my neck to look over people's shoulders and heads to try and spot the waitress but I couldn't see her anywhere.

"Gentlemen."

I groaned inwardly as Relena wormed in between me and Heero.

"Do you mind if I steal Heero for a moment, more people really want to meet the hero that saved the world." She continued.

The four of us - the ones who no one really seemed to want to meet, because apparently our contribution to saving the world was deemed insignificant - glared at her.

Heero happily joined in and gave her his best death-glare.

Relena was unfazed, as expected, she followed him around the globe after all, even though he had sworn to kill her. She wrapped her arm around his and pulled him away from us.

He looked back at me over his shoulder and I mouthed that it would be okay. His response was putting me on the receiving end of his glare. I just chuckled. Like Relena, I was immune due to over-exposure.

"You two seem to get along pretty well." Quatre hid a smile in his champagne glass.

"Yeah." For a moment I doubted telling them, but then I just blurted: "We're sort of together."

"Congratulations!" Quatre practically squealed.

"Don't act so surprised, you practically orchestrated the entire relationship!" I joked.

Quatre blinked innocently.

"Please! Suite 102? Subtlety is not your forte, my friend."
"Gets the job done though." He said into his glass with a grin.

I nodded. "Sure does."

"So you're... gay?" Wufei eyed me questioningly.

"No, I'm a woman." I deadpanned.

WuFei just stared. Obviously sarcasm was lost on him.

I looked at my cheap watch, clashing with the expensive fabric of the suit. "How long has it been? I think I'd better get soldier-boy back."

"Soldier-boyfriend, you mean?"

I shook my head with a chuckle and walked off to find my "soldier-boyfriend". I couldn't find him out on the terrace, so I headed inside through large double doors, stepping into a world even more lavish than the one created outside. The floor was marble with an intricate pattern, the walls were covered with gilded wallpaper and heavy crystal chandeliers hung down from the high ceilings casting playful shadows and shapes of light on the floor. Dispersed evenly throughout the room were little groups of aristocratic men, they were all talking about politics but some groups shared laughter and others shared serious faces.

I spotted Heero rather easily: the only grey suit amongst them. He and Relena had joined one of the serious groups. One man was talking, very animated, moving his hand around in grand gestures. In one hand he held a champagne glass, but it was empty. He might have spilled it all over the floor with his wild movements. I noticed Relena was standing next to Heero, very closely, with one of her hands on his shoulder, like they were to be married. She sure pranced him around like a fiancé that would make any daddy proud.

If only she knew the truth.

With confident strides I walked up to the group and came to stand behind Heero, so close that our bodies touched. He looked over his shoulder and seemed relieved that I had come to save him and to my delight he leaned back into me.

"Hello." I said, interrupting the story. "I'm Duo Maxwell, co-savior of the world."

Some of the men greeted me, but looked at me strangely.

"Duo, mister Wright was saying something."

"Oh, I'm sorry. We'll just go then, so you can continue." I placed my hands on Heero's shoulders, brushing Relena's away and I guided him back outside.

"Thank you." He said softly.

"You're welcome, buddy." I stopped him for a moment and leaned over his shoulder from behind to kiss his cheek. Then I led us back to the table where the others were waiting for us. WuFei had composed himself, perhaps Quatre had convinced him that I had been merely joking. When we returned we finally had something to talk about: Relena. We shared quiet laughter at her antics. I recognized she wasn't a bad person, however I was not obliged to like everyone based solely on the goodness of their hearts.

We hadn't returned for more than a minute when the waitress finally came with my drink.
"Ah, perfect." I was about to take my first, victorious sip when again someone stopped me by suddenly calling out my name.

"Duo Maxwell." Relena looked upset. She closed the distance between us and hissed in a demanding tone: "What was that kiss about?"

"Excuse me?"

"That kiss! You kissed Heero."

I heard someone say: "Oh oh." It sounded like WuFei, it probably had been, he had the most to drink of all of us.

"We're in a relationship." I didn't brag. I knew it to be a sensitive matter for her and I honestly didn't want to break her heart. But I wasn't going to lie either.

She chuckled breathlessly. "A relationship?"

"Yes."

She looked at Heero, who had just spoken, with wild eyes.

I thought she was going to say more. I thought she was going to scream and make a scene, but she stared at him quietly for a second or two and then turned around to walk away.

My body relaxed but it was premature.

She suddenly changed her mind and turned back towards me again, in two steps she was right in my face and all of a sudden I felt her hands pushing hard and fast against my chest. Before I knew it, before I could restore it, my balance was lost and I was falling backwards. On my way down, in slow motion, I saw her walk away. I kept falling and falling, my drink still in my hand and suddenly there was a loud splash that caught everyone's attention and water rushed into my open, surprised mouth and chlorine stung my eyes. I scrambled to get footing, flailing my arms and legs wildly. Luckily the pool was not deep and when I stood the surface of the water was at my waist. But the damage had been done. I was completely soaked. My suit clung uncomfortably to my body and my hair was heavy, my bangs covering most of my face. My eyes were wide and my face made no attempt to hide my shock. Instinctually I had held my hand up to protect my drink but all the martini had spilled from the glass and only clear blue, undrinkable, chemical water remained.

I was about to get very angry when I heard someone laughing. And it was beautiful.

With my free hand I wiped my bangs out of my face and looked at the front of the crowd that had gathered by the edge of the pool.

Heero was right there, his grey suit standing out. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open. His lips had formed a perfect smile as he laughed; deep and strong. It sounded relieved, like a prisoner finally free, it was careless and innocent but the intensity made his whole upper body shake. He held his right hand over his heart, trying to still it, but his passionate, kind heart kept beating and with each beat the soldier cringed and cowered, and he kept laughing.

I stared at him, no longer caring about my spilled drink, my ruined suit, my dented ego. It could have been an embarrassing moment but instead it would be one of the most amazing moments of my life.

His laughter - worthy of Shakespearian poetry that I was unequipped with - finally died out, but a
heartening smile remained as he looked at me with gentle eyes.

Mischief returned to me. I moved towards the edge of the pool, where he stood. "You think that's funny, Yuy?" I asked as I moved my hand to innocently place my glass on the stone edge.

"No." He denied, but then briefly chuckled.

I gave him no warning and even if I had, the crowd had surrounded him would have prevented him to move away and escape my revenge. I jumped up and stretched my hands out. I grabbed the fabric of his pants at the front of his thighs and securely twisted my fingers into it and then with a powerful tug, pulled him down by it.

I was submerged again as he fell right on top of me. We both quickly resurfaced and I laughed as he shook the water out of his hair. I walked towards him, the water slowing my movements but he waited for me, standing in the middle of the pool, looking at me curiously with a slight smile. I didn't stop till our bodies met. I kissed his forehead first, tasting chlorine. Heero tilted his head up, wordlessly asking for a different kind of kiss.

I heeded his request.

I wrapped my arms, heavy with the wet sleeves, around him and then descended my lips upon his. We weren't even aware of all the watchful eyes as we kissed each other leisurely. I tasted only sweetness. As always Heero let me take control of the kiss and I took it gratefully, teasing his tongue into a more intimate kiss. I realized I would remember that moment forever.

"Sirs?"

We abruptly broke our kiss and looked to the side.

Two agents were judging us. "Please get out of the pool. The hostess has requested us to take you home."

I was too giddy to feel wronged. Heero and I got out of the pool. Suddenly it seemed very chilly outside. I said goodbye to Quatre, my heart feeling a little weight down, but lighter again when he promised to keep in touch and to meet again soon. Before I broke away from his goodbye-embrace he whispered in my ear: "I am truly happy for you both. I hope it works out."

I didn't really know what he meant with that last part, but at that moment I couldn't think straight, I couldn't be bothered. I let the two agents guide us back to where the helicopter was already waiting.

The crewmember smiled at me as he helped me on board. Heero required no assistance.

My suit felt like cement around my body, constricting and heavy but I focused all my attention on Heero and then nothing seemed to exist but the love-sick beating of my heart.

Some thirty minutes later the helicopter landed on the top floor of the parking garage again, where giant agent Levelt was waiting for us.

When we were at the elevator doors he whispered to his sleeve again, where a communication device was hidden and the lights went on. The elevator took us back down and I caught many of Levelt's unsubtle, curious stares at us.

We got out on the ground floor, but Agent Levelt remained in the elevator, holding the doors open with one of his large hands. "I've arranged for a taxi, he should be here any moment."
"Thanks."

He retreated his hand and the doors closed. I watched the overhead display as the elevator climbed again.

What a surreal night it had been.

We walked back to the side of the garage where we had been dropped off earlier that evening and we took a seat on the low concrete barrier. I had started to shiver, but I didn't care. Heero didn't seem bothered by the cold. The perfect soldier was slowly coming back. It pained me a little, but I was comforted by the memory of his smile and his sweet laughter.

I looked up and barely saw the black silhouette of the Preventer chopper disappear.

Shortly after a taxi pulled around the corner and stopped across the road. We got up and walked over to it as the cab-driver got out. As luck would have it, it was the same bearded man as before. He looked at our ruined and disheveled suits and said nothing, just grinned at us widely.

On the way home I never took my eyes off Heero. His face had frozen solid in his usual scowl as he gazed out the window. But my heart refused to be frozen. I imagined his smile, smiling myself, just thinking about it.

There was an old painting, I thought, by an equally old master of the arts. It was world renowned and its loss was grieved deeply when the Louvre was bombed during the Third World War and every canvas burned. The painting was of a woman, she wasn't anyone special but her mysterious smile captured the world. It was said to have been the most beautiful smile in the world.

But I knew better. Heero's smile was more beautiful than any smile ever smiled. More beautiful and meaningful than even the smile of that mysterious woman in that painting.

What was it called again?
Warheads

I am going to start this chapter with a warning, it opens with some smut, the beginning of a more physical relationship between the boys.

Cold and still wet we entered our apartment. We didn't bother turning on the lights as we headed straight for the bedroom to get out of our heavy clothes. We easily found our way, the moon seemed to reflect the light from the sun like a floodlight that followed us through the living room. In the bedroom it was darker, the curtains had been closed to keep out the warmth of the day.

"Oh man." I groaned as I started to peel away layers of clothing that had hardened and stuck to my body. The rustling of fabric was impossibly loud and I heard several steady drips of water, soiling the carpet. With my jacket out of the way and thrown through the open bathroom door into a dark abyss of a non-existent universe, I ripped the bowtie away from me. It had been a dread trying to get it undone in the cab, getting wet and then starting dry had solidified the knot. I had been on the verge of declaring it doomed and attacking it with scissors as soon as we got home, but Heero, bless him, reached over at my incessant complaining and figured the knot out in only a few seconds. The bowtie followed the jacket into the bathroom. Right on it's heels - if a bowtie would have heels - was Heero's jacket and tie.

My whole body started to shiver uncontrollably in the AC chilled air. When I took off my button-up shirt my body was covered in a sheen of chlorine water and goosebumps. "Oh man..." I repeated and my teeth started to chatter. My wet braid felt like an icepack against my back and the cold of it felt like pins stinging the sensitive skin. Suddenly, there was warmth enveloping me. I sighed, wrapping the warm, soft towel that Heero had thrown around my shoulders tightly around my body, clutching it with trembling fingers. "Thanks buddy."

"It's that hair of yours." He said flatly from somewhere between the dark shadows of our bedroom. "It's impractical."

A chuckle rumbled low in my chest. "Mm, but it makes me look so sexy..." I took a step forward, towards Heero, who backed into our closet door. We stood so close to each other I could feel his hot breath on an exposed patch of my chest and I smelled the heavy chemical scent that was caught in the shirt that he was still wearing. I didn't do anything, I simply stood there, waiting I supposed. For a long time Heero just stood there too, trapped between myself and the closet, but if he had wanted to escape, all he had to do was take a step to the side. But he didn't do that. He breathed against my chest, quicker than usual, through his parted lips. I could hear his soft pants as he tried to mentally assert control over himself and the situation.

I barely saw him looking up at me. The world surrounding me was nothing more than vague shapes in the dark and I had to rely on my other senses. I focused on the sound of his breathing, the scent of his clothes masking the scent that was distinctly his and the feel of his breath against my skin like feather light caresses. I knew his eyes were searching me for answers and I could clearly imagine that endearing frown on his face, but I didn't offer him any. Even though my whole body was sick with excitement and my heart ached to act upon it, I gave it time and curiously waited for
how he would make the situation proceed. There was fear that he would leave me cold and shivering once more, even within the towel, but considering the events of the evening that had slowly come to pass, I was hopeful that we were on the verge of a breakthrough, but I didn't want to push him off the edge, I wanted him to decide to take that leap for himself.

"I'm cold." He whispered.

"I'm not." I said honestly, the cold was nothing more than a memory, vanished by the heat that burned within me. "You should take your shirt off." I said and just kept standing there.

"Yeah." His voice croaked. He scraped throat and then brought his fingers up to the top button to undo it. Between me and the closet he barely had any space to move and sometimes his cold elbow brushed my warmed skin, sending arcs of lightening through me. He pushed off the closet to take the shirt off and I felt his bangs touch my collar bone.

I swallowed with uncharacteristic nerves.

He dropped it down on the carpet, at that point neither of us cared about getting it wet.

Moments passed in which nothing happened, till he finally said: "I'm still cold."

I had the feeling like he was trying to tempt me, trying to make me act and even though the prospect of taking the lead and speeding the process along was enticing, my curiosity about what would happen otherwise, held me back. I didn't want to always be the one to make the initiation. I didn't want him to feel forced into anything, instead I wanted him to know that he was free to do whatever he wanted. I thought that was particularly important for him to know, considering his past.

I took the towel off my shoulder, I wasn't cold anymore, I was burning up inside with desire. My body radiated heat. Heero seemed to be drawn to it, leaning in, but not close enough to make our bodies touch. He was hesitant, I could feel his nerves and his inner struggle.

Finally, he admitted, with a meek tone that made my heart ache: "I don't know what to do."

I was quick to answer with a reassuring tone: "Whatever you want to do."

He snorted, regaining a bit of his strength. "That doesn't help at all." He grumbled.

I smiled sympathetically. "You could kiss me." I whispered. My stomach tightened and my whole body tensed, almost painfully. I didn't understand how he could have this effect on me by just standing there. I couldn't even see him, I could only feel his presence and even that was plenty to bring me to my knees. He made me feeling weak and strong at the same time. Strong because I knew that he would always protect me, help me and be by my side. Weak because if something were ever to happen to him... I would be nothing. I could handle gunfire and explosions, but loving him made me vulnerable to hurt. He was my weak spot, the soft spot in my armor, through which deadly forces could kill me. But I liked both feelings. I liked the strong and I liked the weak. They made me feel more alive than I ever had before.

A following question brought me back to the moment. "Where?"

I smiled again. "Anywhere you want."

Again for a long time nothing happened and I was starting to lose hope that something was ever going to happen.
But then I felt his lips. Unannounced he leaned forward and placed a soft, gentle kiss on my prone neck, just off the side to the Adam's apple. I gasped at the sudden contact that was as much a relief as it was an agonizing pain, when his lips disappeared again. I didn't know why he would kiss me there, probably because it was the easiest place for him to reach with him being shorter than me, but I simply figured: Who cares? Whatever floats his boat.

"Is that good?"

"Yeah." I breathed.

When his lips returned to my body again, they were lower, in the hollow of my collar bone. When they retreated, they didn't leave for long. Moments later I felt his warm, soft, delicious lips on my skin again and again, trailing up my sensitive throat. I gasped again when his flicked his tongue at my Adam's apple before resuming his path of light kisses up to my jaw line. Finally, I felt his hands, they rested heavily against my chest for support as he rose up on the tips of his toes to run his lips by my ear. Without any hesitation I reached out myself. My hands started out on his hips, feeling the hard bone of his pelvis, tantalizingly close, and then I moved them to his backside, as I rested them there, my thumbs idly stroked back and forth, feeling only smooth, perfect skin. Boldly I moved them further south and strongly cupped his ass.

It was Heero's turn to gasp. It sounded loud in my ear but it was soothed by the warmth of his breath. Heero wrapped his arms around my neck and stopped the attentive ministrations of his lips. It was time to return the favor, so I started kissing and licking his long neck, feeling shudders go through his body. I moved forward a little bit more, pinning him against the closet door. I moved my hands to his naked sides, feeling the muscles quiver, tense and relax repetitively. My lips blindly searched for and instantly found his. He responded favorably by immediately opening his mouth and allowing me to deepen the kiss. I groaned into the kiss, shamelessly enjoying the sensations that were both familiar - as I had had sex before- and completely novel in their intensity and depth. Pleasure ghosted over the nerves of my skin but unlike ever before, they broke through the surface and made me crazy with feelings that I didn't fully understand, but did fully enjoy.

I pressed my body against his. Briefly I was worried about a repeat of the last time we were intimate and I scared him with the same bodily state that I was currently in. But as our lower bodies met he didn't pull away from me, instead, he rocked into me. I moaned at the friction. It was a strike to my pride to notice that he was not as excited as I was, and for a moment it distracted me, but his enthusiastic kisses drew me back in and I decided not to worry, but simply to revel.

His hands took hold of my wet braid and the strength of his grip squeezed some water out that trailed down my back like rivers of ice water, contrasting with the heat that came from inside. He moved his hands, which were then wet and cold, over my back and my chest, it sent pleasant tingles down my spine and to somewhere else. They eventually settled on my neck, his thumbs poised over a wild heartbeat.

I don't remember when exactly all thought process froze and it was a pure matter of reacting to sensations, but at some point it happened and left to their own devices, my hands grew bolder than I would have consciously intended. I was lost in a sea of wonderful feelings, both inside and out, almost swallowed whole by the rough waves that kept crashing over me, overwhelming me. My hands moved down and stopped at the barrier of fabric around his hips. They moved forward and settled over the belt buckle, first just fingering it with no intentions, but then some devious little neuron in my brain fired and told the nimble fingers: unbuckle it. And they could not ignore that primal command. The belt came loose and I pulled it out of the loops and discarded it to the side. I distantly registered the sound of the metal buckle hitting the headboard of Heero's bed.
Heero's tongue drew back. His mouth remained open and I ravaged it, but he became non-responsive. I, however, was too far lost in a fog, out at sea, to notice this change in demeanor. My fingers reached down for the button of his pants.

He groaned something, maybe a word, I couldn't tell. The button was undone.

He groaned again. It was definitely a "No". His hands came clamping down on my wrists and he turned his head to the left.

I panted loudly. My hurting wrists slowly brought me back, like a beacon of light it guided me through the fog back to shore. Realizing that I had pushed my luck, I apologized sincerely, my guilt and regret was evident in my voice.

He released my wrists.

With a heavy heart I reached out for the light switch, I needed to see him and he needed to see me. The light was stark and almost painful to the eyes after the absolute darkness. With squinted eyes I looked at him, he had his face turned away, his hair was sensually tousled, his lips were red from my kisses, his chest heaved with labored breaths and was slightly sweaty. The sight would have been arousing but I was too worried about having hurt his feelings or trying to push a boundary that was now being reinforced so it could never be passed. "Heero, I'm sorry." I said again, desperately searching for his eyes but they were hidden behind his bangs.

I sighed in relief when he looked at me and said it was okay, even though I wasn't sure to what extent I believed him. I chuckled nervously and stroked a hand through his hair. "You can't really blame me. You have this effect on me..." I joked.

"I'm sorry."

I frowned. "No, I didn't mean it like that. You don't have to apologize. I'm the one who should be sorry and who is sorry. I took it too far."

"I'm going to take a shower." The soldier suddenly announced and he took the escape route that I had left for him, to the side. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him with a thud that stopped my heart. The sound of the lock falling into place was like a punch in the face.

Soon I heard water running.

I found myself in a new daze, one of confusion and sadness. Instead of letting myself wallow in it I undressed and brought my pants and underwear to the tiny laundry room - barely more than a closet, with the washer and the dryer stacked on top of each other. I immediately put a load of laundry into the washer. The pants I hung from a rack, they would have to be dry-cleaned, if they weren't beyond rescue already. By the time I returned to the bedroom Heero emerged from the bathroom in his underwear and one of his black T-shirts. He avoided eye-contact as he crawled into back.

"I'm gonna take a shower too." I said, for no apparent reason. Heero didn't answer me.

Under the warm spray of water I couldn't keep my thoughts from wandering. I understood that Heero didn't know how to be intimate, in any form, sense or meaning of the word. I knew he didn't have any experience with it and something he has no experience with, he feels uncomfortable with, because he won't be perfect and his imperfection will show; his worst fear. I understood all that, I have known it since I've known him and I have been living with it and working around it and slowly trying to change it since we had moved in together after the war. What I could not
understand was why he would suddenly shut me out like this, literally, locking a door between us. Was he afraid of me? Was he afraid that I would take it too far, that I would force him? Terrible thoughts spooked through my head as I heard the door still clicking in the back of my head. Was he afraid I was going to assault him if he didn't lock the door?

I shook my head, the water from my hair hit the wall and passed the open shower curtain to where our jackets and ties still lay.

"Don't think like that. Because Heero doesn't think like that." I told myself and then turned off the shower. I worked a fresh towel furiously to clean my hair as quickly as possible. In a brief moment I had become exhausted and longed to sleep. I also found myself looking forward to going back to school after spring break, even if it meant facing Sookie with my secret. Feeling cold I dressed in comfortable, warm sweatpants and my TAMPA HIGH shirt. I looked at myself in the mirror but I kept seeing Heero's face, he looked much better in this shirt.

I stepped out and saw Heero lying on his bed, facing the wall, but his eyes were open and looking at me.

"Did you say something?"

"No."

"In the shower?"

"I didn't say anything." I lied, sounding annoyed.

I ripped the sheets off my bed and crawled inside. I turned off the lights and also turned to face the wall. I hadn't expected it, but Heero whispered in the dark, like he always did:

"I love you."

"I love you too." I hoped he meant it as much as I did.

The next morning no words were spoken between us, but somehow we had agreed to go to the gym, so early in the morning we walked side by side. The sun shone beautifully in the clear skies. It had all the pretenses of being a perfect day. But I know that that was not up to the weather to decide. The receptionist greeted us amicably as she always did, but eyed Heero warily as she witnessed the last work-out session in which he mercilessly kicked me to the ground. Her look amused me, it lightened my mood. I still enjoyed seeing the expressions on people's faces when they realized what kind of strength the little Asian boy packed.

I threw my heavy bag on the bench and picked a free locker of the many that were available.

"I guess we won't be sparring today." Heero said. It had the tone of a joke but when I looked at his face it was impassive, so it was hard to tell.

"We could spar if you want."

"I don't." He was quick to say.

"Ookay." I drawled, trying to lighten his mood as well.

For a warm-up we headed for the treadmills, that hummed loudly in the otherwise quiet gym. Our sneakers squeaked in unison as we ran in pace with each other. Before I would run out of breath, I decided to start a conversation, to test the waters. "So, what do you think about last night?" It was a
strategically ambiguous question.

He had an equally ambiguous answer "It was alright."

"Cool." What else was I supposed to say? I paused lengthily, deep in thought, before I inquired further "...Is "alright" an average, was everything alright, or was one particular thing alright?"

Heero cocked his head to the side. Even through his thick skull I wasn't being very subtle.

"Like, did you like the helicopter ride?" I continued, watching him closely to read his expression. His mask revealed nothing.

"I've been in a helicopter before."

"Did you like seeing Relena again?"

He scrunched his face up and made me laugh.

"I'm gonna take that as a no."

He didn't argue with my assumption.

"Did you like seeing the other pilots?"

He gave my question a lot of thought, his final answer was a carefully formulated: "I'm not sure."

I didn't know what that meant, I told him so.

He thought for a long time again and then answered that he didn't really know either.

His honesty made me smile. "That's okay. What uh... What did you think of our pool activities?"

He looked sideways at me again, his frown was one of confusion. "Why are you asking all these questions?"

I shrugged, trying to appear casual "No particular reason."

"It was nice." This time when he turned his head, he turned it away from me.

"And afterwards?" I kept looking at him, hoping his face would tell me something that his words refused to.

"That was nice too. Weights?" He suddenly stopped his treadmill and jumped off even before the belt had come to a complete stop.

I turned off mine and followed him to the weight section. There was another man there, he was wearing several layers of clothes but he appeared to be a bodybuilder of some sort. He didn't seem happy with our company. He was even more visibly displeased when I continued asking Heero questions till finally the man straightened up, revealing he was much shorter than me, about Heero's size and also much like Heero not at all impressed by my height and he huffed impatiently: "If you want to chat could you do it in the coffee corner? I need to focus." he took his weights and seated himself on the most distant bench.

"Jeez." I said softly to Heero, but not soft enough, the man looked over his shoulder with warning eyes. However, what the man didn't know was that I used to be a Gundam pilot, I've stared down the barrels of many guns, rifles and laser beams, I was not impressed by his attitude, much less
intimidated by his wordless threat. I sat myself down next to Heero, so close out legs were pressed against each other and I leaned in close to his ear, preparing to ask him candidly what he had been feeling the previous night that made him lock the door. But I stopped myself. I realized it wasn’t the time, much less the place. My curiosity would have to wait to be satisfied. I kissed his ear and leaned back again.

Instead of asking difficult questions I talked about going back to school the next day, sharing with him my excitement and fear, fully knowing there was nothing he could offer to calm my senses. He had only soft grunts and barely perceptible nods in his repertoire. I was grateful for them nonetheless.

To the side the buff man walked away with a heavy sigh. I paid him no heed.

Rather than taking to the ring and punching each other, we claimed a punching bag somewhere in the corner and I took the first turn whilst Heero held it to prevent it from swinging back and forth uncontrollably. I gave the sack some of my best punches and low kicks, feeling the whole thing shake at the strong impacts. As I kicked it I went back to a time and place long ago and far away. Like an outer-body experience I watched a short boy with a long braid kick a similar bag, that didn’t even move from the force.

"I said kick it not pet it!" An angry voice yelled from the dark.

The boy kicked harder and faster and threw in a few punches for good measure. Sweat trickled down his forehead and back, his eyes were tired but determined.

"That's barely a nudge!"

He kicked it more, he kicked it harder. The bag swung slightly, but only like a gentle breeze had pushed it. In the background, that evil voice erupted in dark laughter. It grew louder and louder and more hateful. With growing anger the boy kept hitting and punching, trying to funnel his rage like a secret source of power, through his arms and through his legs, but the punching bag was unimpressed. As was the disembodied voice.

"That's not how you punch! This is how you punch!" The voice grew a body and it stepped into the light. A big callous fist swung at the boy and hit him in his face. He lost his equilibrium and with pain he fell to the cold, concrete floor.

And I realized that boy was me, as I still remembered the pain from having my nose broken.

I looked up at the man, at G. I had held a hand to my face and felt the warmth of the blood spill onto it.

"You are worthless, absolutely worthless! J was right! This is not the way!" He bent over and reached his arm around to the back of my neck and took a strong hold of the base of braid, pulling me up by it. I screamed in agony. He started pulling me along by my braid, but my legs were too tired to carry me at the pace he had set. They gave out and with a groan I was back on the floor. I saw my own blood coloring the grey concrete red. G did not stop, he adjusted his grip on my hair, mumbled something angrily and then just dragged me along. I clenched my teeth as all over my body my skin started to scrape and tear by the friction with the course concrete. Relief washed over me when he pulled me over the threshold and into the hallway, where the floor was smooth linoleum. I didn’t struggle, I let him drag me through the entire building, bringing me back to my lonely, damp room - a cell. When he threw me in and locked the door - like he always did - I didn't feel scared, I felt safe. G was the only one who had a key. Inside my cell I was safe from the wrath of the other base employees, dark characters with scarred faces and big hands that turned into big
fists.

Did Heero think that way when he locked the door yesterday?

I kicked the punching bag with all my strength and saw the leather ripple in slow motion. The bag pushed back again Heero, standing behind it and the force of the movement pushed him back a few steps.

Panting, coming back to the present slowly but steadily, I apologized and asked him if he was alright.

"I am." He said, with emphasis on "I".

"Sorry." I said again. "Let's switch." I placed my hands against the leather of the bag and waited for Heero to ready himself. The first punch caught me off guard and I had trouble controlling the bag, but after that I was prepared and I kept it from swinging as Heero punched and kicked it. All the while I was wondering what he was thinking about, gazing at the stern look in his eyes.

Lying on the concrete floor in that poorly lit training room was the first time I heard the name "J". I didn't know what it meant back then. I thought I was the only one. I thought G was the only one. It was strange to remember a time when I didn't even know of Heero's existence. I remember it as an empty childhood, without him. Without Heero there is nothing.

My training had intensified and changed since that night. It was then that they started dragging me out of bed in the middle of the night, nearly drowning me in ice cold water, shocking me with stun guns or just have random, big men beat me up. I knew now what everything meant. What G had meant with what he said and why my training had suddenly changed, one year before the mission: G was trying to mimic J's training technique, in the hope of creating the same results as J created with Heero. But one year was not enough to break me, after a few months I would take it with a smirk, because I knew that I could take everything they could do to me.

I had always thought of G of a heartless, ruthless man, but my perception of him has changed since I've met Heero and has grown more sympathetic and... appreciative, after Heero told me of the choking-bag. It was obvious G did not submit me to all the torture J had perfected to train the ultimate soldier. And now I wondered if maybe the old man cared for me more than he had ever let on.

"That's enough." Heero suddenly said and he wiped some sweat off his upper lips with the back of his hand. "Let's shower."

I nod and follow him back to the locker room. We get our bags out of our lockers and pick adjoining shower stalls. I never used to think that way before, but then, all I could think about was that Heero was only a few feet away, completely naked, separated only by a piece of plywood.

I reached my hand out for the faucet and turned the shower cold. "Are you going to work today?" I asked, mostly to distract myself.

"No. No work." He answered curtly.

"Good. I like having you home."

"I do have a conference next weekend." Heero admitted, his voice laced with traces of guilt. "I leave early Saturday and won't be back late Sunday."

Disappointed I lowered my head. "Where are you going?"
"New York."

"Can't I come with you?" I pleaded, I dreaded the prospect of spending a night alone, not knowing where he was and if he was safe.

"No." His answer, sadly, left no room for argument.

I let the water beat all thought out of me, limply standing under the spray with weak legs and heavy arms. I heard Heero turn off his shower, already done. At that I reluctantly started massaging shampoo into my hair and rubbing soap over my body, scrubbing away the sweat.

"Are you almost done?" His voice came from just outside my shower stall, just as the door of his fell shut after he exited it.

"Uhm." My hands stilled in my foamed up hair. "No." I chuckled. "It's my impractical hair you see. Maybe you're right, maybe I should cut it all off."

"No!" He seemed startled by his own sudden response. A purposeful silence fell between us till I finally broke it with a chuckle.

"I wasn't being serious. I wouldn't cut off my hair if it caught on fire."

We didn't say anything for a long time. I guess we were both lost in our own thoughts. Finally, I spoke up: "It's okay, you go home, you don't have to wait for me."

He didn't respond but I heard his footfalls lead away from my shower stall and then in the distance a door opened and fell shut.

I was worried about the anxiety between us. I thought we had made good progress, I thought he felt more confident and comfortable... with himself and with me. But it seemed that the more physical we became, the more he ultimately shied away from me and tried to push away, tried to create a distance that would protect him from vulnerability. I needed to have more patience, however, the waiting became more difficult as my body and my mind grew more needy of him everyday. I felt like he was disrupting a natural process between us, of growing into one another, like two olive trees planted side by side would entwine their branches and eventually their trunks, to stand stronger and more proud together. The more my branches reached for him, the more he leaned back. The more I tried to guide his leaves up, to the sun, the more he cast them down, into shadows, where they could not grow.

With the soap rinsed from my hair and from my body I turned the shower off and leisurely dried myself off with the small towel I had brought. Fully dressed but barefoot I walked out of the shower stall and took a seat on the bench in between the rows of lockers and I dried one foot at a time and put on my shoes and my socks. I was all alone and I could feel it. The God of Death lingering within me grumbled disappointedly at my dependence, it wasn't like him and didn't use to be like me.

It was a process I could not stop, but that was okay. Though sometimes I didn't like the feel of my heart clenching at the sullen, lost looks in his Heero's eyes, I knew it was something I needed to feel. In order to be alive and be a complete person. And only when I accepted that could I help Heero become complete.

I flung my bag over my shoulder and treaded out of the locker room, careful not to slip on the wet floor. I nodded a modest goodbye to a different receptionist, a young girl, who beamed at me and delightedly announced: "Your friend is waiting for you outside."
I frowned at her. "My friend?"

"Hmm. The cute boy with the messy bangs."

He waited for me? I was bewildered and almost certain she was wrong. She probably just saw him walking outside and assumed he would be waiting for me. "Thanks..." I replied uncertainly and then waited for the automatic doors to slide open. Squinting in the heavenly sunlight I looked right first, there was a bench but there was no one there. Then I looked left and with an elevated feeling in my heart I saw him leaning against the outer wall of the gym, his hands tucked casually in his jeans pockets, frowning through his bangs that the wind enjoyed playing with.

"Heero." I called.

He looked over and when he recognized me he walked over to me, his expression never changing.

I smiled, I couldn't help it. "You waited?"

He tilted his head. "Obviously."

"You didn't have a key?"

"Of course I have a key. I'm not forgetful, like you are." His words were saying an accusation but his eyes had something humorous and light about them.

I kissed the cute boy with the messy bangs right in front of the glass double doors, so the new receptionist could forget about possible plans she might have had. He is mine, I thought, as I released his lips after a brief, innocent but satisfying kiss. I offered him my hand and he took it and so we walked home hand in hand.

I was deliriously happy, grateful that he was capable of pleasantly surprising me and offering me little, precious gifts as rewards for my patience.
I woke to Monday morning with a start, resurfacing from a dream that I instantly forgot when my eyes opened to the soft sunlight, but the sheen of sweat on my skin and the thunderous beating of my heart reminded me that it had not been a good dream. With a sigh I wiped some sweat off my brow and then lay my hand over my heart, feeling it's struggle. It was just a dream, I reassured myself and my heart rate slowed. With stealth that would have made all of my previous mentors proud, from the sly Solo to the demanding G, I fathomed out of the bedroom without causing a single stir in Heero's sleeping form.

The sun was shy at the horizon, peeking from behind fluffy, innocent clouds that reluctantly passed by. I had my wake-up-coffee - extra strong - by the large bay window in the living room, watching civilization come to life on the pavement and tarmac below. I lingered in my morning ritual before rushing out the door to get me and my... boyfriend breakfast. The lady at the bakery had been all smiles - few teeth - lately and barely offered a word. A grandmotherly demeanor had washed over her and she practically forced a home-made cookie through my teeth after which she hastily showed me the door, sending me back out into the world. The door shut with the delicate ring of an old bronze bell and I swallowed the cookie, realizing it was pretty tasteful.

At home I grabbed the almost empty jar of peanut butter. I never acknowledged the fact of it's surprisingly fast decline of content, never spoke a single word about it and as far as Heero knew, I had not noticed. Sometimes, when I would be too engrossed in a random, poorly made science fiction movie or series, he would sneak out of the office, inconspicuously - an adverb he is very familiar with - grab a spoon from the drawer and then silently, nothing more than a whisper, screw the top off the peanut butter jar, dip in the spoon and quickly return to the safe haven of his little office.

The first time I noticed was the previous week, when during an impromptu cleaning spree while Heero was at work I spotted a spoon on his desk, licked clean so meticulously that I thought it was actually clean.

I didn't understand then and just placed the spoon with the other dishes, to wash it just to be sure. But the spoon kept reappearing. Only then did I pay extra attention to his wanderings beyond the threshold of the office and noticed his suspicious behavior.

It never failed to make me smile.

"Good morning!" I chirped as I registered the barely audible click of our bedroom door being opened.

"Hn."

I handed him a steaming cup of coffee and his breakfast plate. I watched him interchange sips with bites for a while, contenting myself with the mere sight of him. Man those pants fit him nicely, I thought naughtily as my eyes traveled down his body.

His question was blunt, as to be expected of him. "What are you going to tell Sookie?"

Nerves immediately gathered in my stomach. I had stubbornly avoided all thought on the matter,
because the thoughts and the questions made me feel ill with uncertainty. "I haven't really given it much thought..." I admitted.

"That doesn't seem like a good strategy."

I smiled at him. "I don't need a strategy. I just need to tell her what feels right."

He lengthily chewed a particularly big bite of bagel, looking thoughtful with a slight frown and gaze cast towards the ceiling. His eyes settled back on me and he asked: "Does the truth feel right?"

I sighed. I didn't know. I told him so, even though I knew he had no advise to be given. "I don't know how she will react to the truth..."

After a long pause he wondered: "Do you want to tell her the truth?"

"Well, "want" is quite an ambiguous term in this situation. I do want to in the sense that I want to be honest and I want her to be my friend and being honest is the only way to accomplish that. But I don't want to because it's going to be hard and she might not understand... it also might not be best for us. What if she becomes angry, what if we accidentally killed someone she knew and she wants to take revenge? She could rat us out."

He nodded. The motions of his bangs distracted me momentarily. "A valid point."

I looked down and fidgeted a bit. I guess I had hoped for him to tell me to ignore all that and just be true to my heart, but I was mistaking him for Quatre. Quatre sees the values and importance of the emotional argument, Heero can only quantify the pros and cons by way of risk assessment. Heero was the wrong person to turn to when you are looking for the answer you want to hear, Heero can only give you the answer he thinks is right and those two usually aren't similar.

"I'm sorry." Heero breathed. He put away his plate and coffee, even though he wasn't finished yet. He seemed angry with himself when he said softly: "I'm not the best in giving advise."

I stepped forward and cupped his chin gently with my right hand, feeling the softness of the skin, not yet -if it ever will be - plagued by hair growth and razor irritation. "That's not true." I whispered and I was right. "Your advise is honest. Granted, it may not always be what I want to hear," I added with a chuckle: "it's what I need to hear. You are the only voice of reason in my head." I kissed him, tasting coffee and peanut butter, a strangely erotic mixture when combined with the warmth and hesitance of Heero's mouth and the smell and feel of his body.

"I should go." He slipped into his jacked and rushed towards the door. "Good luck." He said and then he was out the door.

I'll need it, I feared.

The walk to school was burdened with heavy feelings. A naive, immature part of me wished that the whole matter had blown over and Sookie and I could simply return to being blissfully unaware friends, but ironically her questioning- and no-bullshit-attitude were part of why I especially liked her. She was different in an outspoken way, she dared to ask the questions that other people would bite back. She is like me. I ran with that thought and I tried to imagine my own response to the news I was about to give her. Trying to empathize with the position of an untainted, "mere" citizen, who experienced the war only through a fifty inch flat screen and then from that point of view trying to name the feelings that would come to me if I would be told by one of my friends that he or she killed people and was part of the war that earned only my disgust after staring at the
repetitive news reels of wrangled metal, blood and death.

I realized that if I was that person, I wouldn't like this Duo character.

The knot in my stomach tightened. I was sad, but at the same time, I grew angry, because I knew the only reason she would end up hating me was a case of misunderstanding, because she simply didn't know, didn't understand. And I couldn't even grant myself the satisfaction of accusing her. Because it wasn't her fault. If anything, I should be glad she didn't "understand" war the way Heero and I did. It's knowledge you'll live happier without.

All of a sudden I was standing at the gate of the enclosed school yard and I felt like everybody was looking at me, but of course they weren't. I stepped through the iron gate and walked into the crowd, then I realized they were looking at me! Their unsubtle whispers reminded me of the drama that went down at Aiden's party last week. I started to recognize their stares. Contempt. The rumor of me being gay had been proven true and they didn't approve. I stopped for a second, meeting their gazes, but all of them quickly looked away. My heart began to beat wildly but then my brows furrowed together and my lips pursed in an angry expression as I was reminded: I am not a stupid, ignorant school kid, I am the God of Death!

"What?" I yelled.

They all looked at me again.

"Do I have something on my face?"

"Cum!" An anonymous prankster called from the depth of the crowd.

"Oh, thank you." I replied sarcastically and I wiped my left cheek with my sleeve, even though there was naturally nothing there and then with loud voice I announced: "You see, I sucked my boyfriend's dick this morning!"

Their faces turned pale and shocked and soon the soft muttering returned as they all turned to their little groups to discuss this outrage that was me and my flagrant homosexuality. I stepped forward and the crowd parted before me like the red sea and I walked amongst them feeling victorious, even though they ridiculed me in lowered voices. I was victorious. They would disagree, but they would be wrong. Because I was not a bigot and I was not a pushover.

I disappeared inside the building where I shared a short burst of laughter with myself in the empty hallway. I climbed the stairs to the classroom for Colony literature and arrived at the same time as the teacher. He greeted me and unlocked the door. I took my usual seat, in the back of the classroom, the teacher started rifling through stacks of papers and manila folders, the room was filled with the whir of the paper running by his thumb. In the quiet I organized my thoughts, but all structure was disbanded, blown away like a house of cards when I heard the squeak of all-star sneakers on the linoleum floor and I looked up to see Sookie flip the curly, strawberry blonde hair out of her face, revealing a concerned and sullen expression, reflecting my own. She took her seat, the one next to mine and for a moment we didn't say anything.

The teacher was oblivious, with his reading glasses perched at the tip of his nose like a suicidal cliff diver on a rocky edge, he focused on the papers spread out on his desk. When he pushed a stack of folders to the side, it knocked the miniature model of colony L1 off his desk and the sound of it's impact with the floor made me jump.

After the noise, the silence was not allowed to return - as we shouldn't let it - Sookie leaned far out of her seat, to come close to me and she said softly and genuinely: "I've missed ya."
"I've missed you too." Even though I was whispering, my gravelly voice sounded so loud. I looked up but the teacher was preoccupied with his model, mourning a particularly disastrous break.

"Ya don' have to tell me if ya don' wanna." Sookie spoke.

I blurted: "I do want to tell you." I did, I always had, but the fact that she wasn't prying probably contributed most to my definitive willingness to share my past with her. "Just... not here..." I eyed the teacher warily, but his clumsiness with the model reassured me he was not eavesdropping, yet I wanted more privacy. I immediately thought of inviting her back to the apartment, but figured that would be a bad idea should she react as negatively as I dreaded. We also couldn't go to her place, because her grandparents would be there. Finally, I decided to suggest meeting in the library after school. It would be practically abandoned with the football team playing against their rivals that afternoon.

She agreed right before the other students gathered and the teacher began class, clearly distraught by the loss of his prized model.

I had expected her to keep her distance during the day, but she didn't. During every break she sought and found me and she talked like nothing had happened and like she didn't worry about anything that was about to happen. I couldn't decide how that made me feel. I swung back and forth between confidence and relief and terror and guilt. The switching emotions made the day feel like a rollercoaster ride.

I skipped my last period, one hour before we had agreed to meet. I locked myself in a stall in the boy's restroom. Through the window I could hear the students rallying, cheering for the upcoming game. What an envious, uncomplicated life, I thought bitterly. I came out and looked at myself in the mirror before turning the faucet wide open and splashing my face liberally with cold water, but still my cheeks felt hot.

"Why am I feeling this?" I asked my mirror image. "I didn't feel like this this morning, when hundreds of people were staring at me and judging me... I don't care what she thinks."

I released a deep breath. That wasn't true, I thought to myself, and it wasn't fair to Sookie. I cared about Sookie and therefore I naturally cared about her opinion. I couldn't be the God of Death around her, around her, he didn't exist, there was just me, just Duo, this stupid school kid that doesn't care about fitting in and is crazy in love with his roommate.

Not even Heero could offer me that.

But I needed it.

The cheering outside grew louder as more and more people joined in. The crowd of fans and rivals was swelling, four O'clock was drawing near. I dried my face with the available paper towels that felt like sand paper on my skin and then I headed for the library. As predicted, it was desolate like the desert. By the door, seated behind a small mahogany desk was the only soul; the elderly clerk. She peered at me from underneath the folds of her wrinkled skin.

The high bookshelves swallowed me and enveloped me with a scent of wisdom and age, gathered through the centuries like the layers of dust that covered them. Few people read books nowadays, with most published works digitized.

I disappeared inside the maze further and further, heading towards the autobiography section where we had agreed to meet. It was actually knows as the "all-the-way aisle", it was so unpopular and infrequently visited people had actually lost their virginity right there, between the copies of
autobiographies ranging from Barbara Streisand to Treize Kushrenada. What odd "bed-fellows", I thought, but the guy who lost his virginity in a hammock in the windowless hull of a sweepers vessel to man whose face was unrecognizable with black soot, shouldn't judge.

When I rounded the last corner into the aisle, she was already standing here, leafing through a thick book. "Hey." My voice was shaky and unsure, like I had come to lose my virginity as well. Sadly, that was a gift long unpacked.

"Hey." She closed the book and held it to her chest. The title spoke volumes.

A HERO IN LIFE AND DEATH

The post-mortem autobiography of Heero Yuy, the other Heero Yuy - I didn't like to say the "real Heero Yuy", because that would imply something that wasn't true.

"Ya know," She started, turning the book delicately in her hand to look at the cover, a picture of the charismatic man, "most people on earth don't even know who he was. Ain't that unfair? He did so much for so many people... for earthians too... and they don't even know who he was."

I cocked my head and didn't say anything.

"But... I guess that's what being a real hero is about, ey? Not needing to get credit. Just doing stuff cuz it's right..." she looked at me meaningfully.

I avoided her gaze by looking down at the violated carpet of the "all-the-way-aisle".

"I think I know who ya are." Her tone was soft, not accusing, yet I did not dare to meet her look.

"I'm not sure you do."

"Ya were a Gundam Pilot."

Her words struck like thunder, with a spectacular flash and a frightening crack.

"Duo, it's cool. Ya saved the world!" She took two steps closer and I took two steps back. She stopped and through my lashes I saw her clutching the book. "What are ya afraid of? How did ya think I'd react?"

I finally looked up and saw her friendly smile, but it brought tears to my eyes. "Not like this. And you wouldn't have reacted if you really... knew." I struggled to find words, that shunned me like disgraced friends. "I... We're... " After some more stumbling, I squeezed my eyes shut, sounded the words out in my head and then threw them out there, into the open, into the strangely appropriately named "all-the-way-aisle". "We're not the heroes you think we are." I opened my eyes to her confused expression. "We don't deserve your reverence, or your appreciation... In the end we did what was right, sure... but that doesn't make us heroes. Not the kind of heroes you are thinking about." I looked to the left, to the books and my eyes landed on the titles and the names on the backs of the book. I took one from it's place, dust spilled into the air. I held it up for her to see.

"He was a hero." I said and I put Martin Luthor King's biography back. "And," I pointed at the book she was holding to her chest, "he was a hero. They stood up for justice, they did what was right for all the right reasons. The only reason I even participated was because I was living on the street and I was starving and some old goat offered me food and shelter. And Heero, my Heero," I said to clarify, "he was taken in when he was so young, he doesn't even remember anything else. He didn't choose anything, he was forced and then brainwashed to believe that it's what he wanted." I sighed deeply, overwhelmed with feelings and memories. I was hard to stay strong. I
needed a hug, but no one would give me one because I didn't deserve one.

I heard Sookie slide Yuy's autobiography back into it's slot. "All I know... and all I need to know, is that the Gundam Pilots ended both wars. They stopped the army, one of 'em risked his life to prevent that piece of space ship from crashin' into earth and they resolved the whole Mariemeia incident without killing a single soldier. And no one could have forced you to do that." Her muted footsteps grew closer.

All of a sudden arms wrapped around me and I was being hugged.

With a powerful feeling of relief I hugged her back.

"Ya're a hero." She said into my ear.

I embraced her even tighter and then told her with a light, breathless chuckles: "It was actually Heero who stopped that piece."

Her chest vibrated with a quiet laugh. "He's a hero too."

I inhaled the fresh scent of her clean clothes contently. "I love you, Sooks."

"I love ya too, superman."

Half an hour later found us sitting in a hole-in-the-wall diner after elbowing our way through the mob of Tampa Titan fans. I had suddenly felt weak and lightheaded with hunger, not surprising considering the fact that other than two reluctant bites of bagel I hadn't been able to eat all day. My stomach had been full with nerves, but as soon as they dissipated and left my stomach empty a growling protest sounded from my gut and it had broken the silence and the tension between us and had made us both laugh.

With watering mouth I ordered a hamburger with fries and a large strawberry milkshake - for once not being my own mother and preventing myself from spoiling my appetite right before dinner. When the waiter turned to Sookie she just said: "Ditto."

"Not interested in football?" The waiter asked absentmindedly as he scribbled our orders on a notepad he awkwardly held in the palm of his hand. He must have recognized us as students from Tampa high; the school was just across the street and a lot of his customers were probably students.

"Not really."

"That'll be 16.85."

I reached into my pocket for my wallet and pulled out a twenty dollar bill - one of Heero's twenty dollar bills - and handed it to the waiter and told him to keep the change.

He thanked me, though it didn't sound sincere and then he left us alone.

As we waited for our meals the conversation didn't immediately steer back to the "Gundam topic". We talked mostly about the madness of the crowd that was audible even from the considerable distance between the diner and the field. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether it were cheering fans or a crowd screaming in horror. I laughed when Sookie said the first was probably the case when the Titans scored and the last when the opposite team scored. We discussed the extreme, fanatic interest many people had in sports - football in particular, in the Reformed United States of America - and the terminology soon became very psychological and we kept circling back to the
same conclusion: conformity. Obviously neither of us thought very highly of college- or professional sports, with her being a girl and me being gay.

Some stereotypes simply had footing in reality.

The waiter interrupted our discussion and placed heavy plates and large glasses in front of us. "Enjoy your meal." He said.

"Thank you."

The first few bites were taken in silence and then we both took a sip through the curled straw in our milkshakes, making a laughable slurping sound. We didn't say anything for a while longer and from observing her face I concluded she was trying to find a way to circle back to the subject she was really interested in. I didn't want it to be a big deal, or be like a taboo between us, so I encouraged her with a smile and a teasingly drawled: "Yes?"

She thought for a while longer, running a fry repeatedly through the mountain of ketchup that she had dumped on the side of her plate. Finally she dropped it and put her hands under the table, in her lap, perhaps to keep herself from fidgeting. "We don't have to talk about it if ya don't wanna."

I adamantly shook my head. "No, it's fine, honestly. Now that you know the truth, you might as well know the entire truth."

Her face broke into a relieved smile and she brought her hands back up so she could make gestures to accompany her words, as she always did when she talked. "I have so many questions!"

I put my finger in front of my lips to remind her to keep her voice down.

"Sorry..." She whispered.

"Ask them."

There was a pause, not one of discomfort, it seemed like she had trouble to decide which question to ask first. Eventually, she picked one. "Which one were ya?"

The memory of Deathscythe that flashed before me made me smile. When you are all alone you can't help but get attached. I almost felt like the Gundams were five completely separate characters in the story of our life and in history. Without them, us pilots would have been lost. Sometimes the credit that was due was never given. Everybody seemed to reason they were just machines, but I dared to say the five of us would strongly disagree. How many time did that Gundanium armor save our lives?

I leaned in closer, across the table, to keep our conversation private and Sookie copied my move, seemingly excited by the secrecy. I glanced around myself warily, but I needn't worry, the few people that were present paid absolutely no heed to us, too engrossed in their own lives and accompanying troubles.

I chuckled sheepishly at the pre colony-clichéd-spy-movie-scene we created. "Uhm..." The thought of us wearing bowler hats momentarily threw me off guard. "I piloted the black one."

"Awesome!" Sookie managed to exclaim in a hushed voice.

I looked around again, but no one bothered with us. Everyone was quietly talking to their own companions, like they too were sharing secrets and the waiter was sitting behind the bar reading a newspaper, stirring a spoon in his cup of coffee endlessly.
"That's the one with the batwings, right?"

I decided not to get into the technical details of the upgrades and modifications and simply nodded.

"Cool. That one was always my favorite." She grinned.

"You have a favorite?"

She nodded enthusiastically and then leaned her head down to take a noisy sip from her milkshake. "Hmhm. I keep hoping for L1 to come with some sort of merchandize line. I would love to have a Gundam-lunchbox." She laughed but, disturbingly, she wasn't joking.

"I doubt they will ever make Gundam-lunchboxes." I said confidently, even though the L1 marketing industry was famous for making a brand of the most stupid and farfetched things. "I don't think anyone should put war-machines on kid's lunchboxes."

At that she nodded and appeared regretful of her remark.

To cheer her up I said: "It would be pretty funny though."

She nodded and the smile returned to her lips. "What was it called?"

"You mean my buddy? He was named Death scythe."

Sookie chuckled. "Yer buddy?"

I blushed with irrational shame and stuffed two fries into my mouth. "Hmhm. There are only two people in the world that I call "buddy". My Gundam and my boyfriend." I smiled, stupid with happiness.

"Does your boyfriend's Gundam have a name too?"

I was amused by her enthusiasm and curiosity and decided to answer, even though I should be careful with divulging confidential information; I should not spew it so readily. But I trusted her, her face told me she had no ill intentions. "Heero's Gundam was named Wing. Past tense. They were all destroyed."

"I'm sorry." She reached out her hand to touch mine. It felt warm and comforting.

"No, that's okay. It's for the better. No one can be trusted with that kind of power."

"No one but ya?" She teased.

"Well, we are heroes." I joked. Her hold suddenly tightened and her face turned serious. I raised an eyebrow.

"Ya are a hero. It's not a joke. Ya are."

"Thanks." Was all I said. I think she understood what I meant. To stop the conversation from coming to an awkward stand-still I continued by telling her the names of the other Gundams, but never made any reference to the other pilots, hoping that she would get the message that that topic was off limits. I noticed something dawning in her eyes. She suddenly seemed to realize that it wasn't all as cool as our talk of mechs and lunchboxes had implied. Pity became visible on her face and as soon as I recognized it as such I told her not to do that.

She blinked her saddened eyes in confusion.
"Don't feel sorry for me," I said softly, no accusations, "It sucked, it was horrible... but good came out of it too, so I no longer feel sorry for myself and it doesn't help if someone else does."

She nodded determinedly but admitted: "It's hard though... cuz it must've been so tough on ya."

I could empathize with her sentiment, it was similar to what I felt for Heero, I told her that and then added: "It's difficult for me not to pity him, but I should try harder because he doesn't want my pity. It's not what he needs to grow. But you're right... It's hard."

"What do you do?"

"When something is hard, I just try harder, till I get there. I just try to help him, to the best of my abilities." I snickered. "And try to sneak in a few kisses and gropes."

Sookie laughed with me, the sound warm and welcoming and it seemed to brush everything else off the table. "I see the sexual attraction has kicked in."

"It has." I washed my last bite of hamburger down with my last sip of milkshake. "Just like you said... It's getting bad though."

"Bad?" She brought a fry with ketchup sauce to her mouth - or rather: ketchup sauce with a fry.

"Yeah. Let's just say the sexual attraction has more effect on me than it does on him. Sometimes I'm not even sure if the attraction is mutual." In spite of it being a hard topic for me to open up about, I was glad I could discuss it with her. I needed to tell her, even if all she could offer me was to simply listen. It had been hard struggling with these issues by myself. I liked to pretend I'm expert when it came to emotions and intimacy and in comparison to Heero I may as well have been, but in all honesty I too was challenged in that department. I may not have the humanity literally choked out of me, none of the scientists who reared and trained us had delved into a copy of "Raising hormonal teens into emotionally developed adults for dummies".

"Why, what happened?"

I bit the inside of my cheek, nervous like the mere kid I was. "We sort of made out last Saturday..." I looked up at her, to gauge her reaction. If anything she seemed excited. I raised an eyebrow at her inappropriately interested expression.

She shrugged with a devilish smirk. "Gay guy sex is hot."

I chuckled "How can two guys getting it on be attractive to you?"

"Call it residual heterosexual attraction... ya know, something evolutionary sensible that just won't go away."

I shook my head. "I wonder what Darwin would call that."

"Survival of the misfittest?"

We shared a smile and then she urged me to continue the story and she promised me not to think perverted thoughts.

I told her all about Saturday night after we had gotten home, leaving out any mention of the ball because I didn't want to bring the topic back to the war and me being a Gundam Pilot. With a red hue flattering my cheeks I told her that I had gotten lost in the sensations and in the spur of the moment had wanted to take things further.
"Ya mean ya wanted to plug into his home entertainment center?" She crudely clarified with a wink.

I nodded, baffled, but managed to compose myself and continued that as soon as I reached for the button of his pants, he became disinterested and when it was undone he wanted me gone. I told her that I feared he was scared of me, scared of what might happen. I silenced Sookie's void "I'm sure yer reading too much into it" by showing her the bruises his fingers had left on my wrist. Her eyes widened and with her own fingers - with black polished nails - she gently touched the marks.

"Yikes."

"Yikes indeed." I spoke forlorn. "And he refused to talk about it. I tried to start up to the conversation the next day, but short of asking him bluntly, which frankly I was scared to do, there was no way of prying an explanation out of him."

"Why are ya scared to ask him?"

I shrugged miserably. "I'm afraid I'm not going to like the answer..."

Then suddenly, out of the blue, she said the thing that a little damned voice in the back of my head had been torturing me with since that night and still it was like a thunderclap.

"Yer afraid he was raped."

I looked at her sharply and then turned my sad eyes down, nodding softly.

"Why?" She didn't share in the heavy feelings I felt. "Ya guys are still young. It's only natural if he wants to slow things down a bit..."

I sighed. Normally, she would have been right. But nothing about me and Heero, our pasts, our presents, our futures, was normal. She didn't know the whole story. She didn't know of the training. She didn't know what they were capable of and what they were willing to do to us - to Heero especially - to prepare us for any situation. Any situation. I wasn't sexually assaulted myself, but like I had concluded before: G didn't submit me to all of J's training. He left out the choking bag... God knows what other dark secrets he thankfully spared me.

"Duo," She said softly to make me look up, "I don't really know Heero, but he seems like a straightforward guy, no pun intended, I think if this really worries ya so much and ya think ya have good reason to believe he was ... I think ya should just ask 'im."

I nodded slowly, grateful she didn't use that terrible word again that stabbed at my heart with abandon.

The conversation died out. Our meals were finished and outside the sunlight had faded to a red glow that was quickly surrendering to the dark coming over the opposite horizon. The cheering had only grown louder, fans were flooding the street, they seemed ecstatic, giving reason to believe the Tampa Titans had claimed victory. All heads turned to look through the smeared windows at the crowd, waving banners and T-shirts they had taken off. I jumped in my seat when suddenly a flare shot up amidst them and exploded high in the sky. People looked up in awe at the green and blue sparkles of the firework - the colors of the Titans' uniforms.

Outside a victory was celebrated and even though I was not part of the opposing team, I still felt like the loser that was mocked by their cheerful exuberance.

"Let's go home."
"Yeah."

I walked Sookie to the bus stop around the corner, where I waited with her till the bus arrived. She mockingly applauded my chauvinistic chivalry. Mature as I was I just stuck my tongue out at her. When the bus screeched to a halt in front of us I embraced Sookie before she could step on board. With my nose buried in her blonde locks I thanked her for being such an amazing person.

With a chuckle she brushed the compliment off, saying with a sweet smile she could not take credit for that, her grandparents had made her into who she was. "Ya should come over sometime, with Heero. Then ya can thank 'em." She said as we parted. She stepped into the bus, waved her card in front of a scanner and with a beep she was welcomed on board by an electronic display and the doors closed. With one hand she held onto a metal bar for support as the bus jostled back into motion, with the other she waved at me till the bus was out of sight.

For a moment I just stood in the night air by the flickering light of a lamp post, hoping that Sookie was wrong, that the people who raised us did not make us into who we are. Otherwise, Heero, the other pilots and myself, were screwed.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and started the walk back home.

My hope that Heero would be home already was naive and in vain. I opened the front door to a dark and empty apartment. Lost in my own thoughts I turned on a single light by the couch and laid myself down on the cushions, sighing heavily. When the weight was taken off my feet, I suddenly felt exhausted. With a stomach filled with food and a head filled with worry, sleep threatened. I tried to fight it, but that, too, was in vain. My eyes slid closed again and that time I was not able to force them open. I thought: I won't go to sleep, but I can rest my eyes for a minute.

The next thing I know I am sitting straight up on the couch with a head feeling fuzzy and light. My palms and my back were sweaty. I had suffered another annoyingly quickly forgotten nightmare. With a frown I tried to remember anything, anything, but I drew a complete blank. I blinked and then realized that still the only light on in the apartment was the one I had turned on when I had gotten home.

What time is it? I wondered. Heero obviously wasn't home yet. Apparently I hadn't slept as long as I thought I had. I crawled to the other side of the couch, towards the dim light and shook my arm out of my sleeve to expose my wristwatch.

The hands of the timepiece gripped my heart painfully, causing me to gasp and feel a sharp pain in my chest.

The short arm stiffly pointed at the space between the one and the two and the long arm just moved to touch the eleven.

"Heero?" I called with shaky voice, even though I knew it to be useless.

As expected there was no answer.

I jumped to my feet and rushed to the phone, first checking for any missed calls, but there weren't any. Then I hastily dialed the number of his office. The receptionist that answered noticed I was distraught and asked me if everything was okay. I told her I would be as soon as I would have Heero Yuy on the line. She quickly patched me through.

As always it took forever for his phone to be answered. Was he ever at his desk? I wondered furiously.
I groaned when an image of wrangled cars and maimed bodies flashed before my eyes.

"Pick up!"

"Hello?"

My breath hitched. "Heero?"

"No. This is Reid Mixson... we spoke before."

I really hated this man. "Where's Heero?" I demanded.

There was a pause. "He's on his way home."

"When did he leave the office?"

Another pause - maybe he was checking his watch - before he answered: "Fifteen minutes ago... maybe twenty..."

I let out the breath I had been holding. The commute between home and work usually took him thirty minutes, so he would home soon.

"You seem relieved." Mixson noted.

"I was worried. He didn't say he would be home this late."

"There was an emergency. But it's confidential."

I rolled my eyes. "I know. Anyway, thanks... I guess. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I waited anxiously by the front door, hearing the soft ticking of my watch in the silence, counting down the seconds. My heart drowned out the sound of time passing as my ears perked at barely audible footfalls coming through the hallway. I looked at my watch, ten minutes had passed since the phone call. I made myself take a cleansing breath. Relieved as I may have been, calm I was not. I was torn between wanting to tackle-hug him for finally being home, or strangle him for being home that late without informing me.

The door opened and he came into view. When he spotted me he froze in the doorway, looking at me with wary eyes.

All urge to scream and yell accusations at him escaped me with a single sigh as I met his exhausted gaze. His eyes were empty and dark, drained of all color. His shoulders were slumped pathetically and suddenly the perfectly tailored pants and fitting shirt looked too big on him and just left him looking like a kid wearing a uniform he didn't belong in.

I guess for the first time my eyes saw the truth. For him, I put on a smile, even though I was equally tired. "Welcome home." I whispered, not a hint of resentment. I approached him and pried his hand of the doorknob and by that hand gently pulled him inside. With my foot I shut the door as I kept holding his hand and looking at him. Eventually, he averted his eyes, looking at the single light. The orange glow of the soft lamp suited him beautifully. His complexion looked warm, contrasting with the dead cold of his eyes.

Worry settled over me, suffocating the last of my anger like a fire-blanket doused a flame. "Are you okay?" His hand felt cold and clammy in my own.
"I'm fine." Heero answered with gruff voice. He tugged his hand free and headed towards the back of the apartment.

"How was work?" I asked as I followed him into the bathroom.

"Fine."

I rolled my eyes. "You say everything is fine but I know better! You have not-fine written all over you!" I was startled by my own outburst. Apparently worry could be just as volatile as anger.

He didn't say anything, he kept his back turned towards me. He leaned forward, over the tub, to turn on the shower so the water could warm while he undressed. He took off his tie first. His movements were jerky and impatient. Because he didn't tell me to go away, I just stood there, watching him. Once the pesky tie was out of the way he unbuttoned his shirt and then his arms moved to shake the fabric off his shoulders but with his arms up, mid-motion, he froze and I heard him wince.

"Are you just going to stand there and watch me?" He sounded annoyed.

"Yes."

With visible effort he pulled the shirt off his shoulder and let it drop to the floor.

"What happened?" I asked breathless as I studied the immense, painful looking bruise on his back, covering his left shoulder blade and reaching all the way down to the bottom of his ribcage with a variation of colors, from sickly yellow to a deep purple.

"I fell." He said and then let his pants pool at his ankles and stepped out of them.

"You fell?" I copied sarcastically. "You looked like you were mauled by a bulldozer!" I pushed past him to the tub and turned off the shower. I plugged the drain and opened the faucet at a warm temperature to let the porcelain basin fill.

"What are you doing?" His voice lacked all of it's pervious combativeness and just sounded meek and hollow in the tiled bathroom.

"Running you a bath. It'll help with the soreness." I tested the rising water with my hand.

"I always take showers." He weakly protested.

"Well, now you are going to take a bath."

"I'm tired. I want to sleep." There was something childish about what he said but when I turned around there was nothing childish about how he looked. He stood in the middle of the bathroom in just his black boxer briefs, his hands balled into fists at his sides - more out of habit than anything else. His eyes were wild, his hair messy. Golden skin draped across tense muscles beautifully.

I swallowed. "Bath first." I made sure my tone of voice left no room for argument. I looked into his eyes for a long time and when I was satisfied he had gotten the message I stepped out of the bathroom. For a moment I doubted, but decided to close the door behind me. I dropped myself down on my bed heavily, burying my face into my pillow. My mind raced. What did the bruise mean? Did he really just fall? Or did he have an accident or was he beaten up and just didn't want me to worry?

The faucet was closed and I heard him stepping into the water.
I moved my tired eyes to look at the alarm clock on our shared nightstand and groaned at the 02:24. I was going to be a zombie in the morning, but I knew no matter how late it would get, I could not go to sleep without talking to Heero first. Sister Helen used to say: "Never go to bed angry." I was certain that was an umbrella term that included situations like these. However I couldn't simply barge back into the bathroom and demand answers. Maybe before last Saturday I could have, but not anymore. I needed an excuse to get back in.

I smirked instantly and crawled out of bed and went to the kitchen. I took a large spoon out of the drawer and dipped it deep into the jar of peanut butter.

I returned to our bedroom and stopped at the door to the bathroom, knocking on it softly.

"Hn."

I took that as a "come in" and opened the door. The room was fogged up with hot steam. Heero seemed relaxed and comfortable in the warm water, his head resting against the porcelain edge. His eyes were a hazy, seductive shade of blue. Our eyes met and our gazes locked for a long time and as he stared into me and I into him, I realized it was the most intimate moment we had ever had.

And he was naked.

I broke eye contact, casting my gaze down to the white tile floor to compose myself and return my focus to my goal. I held up the spoon, bringing it to his attention. I smiled at his great effort to keep his expression impassive and not look interested, like when we had snuck out of bed on his birthday to stuff our faces with cake.

I waited for a moment, trying to read his eyes, but they didn't tell me much. I decided to chance it and step forward, keeping my eyes on his face so they couldn't wander elsewhere. I held out the spoon.

Heero raised his right hand up and out of the water and a dripping sound filled the bathroom. He took the spoon from me with a soft "Thank you." He didn't ask me how I knew of his guilty pleasure, he just took his first lick. When he did, I realized it was a mistake coming in here. Lightening arced through me that I couldn't ignore. I damned my teenage hormones most colorfully and started my shameful retreat. I turned my back to him but then Heero called my name.

"Yes?"

"Stay?"

I looked over my shoulder, meeting his incredible eyes once more. "Okay." I could not say no and walk away. His eyes seemed to have magical powers over me. I walked back and sat myself down on the edge of the tub, just behind his shoulder, gripping the rim with one hand for extra support.

For a long time neither of us said anything. Heero occupied himself with his treat and I tried to calm myself down, sending myself in some sort of trance.

I was awoken by the sound of metal meeting tile. Heero laid the clean spoon down and submerged his hand back into the water, just in time to ripple the surface and preserve his modesty as I briefly lost control over my curious eyes. He rested his head against my arm, stunning me momentarily, but it drew a smile to my face and stilled my sexual desires as it just became a quiet, intimate moment that we shared comfortably.

I looked down and saw he had closed his eyes. Deeming him calm and at ease I finally started
asking the questions that I needed to ask. Beginning with: "Why were you home so late?" My voice was soft, as to not disrupt the atmosphere.

His eyes opened slowly. "... I needed to train a newbie."

"That Reid guy said there was an emergency..."

"The newbie screwed things up. The whole system crashed."

"Couldn't you have called to tell me you would be late?"

"We were busy."

His tone had gotten defensive so I kept quiet for a few short moments to allow us both to calm down and return to a neutral state. "Next time, please call, okay?"

"Okay." He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back heavily against my arm.

I brought my free hand up to stroke through his damp hair. "Did you really just fall?"

He seemed to melt at my tender ministrations and it took a long time before he answered with a mere whisper: "Yes. Down a flight of stairs."

I couldn't imagine Heero tripping, he walked with the elegance and precision of a feline. So I asked: "Why?"

"I was carrying heavy equipment. I lost my balance."

"Couldn't you have taken the elevator?"

He opened his eyes and straightened his neck, pulling his head away from my hand.

"Sorry." I said quickly. Obviously he didn't like the third degree interrogation and I couldn't blame him. I decided I needed to trust him, after all, that what I desired from him. How could he ever trust me if I didn't offer trust in return. I assured him I wouldn't ask him about that anymore. "I trust you." I finished. I had hoped he would lay his head back against me, but he didn't. Rather, he leaned his head forward, so I couldn't see his face anymore. I moved from my position on the edge of the tub and kneeled down on the floor next to it, placing my arms on the rim and in turn resting my chin on my arms. From the lower angle I could see his eyes again, through his bangs. I reached out one hand and pulled the bangs, heavy and dark with water, out of his face and smiled at him.

He looked at me warily but then he awarded me a small, shy smile in return.

I leaned forward, not able to resist temptation and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek. I drew back my hand and his bangs instantly fell back over his face. I chuckled at the cute looking mop of hair.

He straightened up and with a single flick of his head he whipped the hair out of his face and revealed his eyes that had lit up with a rare sparkle.

Curiously I watched him as he leaned in closer. He still with his nose only millimeters away from mine, his eyes big and inquisitive but instead of asking me for answers and guidance, he searched for the answers himself. His eyes slid shut as he closed the final distance, but I kept my eyes open, wanting to remember this moment forever and in every possible detail. After what seemed like the span of eternity, our lips touched, just barely. His kiss soon grew more determined, more passionate. He pressed his lips stronger against mine and with his parted mouth he seemed to
worship me. With anticipation I opened my mouth slightly and he understood and accepted my challenge, tentatively deepening the kiss with his tongue.

I lost all my self-control. I closed my eyes and cupped his head with my hands, kissing him back fervently as he drew the battle of our tongues back into his own mouth.

His hands grabbed my wrists again, like he had that Saturday night, but though his grip was tight, it wasn't painful. It was needy and desperate. He was holding them in place to make sure I wouldn't stop, instead of the opposite.

I reveled at his unique taste and the taste of peanut butter lingering in his mouth. It made for an interesting combination that drove me wild. I could have kissed him forever, but humans were sadly engineered to be dependent of oxygen, so with deep reluctance I broke our lips apart, but keeping my hands on the side of his head, feeling the heat of his reddened ears and cheekbones.

"That was good." I muttered, panting loudly. I felt lightheaded but that was more likely caused by his passionate kiss than the lack of oxygen.

"Hm." He licked his lips, probably subconsciously.

I leaned forward and kissed him again, but briefly and innocently. Giving in to the desire to feel his lips just once more. I had a silly smile on my face - Heero even quirked an eyebrow at it - I was just overwhelmed with feelings. I was so happy it almost made me guilty. Nothing should ever feel as good as kissing Heero. No one should ever be this happy. But it did. And I was. Pressing my forehead against his, enjoying the closeness that we were both so strangely comfortable with, I asked him how he felt.

He thought for a long time. The answer didn't come to him readily, the Soldier had snatched it and hidden it somewhere deep. But not willing to give up, he found it and he presented it to me in a soft and delicate voice. "I feel happy." He let the hands he had on my wrists trail down, settling in the crook of my arms. The caress sent shivers down my spine but my body felt hot all over. "Happier than I've ever been..." His voice turned quieter still when he added: "Happier than I ever thought I could be."

The world suddenly felt like a better place, more welcoming to my very existence. I gave him another brief kiss. "I love you." My lips brushed his as I spoke. Against my own, I could feel his lips curl into a small smile.

"I love you too."

Progress, I mused with a content smile and I initiated another lock of the lips.
With familiar reluctance I watched Heero disappear from our apartment. A duffel bag swung over his shoulder, as casual as you please. With a gait determined and strong he took the last step, into the hallway and the door fell shut behind him.

A definitive click resounded.

I felt a sickening coil in my stomach and a restriction in my throat and my body, heart and mind were communicating panic to one another. It multiplied and multiplied, building within me to impossible heights like a storm raised the water's surface over the dykes. But just when I felt the climax was about to happen and everything would spill forth and flood the calm plains of me... it stopped. And a displeased voice within me berated my desperation and dependence.

"Call yourself a God of Death..." I muttered, in agreement with that voice in the back of my head. "It's just for the weekend. He'll be back Sunday!"

Still, in spite of my rationality it took me many more moments to tear my gaze away from the shut door.

"When will you be back?" I had asked him as I leaned myself against the doorframe, trying my best to appear unconcerned.

Heero was kneeling by his bed, his arms reaching under to pull out his emergency duffel bag. He took some things out and replaced them with others. I couldn't tell what was left behind and what was taken, I only looked at his concentrated face and those piercing eyes, scrutinizing everything. "Sunday." Was his less than elaborate answer.

I rolled my eyes. His answer did not satisfy my question. "I know, but when? What time?"

"Shouldn't be too late."

I raised my eyebrows and folded my arms judgmentally. "You don't know exactly? Don't you know when your flight leaves New York?"

There was a short, seemingly thoughtful pause before he said: "I'd have to check the itinerary."

"Well, check it then."

He gaze shifted towards me and he seemed angry at my impatient and pushy demeanor. "I don't have it. It's at the office."

I sighed, not knowing how to handle him when he was in such a state of deviancy, working so hard to shut me out of his life and all I could do was peddle against the stream of a powerful river. My energy was being drained by each stroke. But even though admittedly tired, I couldn't let him drown me. "Why are you being so stubborn?" I managed a calm and non-accusing tone.

"I'm not stubborn." He zipped up the bag with rushed, jerky movements. "Why do you want to know all this? It's just a conference." He walked towards me and wanted to pass through the
doorframe but I blocked his way. He stood before me impatiently, glaring up at me, the bag's strap clutched tightly in his fists.

I tried to see past the anger, I knew something was behind there. The fire of rage was only to distract me from something else, something more vulnerable, but it was well protected by the soldier, throwing gasoline and gunpowder into the flames to keep them burning blindingly bright. I frowned and Heero frowned back angrily.

I had deflated, I felt my body shrink and become weak. I looked at him desperately, eyes searching for kindness and mercy but the Soldier had been relentless that morning and gave me nothing, not even the tiniest glimpse. I saw only cold glass orbs set into a face of finely sculpted marble. As a statue of the soldier he was unreadable, even to me, the one who prided knowing him so well. It was like my brain had suffered a stroke and all of a sudden I no longer understood the language he was speaking to me. With my body no longer presenting a formidable obstacle, he pushed past me. His shoulder dug into my chest, adding to the throbbing pain already there.

"Just give me a time. An estimate." I begged him pathetically.

Heero had shrugged with his back towards me. "Probably ten O'clock." He finally relented.

"Thank you." My voice was soft and breathless.

He looked over his shoulder, but not at me. His gaze was cast down at the carpet at my feet. I don't know why he looked back, perhaps, subconsciously, the boy within him wanted me to see his face at that moment. It was pained and sad and also, self loathing. I told him I didn't want him to go. He looked away, the soldier composing himself, when he looked back again the anger had returned.

"I have to do this." He declared in his deliciously deep voice that always sent shivers down my spine.

"I'm just afraid you are fleeing from something." I had whispered, taking a few steps towards him, my troubled eyes reminding him of last night.

His eyes narrowed. "I told you about this trip last week. I am not running. I'm doing the one thing I'm good at!"

His raised voice surprised me, scared me. I didn't understand why he was getting so upset with me. "That's not true! You can be good at anything, if you would just let me help you."

He had turned away again and with jerky movements had reached for the doorknob. He could not be persuaded to stay. I never had such naive hope. His work was his mission, the one thing in his life that still affirmed to him that he was the perfect soldier. The one thing that he still had control over, needed no assistance with. The one thing he could do better than anybody else. I felt he cherished that quality so much, he clung to it, like one would cling to the edge of a cliff. Falling is frightening, that I knew, but I was standing there to catch him, calling up to him, but still he dare not let go. He didn't trust me to catch him.

There are so many metaphors, so many analogies, I mused grimly as I still stared at the closed door, so many parallels. But they were all equally disheartening and came down to the same thing: I was losing him to the soldier.

Everything had been so perfect since Monday. No, I corrected myself, it had seemed so perfect. His honest words and acceptance of my kisses melted away any suspicions or doubts I had. For a little while. But not long enough. And everything changed when they came back to haunt me and those
dreaded questions finally pushed passed my lips, just last night. I could see the change in his eyes immediately. They had been open and clear all through the week, showing me soft sides I had not yet witnessed before. I found out how small he could look, how lost he could look, how loving he could look. I pocketed the memory safely, till, if ever, I was able to see it again.

I went to school in spite of not being in any suitable mindset to learn. Worry consumed me. An overwhelming mixture of emotions was beating down on me, filling my lungs and taking my breath away. I had burst the bubble and since had been filled with regret. I knew better than to accept a way of living that was a charade, a lie or a careful construction of smoke and mirrors, but honestly I had felt much more comfortable and content within that bubble. Reality was even worse than the lie.

Halfway through a quiet day I took my regular seat in the colony literature class.

The teacher, who was writing quotes on the blackboard checked his watch and then looked at me curiously. "Maxwell?"

I shook my bangs out of my face to make eye-contact with him.

"Break time isn't over yet." He said.

"I know." The first words I had said since Heero left for his conference. "Do you mind?"

He shrugged, "Not at all." There was a pause and then he turned away from the board to face me with a slightly sheepish expression. "Uhm... Since you're here, miss Christenson said you might be able to help me with this..." He reached into a deep drawer and pulled out the colony model that I had watched him break before. "She said you excelled in the arts and craft class and... well, I'm horrible with that stuff. I've pretty much superglued myself to every random object in my house."

I rose from my seat and took the pieces of the colony out of his delicate hands. Hands that hadn't seen a day of manual labor in a lifetime. I quickly puzzled it together with glue and then hammered it to it's base using a wayward nail and the strong back of a heavy textbook. The teacher just finished writing down the quotes and seemed delighted to see the model in it's restored glory at the corner of his desk.

"Thank you, Maxwell." he smiled a friendly, earthian smile, "You're really good at fixing things."

"Yeah..." I muttered, not in full agreement with him. Either I wasn't as good at fixing things as he believed or some things were just too broken to be fixed. I preferred to believe in the former.

The bell rang and I returned to my seat. The classroom slowly filled, Sookie being one of the last to enter. She looked surprised when she saw me. As she sat down at the desk next to mine she asked me where I had been, she had apparently been looking for me all day.

I apologized for her trouble and causing her worry, but said nothing more.

Sookie, though not the most apt at deciphering subtle hints got the message and didn't press the issue. She quietly paid attention to class whilst I lost myself in my own thoughts.

When the class ended she walked with me to Math, in no hurry to make it to her own class. "Sooo..." She started cautiously, "What's with the gloom? Ye've been so upbeat all week... Bouncing from wall to wall."

"I'm afraid I lost the bounce in my step."
"What happened?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't exactly mind her questions and was in fact grateful for her concern, but I wasn't in the mood to offer any answers. Mostly because I didn't have most of the answers.

"Heero?"

I snorted. "What else?"

"Ya asked him?" She sped the conversation along as we were nearing my classroom.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And we had a fight. We stopped by the door to my class. "A big fight." I cast my gaze down to the floor, seeking relief. "This morning... I didn't want him to leave. It didn't feel right, but I couldn't stop him and it only made things worse." A soft hand landed on my shoulder.

"Every couple fights from time to time, Duo." Sookie's voice was soothing but sadly offered no resolve.

"About whether or not one of them has been... molested?" I bit back. I immediately apologized, it wasn't fair of me to take my anger and frustration out of her.

She was quiet for a while, uncertain about what to say, how to calm me, not knowing that no words of hers could ever offer me such. Only Heero could end my worrying.

"Maybe ya should go after him. To New York." She said with a hopeful smile. "It'll be romantic."

"I don't even know where he's staying. Besides, he won't be happily surprised, he likes to keep business and pleasure separate, because of the nature of his work. All that "confidential shit"." I frowned deeply and exclaimed with an annoyed tone: "What is the matter with me? This isn't me! Look at me fussing over this guy, always afraid that he's gonna take off. A few months ago we were just friends, not even that! And now... God, I don't even know what we are!"

"... yer in love. That's what ya are." Sookie said with her persistent smile. "Both of ya."

"Yeah?"

She nodded and chuckled at my pathetic insecurity. "Of course. Don't ya think that if he didn't really love ya back, he would've simply left? Staying with ya is hard on him, cuz it's new and awkward. But he's facing all that, for ya, cuz he loves ya." She leaned forward, up on the tips of her toes and kissed me on my cheek. "I gotta go, or I'm in serious trouble. And don't worry. Heero's gonna come back home to ya Sunday for the same reason he has been coming home to ya every single day. Love. Now I really gotta go!" She jogged off and I watched her leave.

I called after her: "You've been watching too many daytime talk shows!"

Without turning back she raised her hand and flashed me the finger, making me chuckle before I headed into the classroom.

"Duo Maxwell," the teacher said with the utmost sarcastic tone, "how gracious of you to join us. With your permission, I would like to start my class now."

"Sure." I opened my books and for the first time that day I was actually able to read the letters on
the page instead of staring into the center fold like it was a fatal abyss.

The next, shorter break between classes I invited Sookie over to my - mine and Heero's - place for dinner and she accepted with undeniable excitement. We met at the large oak tree in the front yard of the old school building and stopped by a video store and a supermarket on the way back to the apartment. In the dairy aisle I bluntly informed her that to sustain my good and light mood I wished not to talk about Heero and she nodded with understanding.

By the time we arrived at the apartment we had to start working on dinner immediately. Usually I was alone in the kitchen as I prepared meals, so it took some getting used to - sharing the limited space with someone else, but we practically made a game out of working around each other and it was a nice distraction to have someone to talk to while you waited for the water to boil or the microwave to beep.

The topic mostly revolved around her and I was fine with that. In fact, I was interested and curious. I learned a lot about her and my respect and admiration for her grew and I enjoyed listening to stories of family dinner parties and school dance recitals that were alien to me. She had led a full life, young as she was, the road had not always been easy. In that sense I considered us kin souls. I admired the lighthearted and strong manner in which she reflected on the hard times in her life and tried to return the favor by sharing more about my own history.

Of course Heero was such an important part of this life, there was no fighting the conversation circling back to him and I didn't object to it, it simply didn't feel natural not to talk about him in the context of my life story.

By the time we were done with dinner, every last bit of pasta sauce had been licked out of the pan and we had ended up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn and two bottles of beer.

"How did ya guys meet?" she asked.

"Uhm..." I scratched the back of my head. "Properly? I guess at the Alliance's hospital..."

"Why was he at the hospital?"

"I shot him."

"No! Ya shot him?"

"... Twice." I admitted with a shameful chuckle. "But I did save him from that place! And later he stole parts from my Gundam so I consider us even. And he punched me in the gut, knocking me unconscious!"

Sookie listened to the remainder of my wild stories - starring me and Heero - with a fascinated sparkle in her eyes.

"When did ya first realize ya loved him?" She asked with a dreamy voice.

I thought about it for a moment and realized there was no simple, curt answer to that. "I don't know. It all went it stages. I mean, at first I hated his guts, later thought he was crazy and then I finally started to see the sense in the madness, I saw the willpower and the strength. I admired him as a soldier. That's how it started. How that progressed into the desperate kind of love I feel for him now... I honestly have no idea."

She sighed, she found it all very romantic.
I cast a brief glance down at my watch and was startled by the time. We had talked well past midnight without either of us realizing it. Sookie caught my look and suggested it was time for her to head home and then instantly a dread washed over me that made my heart clench. I didn't want to be alone. After a moment's hesitation I offered her the couch and one of my oversized T-shirts to sleep in. To offer her Heero's bed was not an option, knowing how protective he was of his personal space.

Sookie gratefully accepted and I went to get her something to sleep in and an extra blanket and pillow while she called her grandparents to spare them worry. Luckily our couch was large and comfortable and with her being as short as she was, she could easily stretch out.

"Duo?" She called as I stood at my bedroom door, about to close it behind me.

"Yeah?"

She was sitting up on the couch, her bare knees pulled up to her chest, her blonde hair disheveled around her heart-shaped face. "Tonight was really fun."

I smiled. "Yeah, it was... Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The next morning Sookie slept through all my rummaging about in the kitchen after I had gotten us breakfast and was preparing coffee. She didn't wake until I brought a cup of steaming black coffee over to her and held it by her nose.

She wrinkled her nose, sniffed and then her eyes fluttered open. She obviously wasn't a morning person, but the coffee did her good. After her first cup was emptied, I poured her a second and then offered her the bagel with peanut butter that I had made on automatic pilot. "It's good." She said with a mouth full and a sheepish smile.

"Heero's favorite."

She smiled brighter, thoroughly enjoying my lovesick antics and quiet admissions regarding them.

I looked away, feeling a little guilty as all I could think about, with her sitting on the couch, the blanket wrapped around herself in modesty, eating the breakfast I usually made for Heero, was replacing her presence with Heero's. She was a dear friend, a good person and I enjoyed her company, but the night had been rough, staring at that tightly made-up bed against the opposite wall. A haunting emptiness.

"Maybe ya should go to the office tomorrow and pick 'im up." She suggested, finishing her second coffee.

"I don't know exactly when he'll be back."

Sookie shrugged. "So? Ya said that he thought he'd be back around ten, right? Just be there at nine thirty and wait for him. Then ya can go home together."

I frowned. "You really think I should? Isn't that kind of... over the top... clingy?"

"Not in my world. I don't know about Gundam-pilot world though." She winked.

I decided in that moment, backed up by her blessing, to go and pick him up tomorrow, no matter how long I would have to wait.
"I should get dressed."

"You can take a shower if you want. The towels are in the cabinet under the sink."

"Thanks." She tiptoed off to the bathroom with her clothes from yesterday bundled up under her arm.

Once she was ready I walked her to the nearest bus stop and hugged her goodbye, thanking her for the nice evening and her support. She brushed it off. It was no big deal to her, but it was to me. I ignored her aloof attitude and hugged her again.

When I turned to the apartment, something I had postponed by taking a lengthy detour, it was awfully quiet. I walked over to where the remote was buried in between two seat cushions and turned on the TV for some welcome background noise and then just stood by the couch for a while, not knowing what to do with myself. My feet took me back to the bedroom and my body lowered itself onto my bed. Sitting at the edge of the mattress I looked at the bed across from the small open space. The bed looked carved out of marble, with the sheets tucked in tightly and the pillow fluffed with dedication. With effort I suppressed the urge to mess it all up. It wouldn't make it seem like Heero was here, he always made his bed like that.

I passively let time tick by as my thoughts drifted further and further away from the present, back into the past. To the moment I had taken hold of that sharp, sharp needle and with it pricked at the pristine, protective bubble that had engulfed us and had distorted view of reality. It was like experiencing a well-remembered dream, every little detail had been preserved, yet it felt surreal and, in a way, distant from myself.

He was sitting right there, on the edge of his bed.

And I was sitting right next to him.

He bent forward, hands gliding down bare, long, muscled legs to take hold of the hem of each sock and pull them off one by one. He threw them to the floor, by the foot of his bed, where he clothes were neatly hung over the footboard. He was already in his black T-shirt and underwear, his sleepwear.

"You aren't going to take a shower?" I asked.

Heero shook his head. "I'm tired."

I nodded. He sounded tired.

He sighed and lowered himself onto the bed with a half bit back groan, lying across the bed with his legs still dangling off the side.

I lay down next to him, on my side, propped up on one elbow. My free hand I placed on his stomach and felt the strong muscles tense up, becoming hard like steel. "You've been working a lot." I stated, needlessly. He had been coming home exceptionally late all week and although I never caught him in a foul mood, I could tell it was wearing on him, like the wind could erode even the mountain away. His eyes were without fight, without life. Something was weighing on him, something at work, but it was all confidential; not for my ears. I didn't like that there was obviously a secret between us, even if it was only job related. That was stupid of me. I knew, more than most people, the necessity of keeping information to yourself. I guess I just still had to get used to being merely a civilian.

Like a balloon that popped, Heero deflated and his body relaxed. Yet his stomach was still hard, so
dirty. Dirty thoughts came to me, there was no stopping them. There was no stopping the devil of desire. I stroked my hand up and down, feeling his skin through the fabric of the T-shirt that was being pushed up more and more by the motion of my hand, till finally it had rode up enough for my hand to slip underneath and soak up the warmth of his skin.

"Your hand is cold." Heero's voice was groggy. I looked at his face and saw he had his eyes shut, unable to keep them open after a long, exhausting week.

"I'm warming it up." I replied softly, getting sidetracked. I kept stroking my hand up and down, feeling the slight ripple of the modest six-pack. I enjoyed the thought that however small and frail he could appear, he had unequalled strength and could easily overpower me, yet he didn't. Because he was all mine. I adjusted my position on the bed so our faces were close together. I kissed his lips, catching him by surprise. His eyes flew open, danger returning to them briefly, but exhaustion quickly made him submit. His eyes clouded over, his face was blissfully relaxed, like he normally only looked when he was sleeping, but his eyes were looking right back into mine. Into my everything.

And I looked back but I didn't see nearly as far into him as he into me.

That irked me. It had been irking me for a while. The question that had been eating away at me returned to the forefront of my thoughts, to the battlefield. I tried to fight it off by kissing him again and letting my hand trail up further underneath his shirt, but that, sadly, had limited effect. I kissed him harder, deeper and Heero lazily accepted my passion. I rejoiced when I felt his hand on the back of my neck, it wasn't a strong grip, but it was encouraging to the raging hormones. Testosterone filled my veins and threatened to burst the seams. Still that question was there, even as I bent one knee and laid my leg across his. The most innocent version of that question being:

Was I the first?

And with the testosterone the question fought for ground within my body. My stomach coiled painfully and all my muscles tensed up. I felt like it was about to explode out of me.

I suddenly broke our kiss and raised my head up a bit. "Heero, I have to ask you something..." I blurted without a second thought.

"Later." He pushed his head off the mattress and reconnected our lips. The hand on the back of my neck became more firm as he pulled me back down with him.

I pulled back again. "No, now." I said, even as I realized now was not the best - if not the worst - time.

He waited for me to speak, but I suddenly lost my words. I had dropped them and now they were scattered all across the floor and I could not make any sense of them. I made some stuttering attempts that caused his brows to furrow in confusion.

"I... Uh... God!" I sat up straight on his bed and ran my hands through my hair right to the beginning of the braid at the base of my neck where they tangled and it felt good to pull on my hair a little.

Heero sat up too, his confusion had only intensified.

"I want to talk about something." I was proud to even be able to make a coherent sentence. "I want to talk about... the next step."

He drew up one eyebrow in question. My words were making as little sense to him as they were to
me. I struggled through both our confusion.

"The next sexual step."

A dark shade settled in his eyes and replaced a flicker of trepidation I could have sworn I had seen, but his expression remained neutral and waiting.

"Ever since that time after the ball... when... well you know what happened, you were there." I forced a chuckle out of me, but it sounded as awkward as I felt and did nothing to alleviate the situation. My face reformed it's dead-serious and frankly scared expression. I took a deep breath, like that would help - it didn't - I continued down the path that I had unwisely taken. "I've been thinking stuff that I really don't want to think, because I don't want them to be true, but I think them. And I can't stop thinking about it!"

"You're being very vague." Heero interrupted, his hand smoothing over his T-shirt to cover his abdomen, even he could sense that what I was about to say would make it impossible for us to return to the intimate moment we just shared.

"I have to ask you something."

"So you said." He stated flatly, his eyes challenging.

"I know J did some crazy shit to you. And made, or let, some crazy shit happen to you... To prepare you for anything. Anything." I emphasized and looked at him expectantly, to connect the dots. But he didn't. He was going to make me ask point-blank. "When you shied away from me that night," my voice grew soft and vulnerable, reflecting my state of being, "I started thinking that maybe... something bad happened to you... in that way." I observed him intently and saw many different things in his large, blue orbs, replacing each other too quickly for me to identify anything. After moments of searching, the hints seemed to dawn on him, but his face was one of undeniable disbelief, like he couldn't believe I would ask him that.

Moments passed, stretching into the illusion of eternity and yet he didn't say anything.

My heart beat wildly, uncontrollably. I felt I might collapse and pass out from the pressure in my chest as my bleeding heart thudded in my ribcage, thundering like an approaching stampede of bulls. When he looked away I softly called his name and he looked back.

If looks could kill we'd be in a post-apocalyptic world right now.

"What exactly are you asking me?" He played dumb but the seething anger and betrayal in his voice made it evident he had understood the depth of the question perfectly. Yet I instantly recognized in his eyes that he was going to make me clarify.

"Were you raped?"

Only being hit by a bolt of lightening could describe the intensity of the words that I threw out there, into his bed, into the small space separating us. The words made that distance grow immensely, to an insurmountable stretch.

He seemed to struggle with his own thoughts for a long time, his gaze searching around the room. His chest was heaving as he panted with anger and a sense of panic. "Why are you asking me this?" he finally asked with an eerily calm tone of voice, but he could not compose himself for long, the anger was already building back up. Nothing that I could have said at that point could have prevented his outburst, so I was honest with him.
"I thought- I worried that that may have happened to you. It has been killing me inside, thinking that something like that may have happened."

"Why?" He spat halfway through my pathetic explanation.

"Wha-?"

"Has the choke-bag been killing you inside? Have all the beatings been killing you inside? Have all that other shit that you think may or may not have happened been killing you inside?" He rose to his feet, to, for once, assert dominance in height as he looked down at me sitting on his bed with a guilty expression. "How is that any different from... "that"?"

"Because..." I panted, feeling stressed and cornered. I couldn't think straight but knew I had to give him all the answers he wanted or the situation would only worsen. But he didn't give me any time to think and form my words in such a way that he would understand and could be calmed by.

"What, Duo? What?" He almost screamed. He didn't sound like himself at all.

I realized he had never yelled at me before. It cut right through me.

His voice suddenly quieted down and his narrow eyes glistened as he spoke: "Is it that you wouldn't want me if that had happened?"

"No! Heero!" I looked up at him with pleading eyes. "Heero, please, don't think like that. It's nothing like that... It's different because that's so intimate... so personal... I feared - and would understand if - that would have gotten to you more than that other stuff!"

Heero snorted and an evil grin appeared on his face under the influence of the soldier that hadn't made an appearance in a long time. "Worse things have happened to me- and I have done worse things, than rape."

I looked down. I didn't want to see his face; it wasn't him. It was merely him putting up defenses. I realized he still hadn't given me a straight answer to my question, but I was too scared to ask him again. I didn't know how to interpret his anger either. Was he angry because it did happen and he doesn't want me to know or talk about it? Or was he angry because it didn't happen and he is insulted that I have been thinking that it has for so long? Either way I felt his past had many dark aspects that were still secrets to me and he felt comfortable keeping things secret. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to know all of it, but I knew I had to. It would just have to wait till later. If he will give me later.

"Get off my bed." He ordered, dead calm.

And that had been the end of it.

He didn't tell me loved me as he tucked into bed. Still I had faith that he did. And like Sookie had said: that would bring him back to me. I had to keep faith in that. Without it I would be lost.

The lonely day came to an end. I tucked into bed early, hoping sleep would catch me quickly and take me to Sunday in a hurry. But without him lying there across from me, sleep was elusive and dawn was in no hurry whatsoever. The moon crept across the sky slowly, with the stars dancing around him. Finally the colors of the sky started to change from the midnight blue to more friendly pastels as the sun climbed higher and higher and chased away all of the darkness but the shadowy voids within myself.

I laid in bed for a long time after sunrise, fighting the aching pain in my back. I knew the lady at
the bakery would be worried, but I couldn't concern myself with that. My head was full as it was and it felt heavy, carrying it on my neck, so I rested it on the pillow for as long as I could stand it. When I finally got out, I took a shower first. My body notified me audibly of it's hunger, but there was no appetite to spur me towards the kitchen. After a leisure shower all I could force through my throat was strong, black coffee and a few dry crackers. Later in the afternoon I took a bottle of beer and after that another, because I had bought too much of it - being the street rat that I was I basically bought everyone if it was "a steal" - and it took up a lot of place in the refrigerator. Halfway through that second bottle I realized I wasn't even enjoying it, so I gave up on it and drained it in the sink. Even as I turned on the TV and cranked up the volume I could not tune out the ticking of my watch. When dinner time eventually came around, I was starting to get excited about seeing Heero again. No matter what had transpired between us before his departure I had every intention of just walking up to him, hugging him tightly and kissing him passionately, regardless of who was watching and what they would think. I had a feeling that in spite of everything, he wouldn't stop me and that made me smile.

At nine O'clock I left the apartment behind so I would be at the Preventers Head Quarters in time to welcome Heero, even if they had arrived sooner than expected. Excitement made me jog all the way to the underground metro station, I felt like nothing could tire me, even though I had barely gotten any sleep the past two nights. My uncharacteristic optimism was surprising, but I enjoyed it and I hoped the feeling would last.

Sitting in the underground train I thought it was interesting to think Heero sat here every day, twice a day, on his way to work and on his way back to me. He may have even sat it this very seat. I don't know why that thought amused me, but it did.

That tightening feeling returned to my stomach again. The train was heading up to the surface as we had cleared the city. The world had already gone dark and for a moment there was nothing to be seen, only my own reflection, as it had been inside the pitch-black tunnel. But when a mechanic voice overhead announced we were nearing Kennedy Station, I had something to look to as I peered through the window. Up ahead - I could only see it if I pressed my face against the pane of glass - was Kennedy Space Center and adjacent was the high rising tower of the Preventer agency that used the revitalized center as it's personal air- and space port, whilst showing off it's muscle to the visiting public of the museum.

The train stopped with a final announcement and I scurried to get off before the train would move on.

I was one of the few people to get off at the platform, out in the fresh, open air. The train left and I looked around myself for a moment as I tried to gather myself and determine which way to go. As I carefully read the signs a deafening rumble started. Even though it was loud, I could tell it was far away. I scanned the surroundings and spotted a dark shadow against the lights of the runway. A single light on the nose of it blinked, the air behind the machine vibrated. With those two indicators I could estimate the size. The noise increased in volume as the machine started moving. After a short warm-up it quickly sped off and it climbed into the dark sky long before it reached the end of the runway. I smiled like the young, gear-head boy that I was and watched the blinking light till it disappeared. I recognized it as one of the Super Sonic 53 aircrafts, developed around the time of my birth. Initially meant for commercial use they were quickly banned because they were too loud, even when they were at altitude. I knew the Preventers used them now, to transport agents to far away missions. At full speed the SuSo53 could cross the Atlantic Ocean in under two hours. Nothing faster had ever been created without getting into the hassle of breaking through the atmosphere. Not legally, that is. Only Heero's Gundam could rival it's speed.

I smiled and shook the nostalgia out of my head and followed the footpath that read
After a short walk I reached the entrance and the double, automatic doors slid open with a hiss as I triggered a hidden motion sensor. The lobby - looking very industrial; made of steel and concrete - was empty except for the single receptionist sitting behind her desk in the middle of the grey void.

"Good evening." She said warmly as I stopped by the door with hesitation.

I walked up to the counter and greeted her in kind.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm here to pick up a friend. He's supposed to come back from a conference tonight."

"What is your friend's name, sir?"

"Heero Yuy. He works in the computer intelligence analysis department." I chuckled. "I only remembered that because the initials are CIA."

She looked at me blankly.

"You know, from the former, pre-colony- Never mind." I waved it off, realizing there was no sense getting into it. Pre-colony times were forgotten by many. The only reason I remembered it is because reading old history books was the only fun I was allowed to have at the orphanage.

"Let me contact that department. Your name, sir?"

"Duo Maxwell."

She adjusted her headset and dialed a number, her fingers moving at a lightening speed. Even faster than Heero when he typed up reports "back in the day", sitting cramped at a small, dorm-room desk, lit only by the blue glow of his computer screen.

"Hello, this is Ona, from Reception..." She suddenly looked at me and rolled her eyes, bemused, "hm hm, may I interrupt you, Georgia? I have a visitor for Heero Yuy ... Duo Maxwell ..." She looked at me again and asked me to take a seat on one of the finely styled steel benches against the wall. "She put me on hold." Ona explained sheepishly. "This might take a while."

With my hand in my pockets I walked over to the bench and sat myself down. I heard Ona tap her pen against her desk impatiently. Then:

"Yes? Oh. Okay. Yes, I'll tell him. ... No ... Georgia, I am working, tell me later. Bye!" She stood up so she could look over the high counter. "If you would just wait here a few seconds, someone is coming down to escort you."

I frowned but realized I shouldn't be surprised. This was a secret service agency I was walking into after all. I looked at the single set of steel elevator doors in the back of the lobby and waited for them to open. It took a long time. It nearly wore down my patience, but finally a "ding" echoed through the empty space and the doors opened. A typical, nerdy looking, young man stepped out, dressed in ill-fitted sand colored slacks and a white, striped button-up with a coffee stain in it. The hair was messy and the face unshaven, but attractive in a quirky way with thick, black framed glasses perched on his nose. He walked up to me with his eyebrows heavily furrowed and his eyes lost.

"Duo Maxwell?" He simply asked.
"Yes." I stood up. I eyed him carefully. He seemed nervous and jumpy.

"Follow me."

I followed him back into the elevator. There was no panel with buttons, just a blue light, a scanner apparently. He swiped the card that he carried around his neck with a Preventer issue keychain in front of the light and the elevator started moving. A sensible method of security, workers could only reach two floors; the ground floor to get in and out and the floor they were authorized to be on; where they worked.

"I didn't catch you name." I said as I caught him staring at me in the reflection of the doors.

"That's because I didn't say it." He sighed, shifted his weight from one foot to the other and then said: "I'm Reid Mixson."

Great, I thought, disgruntled. "We talked on the phone."

"Yeah."

I saw no use in small talk. "Is Heero back from the conference yet?"

"Uh, no. Should be here soon though." He voice was shaky. I had the feeling he was scared of me. Probably because he had been such an ass to me on the phone and now realized I was about a foot taller than him and my upper arm was as big as his thigh - which said more about his thigh than my arm.

I didn't know how high the elevator climbed, with no indicator counting the floors we passed. But I assumed we were up pretty high, judging by the time the way up took, when the doors opened to a bustling hallway, workers rushing around with phones pinned between their ears and shoulders and rifling through stacks of papers and manila folders. At the far end of the hallway the space opened up to a large work floor where there was even more activity, I could hear people shouting and phones ringing.

Reid opened one of the first doors to our left and led me into a narrow, quiet hallway. He ripped open a door at the end of this hallway and gestured for me to enter.

I stepped inside and noted it was some sort of conference room, a large table in the middle, surrounded by a dozen leather desk chairs. A white canvas was pulled down in front of the window where information could be projected onto by the beamer suspended from the ceiling.

"If you would just wait here, please. I'll let you know when they arrive."

"Uh..." I looked around the boring room again, not too eager, but it didn't seem like I had much choice. "Sure."

"Great. Just wait here." He closed the door and I could hear him run back down the hall.

I walked over to the window and rolled the canvas back up so I could at least enjoy the view. I wasn't disappointed, the room looked out over one of the many space launch platforms and in the bright floodlights a space shuttle stood proudly, with it's nose up to the stars. I stared at it for a while but quickly lost my interest. At random - short - intervals I checked my watch for the time. I watched the thinnest hand tick away the seconds and when the longest hand touched the six to indicate ten thirty, I was fresh out of patience and decided to see if they had forgotten about me.

Damn the fool who forgets about the God of Death, I grumbled inwardly and stormed towards the
door, I grabbed the knob and twisted it, but ran into the hardwood door with my nose.

"What the...?" I tried the doorknob a few more times. It was definitely locked. Perhaps it was a standard security measure, to prevent me from wandering into offices I wasn't allowed to be in? My rational, if a little naive, inner voice offered. The God of Death wasn't buying it. I scanned the room but there was nothing there I could use to pick the lock.

The old-fashioned way, then, I thought. I took a step back, balanced myself on one foot and with the other I kicked the door just above the lock. It broke open and swung fully around on its hinges to slam into wall. I didn't stick around to wait and see if anyone had overheard my escape and went down the hall, back towards the door we had came through earlier. I cracked it open an inch or two and peered through the opening. It seemed the employees were too busy to pay me any heed and I decided the best strategy was to "hide in plain sight": walk like you belong there. With my hands casually tucked into my jeans pockets I walked into the open and followed the hallway to the larger open space. It struck me that it looked more like a busy command center than a room full of hackers. I walked past all the cubicles, invisible to the workers. To the left there was another hallway and feeling bold, I explored it. I quickly noted the hallway led to separate offices.

PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT WASHINGTON, one read. And the next: PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT PRUITT. The doors were open and the offices were empty.

I walked down the hallway, heading for the door at the very end, presuming it would lead to another discovery. By the door a blue light blinked, much like the scanner in the elevator. Something interesting must be beyond there, otherwise they wouldn't have protected it.

On my way I read the signs.

PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT SANTIAGO.

PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT KELLER.

PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT LEVELT.

I looked into the office of the tall, broad man I had met at the night of the ball, but his office was empty too.

I turned and looked at the sign by the door across from agent Levelt's office.

PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT YUY.

I stopped. Stupid as it may have been, the first thing that I thought was: "Does another guy named Yuy work here?" Of course that innocent thought was quickly refuted by rationality. In a state of shock I pushed the ajar door open fully. A tidy office came into view. It looked bare and lonesome, decorated only with several file cabinets, a chair, a desk and on that a single phone and computer. I stepped back out of the office and looked at the sign again. The words read back the exact same way, my eyes had not betrayed me.

PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT YUY.

I jumped when the secured door at the end of the hallway beeped and opened, but I was too frozen with shock to jump for cover. I was surprised to recognize the face that came into view.

Brown wispy hair draped smoothly across the straight shoulders of her jacket and she looked very professional in her high heels and navy blue pencil skirt. Her eyes fell on me and did not share my surprise at this encounter. Also, she didn't look like she was going to send me away because I was
somewhere I shouldn't be. She had a look of apologetic understanding to her.

"Lady Une." I said as a way of greeting.

"Duo Maxwell. Please, come with me." She guided me back to the locked door and swiped her card in front of the scanner. With that same beep the door opened and we stepped through. There was another long hallway. The doors bore signs like: GYM, SHOWERROOM, WEAPONS DEPOSIT and UNIFORM DISTRIBUTION.

We came to another door that scanned her card before it opened.

We ended up in a dark room, with many computers facing the same way and a large, lit up map of the world, the map was dotted with green and yellow lights, one blinked red on the African continent. Some people talked on phones in hushed voices, others squinted at their computer screens. This was really a command center.

"Now I don't want you to worry." Une started and walked through a doorway into a luxurious office that I presumed to be hers. "He is a little overdue, but Heero can handle any mission. He is a very capable agent, you know this and as soon as communication is restored we can arrange a pick up. It's really nothing but a little delay."

She was lying to me, but that wasn't the most important realization racing through my mind at that time.

"What mission?" I asked demandingly.
Part XX - Two steps back 2

Warheads

I was in another dull conference room. It looked identical to the one I had been in before, except
the door wasn't busted open and it wasn't locked to begin with. I had taken a seat in a one of the
chairs at the massive table. The leather creaked as I shifted uncomfortably. Nerves replaced an
eerie calm repetitively. My heart rate would briefly speed up and I would get a sick feeling in my
stomach. But then it would subside and I would be left feeling... nothing. I couldn't even think. Not
the things I wanted to think about, nor the things I didn't want to think about. My mind was blank
and quiet. I guess even the God of Death had no clever remarks.

Lady Une had been kind and forthcoming, respectful and sensitive. I might have to thank her for
that one day. But at the moment I didn't feel very grateful for anything.

"He didn't tell you?" She replied to my question, sounding genuinely surprised.

"He didn't tell me anything!" I exclaimed, standing in the middle of her office, not knowing
whether to be angry or concerned. Struggling with my decision on how to feel and where to put
those feelings, Lady Une continued her soft-voiced explanation of the situation.

"We didn't know that he didn't tell you, Duo. We assumed he had."

"He said he had a desk-job, that he worked here as a hacker!" I was feeling faint, overwhelmed
with emotions. I felt my knees might buckle any second from the weight I had been carrying
around in my chest.

Her delicate eyebrows knitted to a slight frown. "Well, he did. But only for a week or two. He has
been working missions for months now. He did stress that he couldn't be away long, that he had to
be home each night. I never figured that was because he was trying to keep this secret from you."

"Trying?" I burst, "Trying? He succeeded! I only stumbled across the truth by mere, stupid
coincidence!"

"Duo, calm down." She pressed, her eyes looked worried. She tried to get me to sit down but I
violently shook her hand off my arm. "Maybe you should rest for a while."

"No! No! I want to know everything! I want to know the truth! Right now!" I suddenly felt
someone standing behind me. I pivoted on my heels and my dark eyes fell on the short figure of
Reid Mixson. "You." I accused, pointing a finger at him. "You were in on it!" With both hands I
grabbed his shoulders tightly and pulled him towards me. His face was only inches away from
mine and he could see the dangerous rage in my eyes and I let him have a good look.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He proclaimed pathetically.

"Duo! Let him go!"

I did, but not because she told me to. I feared that if I had held on even a little bit longer, something
would be unleashed from within me that I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy.

Reid showed bravery by standing where I had put him down, right in front of me. His eyes were
earnest and pleading. "I'm sorry." He whispered and raised his hands a bit in submission.

"Mixson," Lady Une started with a strict voice, "you knew special agent Yuy was keeping this secret from Duo?"

He nodded meekly. "I helped him."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Why?" He seemed baffled. "I was supposed to say no to the most infamous of the Gundam pilots who happens to be my boss?" He spoke sarcastically.

"Boss?"

"Mister Mixson is Heero's assistant." Une explained.

"Look, he told me to keep this secret from you. I didn't think anybody would get hurt from it. He said it would be better if I helped it remain a secret."

"He said that? He literally said that?"

Reid nodded vigorously.

I sighed. I didn't understand any of this. I didn't understand why Heero would lie to me like this and why he would go to these lengths to keep the true nature of his work secret. "I gotta sit down." I said and found myself a chair to fall down on heavily. I was so exhausted my body threatened to collapse in on itself.

"Mixson, you're excused." I heard Lady Une say. I closed my eyes, not to rest them, but to prevent tears from falling out and rolling down my cheeks. I took a few seconds to calm myself, to gather my strength so I could handle this. I opened my eyes and saw Une sitting across from me, looking at me. "So he's been going on missions for months now?" I asked with a hoarse voice.

She nodded.

"Did you make him or-" I took a deep breath, "did he ask for it?"

"It was fairly gradual. He worked very hard as a hacker, so hard that, honestly, we were running out of work for him. He had increasingly more free time on his hands and I could tell that he... needed more. He started helping out creating tactical assault and invasion schemes for the field teams. He did that a few days and then we got a really hard mission. Two agents had already died on previous, botched attempts-"

"What was the mission?" I interrupted.

"We had to stop the illegal shipment of Gundanium alloy from a space port in North Carolina to an independent resource satellite off L3."

I was surprised she told me and let her continue.

"We couldn't catch them in the act, couldn't make any arrests. The two agents had gone undercover but were exposed and executed. Heero sat in on a meeting, during his lunch break, like it was the most normal thing in the world and suggested a bold plan. A dangerous plan."

I nodded, he had a flair for the sort.
"The team Captain wasn't impressed, he said we didn't have a man on payroll who could do the job, questioned if it was even possible. Heero said that he could do it. At first, I didn't let him, it was dangerous and I was afraid that even if he would succeed it would prove to be detrimental to his recovery from the war. But, as you might imagine, at that point, he insisted and after a third failure there really wasn't anything I could do. We sent him off with the team. He managed to dump the team, leave them behind to do it by himself. He was back in six hours and told me to send an arrest team to North Carolina. We found seven men, all tied up, on crates of stolen, government issue Gundanium and a camera filled with photographic evidence. The seven men ratted out the rest of the cartel immediately." She looked at me meaningfully "something had definitely spooked them."

I knew what she meant. I had seen the Perfect Soldier just that Friday.

"The case was closed. The men were tried and sentenced. I sent Heero back to his desk in the CIA department. Two days later, on an unrelated mission a whole team of agents disappeared. I asked him to hack the computer we had confiscated for that mission and he found videos of the agents being executed. He walked into my office, right before he was about to head home... and he told me... "The Preventers need a man on payroll that can do the impossible"." She was silent for a moment, contemplative. She looked at me with a pained expression, but at the same time I could tell that she had known that at that moment, she had made the right decision. "I just told him he should take his request to Administration. The next day he had his own office, an assistant, a team to captain - which he refused- and a new security clearance card." She leaned over and made me look her in the eye. "He saved a lot of lives, doing what he does."

"I thought he had already saved enough lives." I said bitterly. "I thought the time had come for him to let someone save his life. Instead he has been lying to me..." I finished with a mutter.

"I think he only lied so you wouldn't worry."

"What kind of an excuse is that?" I spat, rising to my feet. "That is ridiculous! I was a Gundam Pilot too! If anyone would understand it would have been me!"

"You would have been understanding?"

"Well... yeah! After giving him a few good knocks on the head I would have!" I paced the room back and forth a few times before I suddenly stilled. "Wait? Where is he now anyway? Is everything alright?"

She didn't answer me. That wasn't good.

I rushed out of her office, too quick for her to catch me. She may have called out my name but I paid her no heed, I walked up to the first employee I saw, sitting behind one of the computer screens in front of the map. "You." I tore his headset off his ears and cast it aside. The tech looked up at me with wide, frightened eyes. "Where is special agent Heero Yuy."

He swallowed and then pointed at the map. "He's right there, sir."

My gaze followed his finger, hoping to see Heero's figure in the glow of the computerscreen, waiting for that relief to wash over me and cleanse my heart from sorrow and worry, but I was disappointed, the path set by his indication led to the large map of the world. My eyes settled on the single red light, in Africa. "He's in Africa?"

"In Ethiopia, to be exact... sir."
"What the fuck is he doing there?"

The young man blinked at me, unsure what to say.

Une called out my name from the doorway to her office. "Let the man do his work. Heero will be home all the more faster if you stop harassing him." Recognizing my reluctance to leave him alone, she continued: "I will tell you everything. I promise."

I walked back into her office and reseated myself. I looked at her expectantly, trying to read her expression as she closed the door before she sat down at her desk. She folded her hands together and her mouth tightened. "It's hard to be a friend and diplomatic at the same time." She said out of the blue and then let more silence resume. "To tell you about an old case is one thing," She finally started, "but to tell you about an open case is something else."

I nodded, I understood. But I had every intention of keeping her to her promise should she try to diplomatically shimmy her way out of it.

"Do you know of the situation in Ethiopia?"

"No." I answered directly, not ashamed of my oblivion for I had a feeling it was the answer she was expecting.

"That's good. So we've managed to keep a lid on it here in the RUSA. Till now..." She straightened in her seat. "So here's the situation. For decades Ethiopia has suffered under a crooked government and with the help of an RUSA secret service agency a new president was appointed four years ago, an honest man who could bring balance and equality to the country. It had been going great since, but a senator, who liked the way things were previously, has been planning an assassination on the president and is staging a coup d'etat. If this senator is allowed to assume control, things will reverse into the poor state that they were; the poor will get poorer and starve and dehydrated all through the country and the rich will get richer from the money made by all the dams that will be built, that bring terrible drought to most of the country. The mission is to assassinate this senator, making it look like an accident."

I was surprised that the Preventers took matters into their own hands to this extent, but I didn't let it show. "So, Heero and his team is there now, to do this?"

"No, not a team. Heero prefers to work alone-"

"Alone? ! You sent him there alone? You never send an agent out by himself!"

"Will you let me finish?" She barked.

I quieted myself down and nodded to encourage her to continue.

"Because Heero is so damn stubborn he has been doing the smaller, lower risk missions by himself. But for this mission I refused to send him in alone, so I assigned him a partner. He wasn't happy with it, but I told him that was the only way I would let him go."

"Who is his partner?"

"Agent Levelt. He is rather new to foreign missions, but with his expertise in explosives I figured he could best complement Heero on this particular assignment."

I just let all the information come into me. I wasn't sure everything was registering, but I decided to ponder it more carefully later on, when I would have a quiet moment to myself.
"Heero is fine at making things go "boom" quite spectacularly, but because we needed to set this up as an accident, Levelt's precise knowledge would be preferred." She reached into a drawer of her desk and got out a folder, the front of it read CONFIDENTIAL in red, stamped on, letter. With her long fingernail she flicked it open and got out a large folded piece of paper. She opened it and turned it right-side-up towards me, spread out on the edge of her desk.

I leaned over and recognized it as a map of Ethiopia.

Her slim finger pointed at the city at the South edge of a large lake. "They're in Bahir Dar. Senator NgGasi likes to spend his holiday there. He has rented out an entire hotel for this weekend, paid with drug money that has made him an exceptionally wealthy man. We knew this was our best chance. The building is old, no one would think twice of a fatal structural malfunction due to a gas explosion." She looked at me sharply.

I reached over the desk into the folder and slid out a picture of what I presumed to be the hotel in question. It looked high end, but obviously it had seen better days. The facade was cracked due to the exposure to the relentless African sun. Being an explosive expert myself, I started planning the job in my head. I reached into the folder again and caught the blue print of the building between my fingers and pulled it towards me. The elevator shaft in the center of the building provided most support to the entire building. Both gas pipes and electrical wiring ran up and down the North wall of the shaft.

"How would you do it?" She asked, catching onto my train of thought.

Something automatic, instilled into me, took over. "Cut the gas, to eliminate that as a variable, restore it once the job is done, of course. Probably set the main charge along the main line to imitate the failure and set secondary and tertiary charges on other floors, against different pipes, cause they are all independent, closed systems, so they would blow up independently of one another in case of a real gas explosion. Placing charges on three consecutive floors should be enough to weaken the shaft. Leave the top few floors untouched, the weight of them will crush down on the weak spot and the three floor fall, that won't give much resistance, will allow the momentum to build up and it will basically be an unstoppable domino effect down to the basement."

Her lips curved in a small smile. "That's exactly what agent Levelt suggested."

"Then I guess he's pretty damn good." I let out a short chuckle. I eyed the photo and the blue print lengthily. It seemed like a straightforward mission, the only real obstacle to face was to get into the building unseen to set the charges and to get out before the charges go off. I trusted Heero to ghost himself into that building and I trusted him to fathom himself out of it. I had confidence in his abilities, as my comrade during war I had no choice but to trust him and that trust was never misplaced, so it stuck. Agent Levelt, however... I knew nothing of his abilities - capabilities. To me, he seemed like the most unreliable variable. "If they got it all planned out, why the delay?"

"The last message we got from them was an unexpected visitor arriving. The bodyguards we knew we had to live with as collateral damage but we couldn't with good conscience let that building collapse onto itself with NgGasi's eleven year old daughter present."

Civilian causalities. My heart started to race with remembered dread. Seeing innocent lives get wasted in the throws of war is something to never be forgotten. The fact that I never even saw the faces of the people whose lives I took makes it even worse, because it's so anonymous and I have that distance, but their families don't. They will remember those faces forever with tears in their eyes, because of me. Even the bad people who we sacrificed to reach the end of the war, were someone's family. To them they weren't the generals and colonels responsible for unnecessary
death and suffering, they were just their father, their mother, their son or their daughter. "When did you receive this last message?"

She didn't need to check her watch, obviously she had been keeping close track of time. "Little over four hours."

"Four hours?" I shook my head. Four hours was a lifetime. Worse still, four hours could mean the end of a lifetime. "Did you send a back-up team?"

She nodded slowly. "Standard procedure is after an SOS call, or after three hours since the last communication."

My stomach felt tight and alien in my body. "They only left an hour ago?" I remembered the black aircraft I had spotted on the runway just as I arrived here at the Kennedy train station. "I think I saw them leave..." I uttered, mostly to myself. "The SuSo53?"

"Yes. They should be in Kenya in about eighty minutes. We've made some improvements. It's good to be faster than people actually think you are." She elaborated as she caught my look that clearly read: that fast? "From there they will transfer to a stealth aircraft, like Heero and agent Levelt did. We are not supposed to be in Ethiopia so it's better no one knows we were ever there. Can't land there with the world's fastest but loudest airplane."

I sighed again. It was so much information, combined with so many feelings. It became confusing to me. My arms felt heavy and my legs felt weak. My head felt like veritable paradox, heavy, but empty at the same time. The lack of sleep was steadily catching up on me.

"I think you should rest for a while. I will keep you updated."

That was an hour ago and not a word yet.

Alone in that conference room, the pieces of the puzzle that I had been carrying in my pocket for a long time finally slipped into their places and a coherent picture started appearing out of the confusing jumble. Every time when I tried to contact Heero at work and after so many rings finally Reid Mixson would answer, Heero was God knows where, on a mission and his assistant was merely covering for him, feeding me more lies as side-dishes to the main, filling, gut-wrenching lie. That one time I was able to reach him, I quickly gathered, when he claimed to be working in the computer room, he was probably in truth on board the SuSo53, lying to me some more, thinking me a fool. And I was a fool!

I also remembered the flight to Relena's mansion and the crew that had greeted Heero with a grin. They knew each other, from missions!

The bruises finally made sense too. He didn't get that large, rib-breaking bruise on his abdomen from a tumble on the basketball court and he didn't fall down the stairs this week. The small bruise I had seen on his breastbone a while ago - I scolded myself for not recognizing that bruise, for I have seen and caused many of the like - the telltale sign of a fortunate wardrobe choice: a bullet being denied it's purpose, caught in a Kevlar vest.

I felt stupid, betrayed, angry, concerned, sad, but most of all, at that moment, I felt desperately helpless, sitting in that room, just waiting on the outcome of events on the other side of the world. At times like that, my hands best remembered the weight of my gun, or the resistance of the throttle of Deathscythe. But my tools had been taken from me, opportunity had been taken from me. There was nothing I could do but pray, but I wasn't very good at that. Growing up, getting nothing what you ask for, eventually makes even just asking the question too hard to bear. I almost
felt Heero would be better off without me praying for his safety, for I feared by prayer I might call a wrath upon him that was meant for me. He might be taken away from me because some higher power wants to smite me.

"He's going to be okay." I said to myself out loud. My voice sounded firm, but even as I said the words, I did not trust them. All I could trust in were Heero's skills and hope that they would be sufficient. I closed my mind and remembered a joint mission during the first war.

"Put that out." Heero said strongly.

I peered at him from underneath my eyebrows, but hadn't quite mastered the death-glare yet - the student had would never surpass the master. I held the flare in my hands by his face to see better, of course even in the dim light my eyes had not misguided me, his expression was dead serious. "What for?"

Instead of answering my question one of Heero's strong hands suddenly to came up to fight me for possession of the flare. The fight soon tipped to his advantage and as soon as he had pried it out of my grip he threw it to the ground and the flame doused in the deep, black puddle of water it landed in. As the light died, we were engulfed by darkness, swallowed into the deep realms of the earth's crust. Far behind us was a single spot of the light, the only opening back to the real world.

"Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me?" I stomped my feet childishly, splashing up water, but I couldn't see a thing. Still, I felt his gaze on me, piercing through my skin like needles. He didn't say anything for a long time and just let me rant about the "damned darkness". Heero was in one of his most stoic periods at the time.

Then his deep voice interrupted me: "We are both carrying ten kilos of explosives on our backs and you light a flare?"

I snorted. "Well, is a life worth living if you can't live a little adventurously?" I bantered.

"Is that what you call it? Adventurously?"

"Well, what would you call holding an open flame to a backpack of explosives?" I hissed sarcastically.

The question was rhetorical, but he wasn't too sensitive to that, so he replied: "Irresponsible. Dangerous. Negligent. Immature."

"Whoa! Don't use up your words for today, Heero. By now you only have like... four left and we haven't even started!" I joked, seeing the vague outline of his shoulder, which I playfully punched. My eyes started to adjust and I could dimly see his silhouette. I saw him reach deep into his pockets, what he pulled out I couldn't see, but it soon became clear. I heard something snap and crack and then a stick in his hand started to glow a bright green. I whistled. "Fancy. Doubt Indiana Jones had one of those though, so your kind of ruining the fantasy for me here." In the glow of the light-stick I could see his eyes and the clear question in them: Who is Indiana Jones? Or maybe the question the was: Does he ever stop talking? He never voiced either of those questions and silently just started further down the tunnel and I followed him. The stick helped to illuminate the ground directly before us and helped us coordinate our footing on the uneven layer of muddy clay but we couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of us, in contrast to the flare that I had had, which lit the way several yards into the tunnel. "Well, it's safe, sure, but is it efficient?" I said "efficient" in such a way that he must have recognized, for of the few words he said, that was obviously his favorite and he always said it in a distinctive way which I imitated, but it didn't provoke any response.
We followed the tunnel deep into the earth, balancing our feet on deep tire tracks left in the mud by large machinery. When I looked back, I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel any more. But considering the analogy, I took it as a positive sign and quietly followed Heero. I would have whistled, just to annoy him, get him to say something, but we were in enemy territory and if someone opened fire on us because they caught my rendition of "always look on the bright side of life" echoing down the tunnel, I might survive the initial wave of gunfire but not Heero's wrath.

We finally reached a point where the single tunnel branched off to the left. This corridor was fenced off by a high, chain-link steel fence that left only a small crevice at the roof of the circular tunnel. It was the way we had to go. I carefully took off my backpack and fumbled in one of the side pockets for the heavy duty set of plyers I had brought. Sadly, they were no match for the thick steel. "We're gonna have to climb this baby." I announced after fighting with the plyers for a while. Trying to cut the lock on the gate was hopeless as well.

If my partner had been anyone but Heero, I might have gotten a "well, duh", but I got nothing. Heero put the stick through the fence and let it fall to the ground. The fence started to rattle as he climbed into it effortlessly, quickly reaching the opening. He barely fit through. He lowered himself down on the other side and then ordered me - oh he had the nerve - to pass the bags through one by one.

I grabbed his first, pulling one strap over my shoulder and climbed the fence to the top, not nearly as elegantly as Heero had but I had the heavy bag as a believable excuse. I pushed it through the opening, for a moment fearing that it wasn't going to fit. "Heads up," I said and then let go of it.

Heero caught it and I don't know if he felt it too, but after a drop from that height, my heart skipped a beat. When nothing when epically "boom", I jumped down the fence for my own backpack and passed that through to Heero as well before climbing through the opening myself.

We both picked up our bags. Feeling the familiar weight I joked: "Think this will be enough to blow the complex?"

Heero didn't catch my sarcasm and in the green glow of the light he had picked up he shared with me his infamous death-glare. "You did the math."

"Relax! It'll be fine. We could probably blow it with half this shit."

"So you made us carry double the load, for no reason?" He asked as we walked away from the fence.

"Yeah, just to be safe, you know?"

"Doesn't seem very efficient." He grumbled.

I smiled.

We jogged the short distance to the end of the tunnel. We had reached the outer layer of the building. The steel wall was eakened by a maintenance door, large enough to have trucks pass through. I felt tugs of the straps on my shoulders as Heero rummaged in my backpack. With a hammer he hit the pins out of the hinges of one door. I stood ready, holding the weight of the door. Together we slowly lowered it down on the ground. "Heavy." I grunted. "Captain Obvious" the members of the sweepers crew used to call me. Considering some of the nicknames a chosen few of the other's had gotten, I knew myself to be lucky.

Heero drew his gun and stepped through the opening we had created. I followed suit.
Suddenly Heero crouched down and raised his balled fist.

I ducked into a shadow and held my breath. Long moments passed. Finally, I hissed at Heero to get his attention. "What is it?"

"Thought I heard something."

I snorted and pushed past him. "Call yourself a Gundam pilot..." I muttered, "... Freaking out at every little sound... Almost shot a poor rat or something..." I ripped the door to the staircase open and with my gun first walked inside. It was clear. I called Heero in and we ran up the stairs to the ground level. The halls were all deserted. Employees had responded to the alarm and returned to their respective quarters and the guards had been distracted by an explosion just within the perimeters of the compound. Nothing I had anything to do with, of course. I tapped my leather gloved fingers on a sign that read "FACTORY FLOOR" and an arrow pointing ahead. Heero nodded. We jogged down the hallway to a door that had the same sign and a large red sticker that read: "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY". Being about as "unauthorized" as they come, I pushed the door open.

Jackpot.

We entered a large open space; the factory floor. A broad rubber conveyor belt led what looked like pieces of shrapnel by all the large machines, but someone had pressed the emergency stop and a red light flashed brightly. It was standard procedure for workers to clear the floor during a threat till further notice. Since further notice had obviously yet to come, we had the place to ourselves.

"No Gundanium allowed for the Ozzies." I said, picking up a jagged shard of the special metal that with the right chemical and heating process would become the impenetrable alloy.

The factory floor was right at the heart of the ground floor, on which three more floors of offices and sleeping quarters were stacked. To allow such an open space to be able to carry the weight of the concrete slabs above it, six columns spread evenly throughout the open space were constructed. Blow the columns and everything would come crashing down.

I winked at Heero. "This is the fun part." I walked over to the nearest column and took off my backpack. We had assorted the explosives in even packages, one should be enough for each of the columns, but to be safe - and to create prettier fireworks - I had doubled up, so I stuck two packages to each column. I whistled Heero over when my backpack was empty and used the explosives he had been carrying for the final three. The columns were absolutely massive. Seeing their size made me question my math, but I shook it out of my head. I was good at this. I knew what I was doing.

"All personnel return to your work place. Repeat: All personnel, return to your work place." A nasal voice announced loudly over the intercom.

I looked at my watch and cursed. I was sure the explosion would keep them on their toes for at least an hour. "Shit." I said softly.

"What?"

"I said: Shit! We gotta reset the timers. These things gotta blow up before the workers come here and find them. Let's hope they're lazy!" My fingers worked furiously at the timer of the last charge I had placed. "Go! Go!" I yelled to Heero, who was still standing there.

"How long?" He asked, walking over to the other side of the column to reset the timer.

I wiped the instant sweat of my brow. "Pfff. Set them to 09:47." I said, running over to the next.
"Four minutes?" Heero questioned, but he worked the timer regardless and jogged over to his second. "Will that be enough to clear the place?"

"Only one way to find out!" I scrambled over to my third as Heero rushed to his. By the time we had adjusted the final timers, we had already lost a minute.

I ran back towards the exit, picking up my backpack along the way and en route handing Heero his. With our guns drawn, but in too much of a hurry to really check around the corners and past doors, we chased each other down the hall. I realized, in my panic, I didn't know which way to go. "Which way? ! Which way? !"

"Left! Left! Left!" Heero yelled back.

My body slammed into the steel door to the staircase - that's one way to open it. "Two minutes!" I announced as we flew down the stairs. I burst out of the door at the second floor underground, where we had entered and we headed back out through the door we had pried open. The chain link fence appeared before me like an impossible obstacle.

A deafening alarm went off, alerting us to OZ's discovery of the explosives. I hoped no one would try to dismantle them by taking out the timer, that would instantly set them off and we hadn't cleared the kill-zone yet.

Heero jumped into the fence and swiftly climbed to the top and over. I threw my bag to the ground and climbed up as well.

"Duo, first the bags!" Heero ordered.

"Fuck you, Yuy. We got like a minute!" I said between pants. I pushed my way through the opening and lost my balance. I fell down on the other side hard and groaned. Strong hands grabbed the fabric of my shirt at my shoulders and lifted me to my feet. He started running and dragged me along by my sleeve.

"When will we be clear?" I asked as I literally ran for my life.

"We have to clear the tunnel, it will likely collapse from the shockwaves!"

"Fantesticles!" I screamed. The light at the end of the tunnel appeared. I just hoped dearly it wasn't the metaphorical light.

We were both knocked off our feet when the ground shook powerfully and a giant rumble resounded. I instantly looked at the glow-in-the-dark hands of my watch.

09:47

"Come on!" Heero pulled me back up by my hand and kept holding it as we ran like idiot towards that distant light. Behind us I could hear the most frightening sound of concrete crashing and the floor kept shaking, making it hard for us both to maintain our balance. Then I heard earth moving, an even more frightening sound. The tunnel was collapsing.

Almost there! Almost there! "Almost there!" I screamed, squinting my eyes at the light that got brighter and brighter.

After what seemed like forever we passed through the mouth of the tunnel, back into daylight, but Heero kept tugging me along in full sprint. He didn't stop till we were about fifty yards out of the tunnel and we both threw ourselves to the ground, utterly exhausted, blowing up dusty sand with
our labored breaths. I rolled over on my back and sat up a bit to look at the black mouth of the tunnel, it seemed fine. "What the-? That isn't very-"

All of a sudden a cloud of black smoke and brown sand burst out of the mouth and I could feel tiny flecks of mud and God know what hitting me in the face. When the dust settled, the tunnel had disappeared I was just looking at a solid side of mountain.

"- spectacular." I finished, breathless and let myself fall back to the ground. "You okay there, buddy?"

"I'm not your buddy." Heero puffed, lying on his back, his chest heaving as he panted through his wide open mouth.

"If you say so, pal."

"I'm not your pal."

I snickered. "You might as well stop fighting me on this one, mate."

And he did.

"Uh, Duo? Mister Maxwell?"

I got my head out of my hands and looked up at Reid Mixson standing in the doorway of my secluded conference room. "Just "Duo" is fine."

He nodded. "Lady Une sent me to get you, she has an update."

I followed him through the command center back to Une's office. I looked at my watch but I was so tired it was hard to tell the time.

"Duo, I hope I didn't have Mixson wake you."

"No and even if... any news at this point is welcome."

She nodded. "The back-up team was dropped in lake Tana by Bahir Dar and made visual contact with the target building about fifteen minutes ago. The building has been successfully collapsed. But they haven't found Heero or agent Leveit yet, nor have they confirmed whether or not the mission itself was a success."

"So what you're saying is that in three months a random guy operating a bulldozer might stumble upon their bodies?" Before she even had the time to answer I announced I had to sit down for the second time that evening and promptly did, right where I stood, on the dark blue carpet. I didn't feel like myself all through that evening, I felt like an important part of myself, the verible psychological crutch, with which I have been holding myself up since a denied childhood, had been taken from me. Locked away somewhere deep and secret and only Heero had the key.

Une came to kneel by me and placed an elegant, lady-like hand on my shoulder. "I'm saying that at the very least they were able to set the charges and make them go off. That means they made it through most of the mission, which brings me hope they survived the last step as well."

I thought that was very naive of her to think and that perhaps she should know better, but I understood why she chose to assume this perspective. It was certainly easier. More forgiving on the mind and the heart. But my mind and my heart always knew better and could not deny that. False hope has broken my heart many times in the past, acquired cynicism made me become
immune to it. I laid myself down on the floor like Heero and I had after escaping from that tunnel and I hoped with all my being that he was doing this right now, just blowing off some steam somewhere, riding the waves of the adrenaline rush. I was surprised - no, shocked - when she lay down next to me, kicking off her high heeled shoes.

We both stared up at the paneled ceiling of her office.

"I'm sorry for allowing Heero to become an active field agent." She started.

"Don't be. I know him. When he wants something, he can't be stopped, so you might as well cooperate."

"Are you angry with him?"

"Yes." I briefly looked into myself and felt that rage tug at my heart, made me flare my nostrils and wiggle my mouth discontented. "Not for being a field agent though. That's his decision and I have no right to judge. I'm angry that he didn't tell me. What does a relationship mean when you can't be honest with each other?"

Une snorted. "You're asking the wrong person. There's a sleeping bag and a pillow in that cabinet over there, because I hardly go home. I don't even have a toothbrush at home, let alone someone who's expecting me."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. My phone vibrates."

Laughter consumed us both, catching us by surprise. In between her chuckles, she asked me: "I'm sorry, was that inappropriate?"

"Hell yeah." I answered, still laughing.

"Lady Une?"

We both looked up at Mixson's baffled face.

"Yes?" She slowly got back to her feet.

I got back into a sitting position, my legs didn't feel strong enough yet to stand.

"There's news from Special agent Santiago."

"Duo, stay here." She ordered seriously and walked out of her office barefoot with Mixson trailing behind her.

I was too tired to stand anyway. With a thundering heart I waited for her to return with news. When she did return, about five minutes later, I could tell the news was bad, still I asked.

"Yes, it's bad. But not for you, particularly. The mission failed. The first news reports are in, "Senator NgGasi escaped Bahir Dar death trap"."

"Do they buy it as an accident?"

"We won't know for a couple of weeks, when the Ethiopian investigation of the explosion will be concluded. But two SuSo53's landing in a neighboring country is not something that will be overlooked. No proof of course, but he will get cautious."
"And still no word from Heero and Levelt?"

She shook her head apologetically.

"Lady Une!" An anonymous voice screamed from the control room.

She rushed out and I mustered the strength to follow her, spurred on the immediacy in the tech's voice. The man I had talked to earlier had turned in his seat and waved us both bother, he kept one hand on the headphone over his left ear. My feet raced, as did my heart.

"What is it?" She demanded, leaning over his shoulder to look at the mostly blue screen, just a few lines of grey code at the top left.

"COM code 3045 is trying to contact us."

"COM code 3045? What is that? Une, what is that? I that Heero?" I blabbered, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans but there was no use. I really hated the not-knowing, being an outsider in a world I was once considered an expert; one of the best.

"Yes, it's Heero." She said softly. She turned back to the tech, her voice changed when she talked to her employees. "What are you hearing?"

"Just static, ma'am." He unplugged his headphone so we could hear; rhythmic bursts of static.

"Try to trace the signal."

He scrunched up his face uncertainly. "Tracing a low frequency signal from across the world, ma'am? I can't even hear him, let alone pinpoint him."

"If contacting the base in Kenya was a possibility, he would have done that. Obviously, it isn't, the line to Kenya is probably compromised. Just try it this way, okay? You!" She waved another tech over. "Contact special agent Santiago and his team, have Keller work his magic, maybe he can trace the signal from their position in the field. Tell the chopper crew in Hamusit to stand-by for an immediate emergency airlift."

"Yes, Lady Une." he rushed back to his desk.

"Is he okay? Does this mean he is okay?" I managed a strong voice, listening to the static with a half ear.

A concerned frown took to her face once more. "He might be, Duo. I want you to have hope but... We've seen malfunctions just like this before, it might just be his microphone going on and off due to damage."

The static filled the heavy silence between us.
Part XXI Life Changing Moment

Warheads

Part XXI Life Changing Moment

We, us humans, earthians and colonists alike, all like to think we are so smart, so wise. We like to walk like there is nothing to figure out, with our hands stuffed deep into our pockets where we play with a wayward nickel, some lint and all the answers man could ever hope to have. I had that same arrogant gait. It grew more confident as time passed, sometimes slow, sometimes too quick for me to catch up. I knew life, or so I thought. I knew of every footprint I had left and I knew of every next step; knew exactly how to place my feet to maintain my balance.

But we should know - especially I should have known! - that the ground is easily shifted. And all the rules and codes that we spent a lifetime gathering, learning and accepting, become meaningless and worthless and the answers are no longer answers, just precursors to new questions. And then we stand there, in unknown territory, in the dark. We don't see the footprints that we have left and we don't see the path we are ought to take. There is just the ground under our feet and even that can't be trusted.

We have this happen to us in every lifetime, some often, some few; life-changing moments. And you have to learn to walk all over again, because left and right, up and down and right and wrong are all interchangeable.

I felt like I was standing on the precipice of a life-changing moment. One of those moments that people have experienced and that they look back on, in their elderly years, either filled with pride, or emptied with regret. I've suffered many of these moments. When I was out on the street, wailing like the child I was and a honey blonde boy not much older than myself offered me a hand to help me to my feet. When the church burned before my eyes, stone overcome by flames, and I heard the sirens of police vehicles and ambulances nearing. When I walked down a rainy street, with my hands in my pockets and my eyes to the ground and a long black limousine pulled up next to me and a man with an offer rolled down the tinted window. But of them, not a single one felt as frightening and sickening as the moment I was standing in right now. Because I was powerless. Rather than having my hands tucked comfortably in my pockets, they were pinned painfully behind my back. I could not intervene, I could only watch things happen. I wasn't used to that and - I realized without much effort - I hated it. There was no choice to make. Not the decision to accept the helping hand. Not the decision to flee the scene. Not the decision to get into the car. Only nervous glances at the hateful hands of a wall clock.

I've seen many movies where the image slows and the people become blurred and the dramatic music that had been playing is muted as the main protagonists stands in a hospital corridor, or by the scene of a horrible car accident. In contrary to what those movies made me believe, my senses seemed heightened, I was acutely aware of everything, every softly whispered words by the techs, the continuous static bursts, the ticking of keyboards, the ringing of phones and even Une's voice - from as far as her office - as she talked into her phone.

"Sir... Sir, what you are asking of me is unreasonable! ... Those are my men in there! I sent them in there, I will get them back! ..."

I looked at her, at her upset face, at her defensive body language. The moment was being decided and I was on the outside looking in. The path was being treaded without my say.
"Sir, with all due respect- ... No. No, you know what? There is no respect due! I know what I'm doing and you don't. ... I understand that. Of course I understand that, we are not authorized to pass Ethiopian borders but sir, we have and now our men are out there. Because we told them to go there. ... I can't just pull back the team, they haven't found the initial team yet." After that she was silent for a long time and distanced the phone from her ears a little as she was likely being yelled at, judging by the expression on her face, the man on the other side of the line was being condescending and not taking her argument under advisement. Finally, her complexion turned defeated and she hung up the phone. Her eyes found me through the clear glass facade of the office. She took in a deep breath and then waved me over.

I left behind the hard working tech as he tried to trace the signal, but looking increasingly hopeless, and stepped into her office, hovering near the door. I felt I was about to throw up and needed a clear bolt for the nearest bathroom. "Who was that?"

"My boss."

"I thought you were the boss."

She chuckled grimly. "My boss as in the president of the Reformed United States of America."

"Oh... So what did his speech writer tell him to say?" The joking was misplaced but it was a trait that came to me naturally, even in the most inappropriate situations.

"Actually, this time, he was pretty unscripted."

I nodded, understanding. "Unscripted" meant he was being a foulmouthed asshole. I rephrased my previous question to: "What did he say?"

"Nothing good." She sat herself down in her chair and rubbed her temples. "If our involvement is exposed but we remain to be unsuccessful and NgGasi manages to make himself president, we basically started a war and I would get fired."

"What does that mean for now? For us? For Heero?"

"It means that without proof of life, I am ordered to have the rescue team retreat. The vice-president is flying in to ensure I abide by this order."

I shook my head. "They can't do this." A choking feeling crept up on me, like someone was hidden in my own shadow and had big, strong hands wrapped tight around my throat.

"They can and they are. I'm supposed to make the call right now." With her elegant finger she touched the phone on her desk, but then she suddenly looked at me with passion and determination shining through her eyes. "But the vice-president won't be here for another fifteen minutes to verify the call. That leaves us some time." She jumped up to her feet, still not wearing her shoes and made her way back towards the command center. I let her pass by me, letting her words process in my mind and then jogged after her. The grip on my neck loosened, hope was a power adversary to shadow dwelling creatures.

"Won't you get fired for the delaying the call?"

"Most certainly. But not if we agree with their condition and find them proof of life."

I smiled. "You think they're still alive?" My heart had an elevated feel to it. I don't why, just because she would think so, doesn't make it so, but I guess it gave me the hope I couldn't muster on my own.
"There's no way to know right now. But what I do know is that I sent two capable agents in there, with every expectation of getting them back. I'm holding on to that feeling, because nothing has changed. The mission may have failed but they are still the two agents I put faith in." She walked over to the technical annalist responsible for tracking the signal. "Anything?" She asked him expectantly.

"The constantly turning on and off of the signal makes it impossible to trace, ma'am."

"He might be doing that on purpose." I offered, desperate to find something that would count as proof of life.

"Possibly..." Une sounded unconvinced. "You've been getting nothing but static?" She asked the tech, leaning over his shoulder to look at the blinking line on the screen: COM 3045. COM 3045. COM 3045.

"Well, I have been focusing on the trap-and-trace but I would have noticed if there had been an SOS or something in there, ma'am." He responded with poorly disguised frustration. Irritated by her relentless scrutiny he turned back to the screen and plugged his headphones in redirecting the static from the speakers to his ears privately.

In the abrupt silence that was created, something clicked in my head. "SOS?" I questioned.

"Yeah, Save Our Souls?" The tech replied condescendingly.

"I know what it-" I let my words die out and reached over his shoulder to take hold of the plug of his headphones and gave them a rough tug, ripping the plug out of the computer.

"You can't do that!" He yelled at me and defiantly tried to plug his headphones back in.

I swatted away his pale, bony hands with my right hand and covered the entry in the computer with my left to prevent any following attempts. "Shut up, will you?" I hissed at him, a voice in the back of my head - mischief evident in the tone - told me to punch him in the face, but for once that little, deviant voice was drowned out by the voice of reason, I knew that would only prolong the process and not encourage cooperation of any form. I tuned the tech out as he denied my request and started ranting to Une about this "crude" invasion of his workspace and that I wasn't allowed to be in the control room to begin with.

I listened to the rhythm of bursts till my heart skipped with it in step. It seemed like random short and longer bursts of static, intermitted by short and longer pauses. A smile broke the gloom that had taken to my face, the feeling in my heart was indescribable.

Une silenced the tech with a definitive order and asked me gently what it was.

"It's an SOS."

"It's static." The tech argued childishly.

"No, it's an SOS. It's Morse code." I said to him with a raised, dangerous voice. I looked back up at Une and repeated wistfully: "It's Morse code. He has been sending us SOS messages all this time! I can't believe I missed it!"

"It's an antiquated technique," the tech set, bent on ruining the moment and my hope, "no one uses it anymore since the introduction of the more efficient coded alphabet by Jaeger!"

"That is exactly why we used it!" I bit back. "Trust me Une, it's Morse code, he's alive. Short.
"Why would a trained Preventer agent use such an outdated code when we teach them the Jaeger code for emergencies?" The snotty tech protested.

Realization visibly dawned on Lady Une's face. "We never trained him. He didn't go through Preventer training, so he wasn't taught the new code."

"Will this do?" I asked hurriedly, as time ticked by and the vice-president was on his way to call off the rescue. "Will this be good as proof of life?"

Une ran towards a different desk in the darkened room and urged another worker to access the virtual database and print her a copy of the Morse code Alphabetic table. He briefly dared to give her a strange, questioning glance but she affirmed her order and he quickly set to work. She tapped the one next to him on the shoulder and told him to call down to reception and tell Ona to stall the vice-president upon arrival as long as possible. "Hurry up on that table." She called, before walking back over to me. "Good work, Duo." She smiled at me and patted me on the shoulder, she was panting with excitement and relief.

"I could just kick myself for not recognizing it sooner!" I let out a laughter that suddenly overwhelmed me, erupting out of me as the relief washed away most of my nerves.

He was alive.

"Lady Une," the employee walked towards us and handed Une a sheet of printed paper, "the table you asked for, ma'am."

She practically ripped it out of his hands and traced the table for the O and the S. With her eyes fixed on the paper she fell silent and listened to the static bursts intently. "Short. Short. Short. Long. Long. Long. Short. Short. Short." I heard her mutter under her breath. She looked up at me and her smile just widened. "You're right. Again, Duo, good work."

The tech had lingered at her side and coughed to regain her attention. "I should also inform you that Ona called and the vice president is being escorted up as we speak."

"That's fine. We're ready for him."

Just as the words left her finely red painted lips, the door at the far side of the control room opened and light poured in from the hallway. The silhouette of a short, plump man appeared. He stomped over towards Une with quick, angry steps, flanked by towering bodyguards. His bald head shone in the blue light of the computer screens. His glasses had slid halfway down his nose and he was gazing over the top of them with imminent murder in his eyes. As he came to stand in front of Lady Une's regal, proud figure, all he could look at, for several moments, lasting inappropriately long, were her bare feet. Even without her high heels she was still taller than the hissing and puffing man. He probably took it as a deliberate mockery of his vertically challenged form.

"Have you made the call?" He barked with a low, obnoxious voice.

Une smiled down at him sweetly. "No, mister vice-president, I've been keeping the line free for you."

Instead of responding to her provocative statement he suddenly snapped his head to the right to look up at me with his beady little eyes, as I was just standing there, watching and listening to their conversation. "Who the hell are you?"
Before I could answer Une interjected with: "He is the concerned partner of one of the agents gone missing in the field."

The man mumbled something incoherent. "Why haven't you made the call?"

"You might want to call the president first."

"He made his decision and as I understand he was very clear to you about it."

"We have knew information that may cause him to reconsider. With the help of mister Maxwell we have just decoded an SOS call from one of the agents." She gestured towards the speaker from which the static still came forth. "Morse Code. An SOS. Policy is to respond to an SOS no matter what. The president wrote this policy himself, I'm sure he will feel very motivated to honor it."

He stared at her, clearly displeased, for many passing seconds till he finally grumbled: "Give me a phone."

"You can use the one in my office."

The man walked over to her office and behind his back Une shared a triumphant smile with me. The man returned quickly, the conversation had been short. He obviously didn't agree with the decision that had been made but he declared that the president had authorized the rescue to continue. "But," he added with a threatening tone, raising a stubby finger into the air, "you do it quick and you do it quiet." He left without saying anything further.

Une immediately moved to sit down in an empty chair by a large video phone and turned to the man beside her. "Patch me through to contact 08." She looked back at me over her shoulder and explained: "I'm calling in a favor."

The screen blinked to life showing a tanned young man in a business suit. He smiled when he recognized Une's gentle face. "My dear Lady Une."

"Jonathan, it's good to see you."

"I presume this is a business call?"

"You presume correct. I'm calling in that favor."

"Damn." He chuckled. "When I asked you to ground all media choppers for my wedding I knew I would have to get myself in trouble one day. What can I do for you?"

"I want you to ring the alarm in Bahir Dar. We need the streets to be quiet for about an hour or so."

"Anything for the Lady." Jonathan responded glibly. "I will make some calls, you should have the streets to yourself in about five minutes."

"Thank you, Jonathan. Your debt is paid. Goodbye."

He said his goodbye and then the feed was disconnected and the screen went black except for white letters across the center reading: CONNECTION LOST.

"Who is he?" I inquired curiously.

"He's one of the American ambassadors in Kenya. Fully integrated, if you know what that means. He has many contacts, beyond the Ethiopian border as well." She rose back to her feet.
"What does the alarm do?" I asked as I followed her around.

"A sandstorm alarm, much like an air-raid alarm. Every African city located within the perimeter of the desert has one. When it goes off, people know better than to stay outside, they go indoors and lock and blind every door and window." She gestured for me to wait as she addressed an employee and ordered him to contact the back-up team and inform them that the about to resound alarm is false and serves only as distraction to buy them free roam of the vicinity. "There will be no civilians to get in the way," She continued to me, "but also the police and the media the attempt on NgGasi's life will have surely generated by now, will be forced to bunker down inside and wait till the alarm is stopped. Without their prying eyes on the street, we have a safe window of opportunity to look for Heero and Levelt. Obviously, there won't be a storm, but false alarms are common."

I watched as the entire room came to life with renewed energy, the sounds of typing and ringing phones seemed to speed up and workers were walking around comically fast.

I lingered in the control room by Une's side for a while, but eventually returned to my private conference room to gather my thoughts and feelings, sort them in a way that would make sense to me. There wasn't any reason to stay in the control room, I would only be a bother, getting in people's way. During the search for Heero and Levelt by the team on site, radio-silence was enforced. There wasn't anything to listen to but the continuous distress signal sent by Heero, which I could still hear from within the confines of the separate room. Even though every burst did something painful to my heart, like taking a bite out of it, it was even more disheartening to listen to it decrease in frequency as time passed on and he must be getting tired. I wondered if he started to lose hope of being rescued. I wondered if he was scared. I wondered if he was worried. I wondered if he thought of me, of what might be going on here, back home. I reminded myself that he was the perfect soldier and probably the only thing on his mind was the failure of the mission. Through the resentment at being lied to, I could still feel the empathy for him and even though I knew painful times would be ahead of us following his return, my heart was so desperate for his closeness that it even yearned to share this pain with him.

My heart, I knew, was quite the sado-masochist, but I never made any apologies for that. When you've been dulled and calloused by images of war, any feeling is reason to rejoice, it means the sights haven't defeated you.

I wondered if Heero could confidently state that he was unbeaten by the sights...

The static stopped.

I sat up straight in my seat, my heart beating furiously. I was convinced that the mere seconds that went by were eternities.

"Duo!" Lady Une called from a distance.

Though I was sitting with my back towards the door, I didn't turn around to look at her, knowing that whatever expression she currently bore, would seal my faith and I didn't know if I was ready for that yet. I only slightly moved my head, to let her know she had my attention. I wished she would say nothing, for only the littlest while, prolong my happiness and my hope, before she might crush it.

"They found him!" She called from across the room.

My whole body froze.

"They found him and he's alright! They're bringing him home!" She didn't approach me, she
continued working and left me to myself.

The ground stopped shaking, the lights returned and illuminated the path that I knew and looked forward to walking. Left was still left, right was still right. Like a hurricane that suddenly changes course, I was spared a painful life-changing moment.

Upon hearing the news, I started to cry. The feelings that filled me were like nothing I had ever experienced before. My heart felt full with positive feelings, but felt light at the same time and my whole body trembled as it was finally able to release all that pent up anxiety and dread. I cried all the sad feelings out of me, rejecting them from my soul. After crying for about five minutes - a salty pool of tears forming on the table - I was able to smile and every tear that fell from that point on were spilt out of sensational happiness, that I almost felt I had no right to.

Undeserving as I may have been, I reveled the feeling and pushed all "what if's" from my conscious thought, they were unimportant now, only reality mattered. And luckily, for once, reality was as amazing as the dream.

I had lost my anger and the hurtful betrayal somewhere in the depths of me. I knew they would resurface, with foul, displeased faces, but for now I was content in their absence as the waiting game continued. At best it would take the team three hours to get back to the Head Quarters. I spent that time re-braiding my disheveled hair, lacing my hands together and repetitively placing the left ankle over the right and then shifting in my seat and placing the right ankle over the left. Honestly, that was all I did.

My mind focused all it's energy on getting Heero home; call it a monotonous mantra, call it a symptom sleep deprivation, it wouldn't matter. I kept imagining that moment that I would see him again, trying to estimate the intensity of the emotions I would be submitted to, so that I could prepare myself, steady myself and not let myself be reduced to a crying mess of a person in front of tall, masculine agents. For some reason, even at times like this, that was of some importance. We all have big ego's, us Gundam Pilots.

I realized Heero might not be in any state to hug and kiss, regardless, that's what I wanted to do. Berating him and yelling at him for lying to me, spitting in the face of the trust that I had been nurturing between us, would have to come later. At the end of the day, when all was said and done - all lies had been given and accepted - I still loved him. That feeling dominated everything else, empowered by the relief of Une's words that still echoed in my ears.

"They found him and he's alright!"

Of course he is. He is Heero - fucking - Yuy, I joked to myself inwardly, even though I knew there was an untold truth behind that statement. Still the Perfect Soldier, he took bigger risks that anyone would take, pushed his body farther than other people would and by doing that he makes himself all the more vulnerable. Just because your bones are like gundanium and your skin is hard as steel, doesn't make crossing the road without looking any less dangerous. And as well-protected as he may be, comparing easily to strong alloys like I had, my heart was of mere glass and shattered at every drop I experienced each time he would veritably cover his eyes with his hands and step into traffic, or lied to me, or didn't speak to me, or shied away from me. Picking up all the pieces and mending it back together each time, was starting to take it's toll, more than superficial cuts to the fingers and palms.

My ears perked when I heard an approaching rumble.

I pushed out of my seat, knocking the chair backwards and stepped towards the large window of the conference room overlooking the dimly lit airstrip. I waited as the noise got louder. The sound
seemed to reach it's peak and I laid my hands flat against the window pane and felt it vibrate. I peered outside with narrowed eyes. I couldn't see much, but focused on the lights lining the runway. The intensity of the sound decreased a little and then I saw a long awaited black shadow appear on the tarmac. With an unrestrained smile I raced out of my private little room and found Une in her office with her feet propped up on her desk and her eyes closed. Though she appeared to be sleeping, I called out her name and her brown eyes shot open. "They're here. I saw the SuSo land."

She quickly got to her feet herself and demanded information from the nearest present tech. He informed her that they were flying him to the helipad on the roof.

I wondered why. When I closed my eyes I saw blood, so I forced them back open, even though they burned with tiredness.

She didn't tell me to follow her, but I assumed that was implied and I did, as she ran to the door and opened it with her card. I trailed behind and she guided me back towards the elevator, she swiped her card and said with exaggerated articulation: "Roof access". The elevator took us further up in the building, to the top floor. The doors opened to a long stretched, narrow corridor leading to only one door with a red sticker warning us, the print was illegible from the distance. We started towards it but halfway down the hallway the door already opened and several men in black uniforms hurried through. Amidst them I spotted a familiar mop of chocolate brown hair and upon seeing it I realized fully how much I had missed even just his hair. The sensitive pads of my fingers were instantly reminded at the silky softness of his dark strands from when I ran them through his hair, or wrapped my hands around his neck, with my thumbs buried into his hair.

"Heero!" I called out.

The men looked up with serious faces and one of them yelled at me: "Get out of the way!"

Both Une and I stepped to the side so they could pass by us. When the group of men parted and I saw Heero, being supported by the shoulder of one of them, my heart first soared to impossible heights, but then plummeted down back into reality and the seriousness of the situation.

He wore a pair of black cargo pants, with handguns and ammo strapped around his waist and thighs, his upper body was covered only by a black sweater with a Preventer logo attached with velcro over the right side of his chest. Worryingly his clothes were torn in several places and the rips exposed bloodied skin and open wounds. He walked with a heavy limp and the cut fabric over his right knee revealed dark blood. He had bloodied scrapes on his neck and face as well, dried trails of blood coming down his nose. His left ear was damaged, the shell was cut in several places and the skin looked burnt. He had his right arm held tight to his torso, the hand looked limp.

Most discouraging of all was the dead expression in his eyes. They looked grey even though I knew them to be an intense, vibrant blue. It sank my heart to new depths.

I noticed he was wearing two sets of dog tags and my gaze briefly searched for the giant agent amongst the others, but he wasn't there. Agent Levelt was dead, I knew instantly and it added to the grief I felt for Heero.

I reached out for him, hoping my touch would revive him from the dark place he allowed himself to sink into, but the men surrounding him pushed past Une and me without apologies and my outstretched hand was deflected by a hard, broad chest. The skin on my arm scraped across the rough, protective Kevlar but my own pain was insignificant. "Is he okay?" I asked the team, but none of them offered any answers nor assurance as they rushed him to the elevator, crowding it. Une and I were forced to wait as they brought him down. I asked Une, dazed and confused and
once again reminded of how tired I was, where they were taking him.

"To the hospital floor. Once the elevator is free we will join them." She pressed the button by the steel doors several times, appearing impatient and anxious herself.

"I thought you said he was all right." I wondered out loud as I waited by her side.

"That's what they told me. His injuries probably aren't very serious. I'm sure he'll be fine." In spite of her calm and supportive voice, she practically jumped into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. "Hospital floor." She ordered and the elevator hummed back to life and brought us down.

The lobby that was then revealed before us was white and sterile, with several long corridors branching off it with overhead signs that were indeed very reminiscent of an actual hospital.

I hated hospitals, I noted with a heavy feeling. I let Une lead the way, I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing anyway, I was only directed by the pull of the magnet of my heart that was being attracted to the steel encasing of his.

She walked to the central reception in the lobby where two nurses in crisp white uniforms were chatting with each other. When they caught the presence of their boss they both straightened up and smoothed their shirts nervously.

"Lady Une." One said and bowed her head in a polite greeting.

"Where did they take the agent that was just brought here?"

"They took him to see doctor Borland." When she finished speaking the escort of agents that had rudely bypassed us earlier emerged from one of the narrow corridors, their black uniforms stood out in the all-white surroundings, they seemed like black voids within the light. Eclipses. They approached Une dutifully and I figured I could slip past them and find Heero while the Lady debriefed them, but as I tip-toed around them purposefully a strong, masculine voice barked at me:

"Where are you going?"

I turned around to look at a tanned man with chapped lips and small eyes and freckles all over his face that did nothing to diffuse the intimidation of his expression, nor the strict military cut of his dark hair. Another agent walked over and blocked the way to the corridor they had come from. Instead of feeling threatened, instead of being submissive to their authoritarian stance, with their legs at shoulders' width and hands on their hips, I felt angry. I felt deviant. I felt like someone was about to get hurt and even though they were the ones dressed in full armor, I didn't think that would be me.

"Step back, sir." The one who had blocked the way wrapped his big, long fingers around my upper arm.

He asked for it.

In a single, swift motion I shook my arm free and pivoted on the ball of my foot to swing my white-knuckled fist at him. My fist connect with his face with a crack, he had been too cocky to even try and avoid my assault. He paid no heed to his bloodied nose and tried to regain control over me but just as he was about to showcase what Preventer agents were made of, Une called us all to order.

A nurse rushed to the man's side and mothered over his asymmetrical nose. Even though he seemed to manage the pain just fine, he made no objections as one of the attractive young nurses led him to a private suture room to tend to his injury.
Drained of any empathy, all I could think was: "One down..." With my eyes I challenged the others, but got nothing more than angry stares as they stood at ease with their hands behind their backs.

"Duo, I know you are worried about Heero. I promise him you can see him as soon as the doctor is done with him." Une negotiated.

I looked at her in disbelief. I thought she was on my side! "Une." I objected, but what I started I could not finish, with her looking at me like that, I knew there was nothing I could say to convince her otherwise. Her will would be done.

"An agent is debriefing him while doctor Borland examines and treats him. That can only be done in privacy." She tried to take hold of my shoulder but I shook her loose grip off as well. "Duo, come upstairs with us, you can wait for him there."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to wait for him right here." I was being infantile and stubborn but felt I had the right to be, after all I had been through that night.

Une made no contest. She left me alone in the desolate white space as she took the agents back up to the control room to debrief them. The single nurse I was left with looked at me hesitantly.

"You look very tired." She said with a timid voice.

"I am." There was no denying it. I glanced at my watch, squinting at the tiny hands.

"It's three fortyfive AM." She said and then offered to give me something to help me sleep.

"I need something to help me stay awake. Have that?"

She shook her head "no", she didn't want to give me something like that. It probably wasn't healthy, giving someone severely sleep deprived medicine that would keep him up.

I paced back and forth through the lobby, intently gazing down the hallway each time I walked towards it. It remained quiet. Maybe I had expected to hear Heero make noise. His arm had quite obviously been dislocated and setting it back into place would be an extremely painful procedure. But he was the Perfect Soldier. Being quiet was his thing. I never heard a single peep.

The nurse and the agent I had socked in the face came back out. He had a large bandage over his abused facial feature. He looked at me, warning me with his eyes, but stepped into the elevator and left without a single word or thrown punch. The two nurses whispered amongst themselves. I caught them looking at me. I smiled weakly but presumed it looked as crooked and horrible as it felt. The nurse that had offered me medicine disappeared into a room just off the main lobby. I heard her rummaging around in there and then the steady sound of plastic wheels over the white, tiled floor. I watched her push a white, plastic office chair towards me. She stopped two feet away from me and dug her hands deep into the pockets of her uniform. She fidgeted shyly and then said apologetically: "It's not the most comfortable..." She gave it a final push towards me.

I stared at the chair for a while, awed and touched by her kind offering. "Thank you." I said genuinely and rolled the chair to the wall - because it felt strange sitting down in the middle of the room - and positioned the chair so that, once seated, I could look down the hall unhindered, with my view unobstructed. As soon as I had seated myself, she returned and handed me a white plastic cup with water.

I accepted it gratefully. "Thank you." The cold water soothed my dry, sore throat.

The nurses were apparently quite interested in me. They talked to each other a lot in hushed
whispers and looked over at me with steady intervals. They blushed as they - more than once - got caught looking, but always smiled and made me confident they had no ill intentions.

I assumed it was the braid. It was always the braid.

Another eternity passed as I waited, under the girlish scrutiny of the nurses.

Just as I got up, running on the last fumes of my patience and strength, a door at the far end opened and an agent dressed in black and an elderly doctor dressed in white, stepped out into the hallway. I hurried towards the end of the hall but their forms blocked my way. Both of them ignored me as the men talked to each other and occasionally pointed at something mentioned in the chart that the doctor was holding in his small, old hands. He ripped out a page, folded it awkwardly with one hand and then handed it to the agent, at which the agent accepted it and walked off.

"Sir, you are here for Special Agent Yuy?" The man questioned without taking his eyes off the chart.

"Yes."

"Follow me."

"But Heero is there, isn't he?" I weakly objected, pointing at the door that the doctor guided me further and further away from.

He opened a different door down the hall and ushered me inside. It was as white, sterile and alien as everything else had been. There was a single table, with two white chairs on opposite sides. In spite of my strong associations with interrogation rooms - which this particular room shared many similarities with - the first thing to cross my mind was: "The bad-news room". He told me to sit down, but I refused. All the while he didn't look at me, only at his chart through his thick glasses.

He came across as a caricature of a man, short and thin, with emaciated features except for a prominent bulbous nose and heavy eyelids that made his gaze tired-looking. His frail figure appeared bird-like to me, as did his movements; sharp and quick.

He smacked his lips as he read through his own writing in the chart. The conversation started with a shallow cough. He spoke mechanically and quickly, making it hard for me to keep up with him.

"Preventer Special Agent H. Yuy. Presented at three thirty-nine AM." He never looked up as he read aloud a list I could vaguely see on the chart. "Internal injuries: Serious concussion. Dislocation of the right shoulder. Five cracked ribs on the right side, causing some respiratory issues. Bullet wound above the left hipbone, no vital organs hit. Shifted kneecap in the left leg. Tendonitis to the left Achilles tendon. External injuries: Lacerations on the right brow. Subconjunctival hemorrhage in the right eye. Lacerations to the left pinna. Third degree burns to the left pinna. First degree burns to the side of the neck. Deep laceration to the left upper arm. Superficial cuts to the torso area. Bullet wound, through and through, left thigh. Shallow laceration to the left knee."

He suddenly looked up at me, it startled me.

"How is he doing?" I asked meekly, turning shy under the man's ice blue stare.

"I just told you." He turned the page over and directed his attention back to the chart. "In-hospital-treatment," he started dutifully "Setting of the right shoulder. Immobilizing the shoulder with a brace. Supporting the arm with a sling. Bullet retrieved from midsection, wound disinfected, sutured and dressed. Knee cap readjusted and immobilized with knee brace. Surgery to the left

"What kind of morphinomimetic?" I inquired.

He looked at me sharply. "I can't tell you. Government issue. But expect him to feel pretty good tonight. Till it wears off."

"Strong stuff, huh?" I muttered.

"I continue," he announced, flipping another page, "out-patient care: Wake-up schedule. For the first episode of sleep after suffering the concussion, patient must be awoken every hour for the first six hours and asked simple questions for assessment of cognitive functions. After the initial six hours, another six hours of waking the patient every two hours. After twelve hours without signs of cognitive impairment, patient can sleep. Keep the right shoulder immobilized to allow stretched tendons and muscles to heal. Wear provided brace for an advised two weeks, continue to wear provided sling for four weeks."

I looked at my feet, I knew both the brace and the sling would be gone pretty quickly. Heero was the worst patient in that way. In many ways, actually.

"Keep bullet wound to midsection clean and frequently change the bandages. Immobilize the knee with the provided brace for four weeks. Put no wait on the knee for two weeks. Limit exercise to a minimum for an advised two to three months. Re-dress surgery-suture to the left ankle frequently, wound should heal in time with knee. Physical therapy required. Keep left Pinna clean, monitor healing of the wounds. Re-dress laceration to the upper arm frequently. Re-dress bullet wound to thigh frequently. Keep the wounds out of water to best of abilities. Do not let wounds get wet for an advised two days." he finished with a nod and then said the long-awaited words: "You may see him now."

I didn't need to be told twice. I let myself out of the room and found my own way around. There was minor trepidation as I stood by the door to where Heero would be. I was afraid anger would resurface and it would be an inappropriate moment. I wanted to take him home and get us both some rest. I could be angry with him later. I pushed the door open and expected to see his lonesome figure lying underneath white hospital sheets with exposed frailty. But when my eyes actually landed on his form, I knew there would be no anger coming out of me for a long time, the image was different, but still pathetic and heart wrenching.

I found him sitting on the edge of an examination table, dressed in a change of clothes that wasn't his; baggy jeans and a large, loose T-shirt in a faded shade of red. He was sitting completely still, looking down into his lap. I noticed the sling that held his right arm to his body and the dark blue brace that peeked from underneath the short sleeve. The knee brace was hidden behind the fabric of the jeans. He had only one shoe on, on his right foot, his left was bare except for the white bandage wrapped tightly around his ankle and the arch of his foot. His left ear looked like a big lump of whipped cream as the complex shape of it was awkwardly bandaged. Leaning against the bed was a single crutch.

I started towards him, my feet making no sound on the white floor. "Buddy?" I asked gingerly as I neared him. He didn't respond in any way, worrying me. He seemed frozen. I came to stand right by him and still he didn't move a muscle and he kept staring at his lap, sitting limply, drained. I bent over so I could look at his face, it looked ravished. His left cheek was red and irritated, a continuation of the first degree burn to his neck but a stark contrast to the pale appearance of the
rest of his complexion. His lips were cracked. His chin, nose and right cheek has suffered friction with a rough surface, causing the skin to break. Two small band-aids kept the cut through his right eyebrow closed, so it could heal naturally. In his eye on that same side I noticed the hemorrhage that the doctor had mentioned, the outer half of the white of his eye was a bright, blood red. What scared me most about the eyes however was the dead, unfocused look in them. He seemed shell shocked. I touched his unharmed shoulder and finally managed to provoke eyecontact.

His gaze quickly shifted towards me, for a moment they did not seem to recognize me, but then something visibly dawned and he spoke with a weakened voice: "Hey."

It sounded so pathetic it nearly broke my heart. "Hey." I said back, sounding as carefree and unconcerned as I could muster.

"Are you mad?" He sounded so small and childlike.

"Yes." Unlike him, I didn't want to be dishonest. "But not right now. Later."

He nodded and looked very ashamed.

"Don't forget the wake-up schedule." The doctor, who had joined us, warned as he adjusted some surgical tools on a metal tray.

"I won't." I offered Heero my shoulder to lean on, to ease him off the table and then reached over and handed him the crutch. "But... what questions should I ask him?" Heero placed his one good foot on the floor and leaned heavily on the crutch. The disorientation was apparent in his eyes and the small surface area of the crutch provided little support. I decided, before he would crash to the floor, to take the crutch from him and wrap his left arm around my shoulders and my own arm around his waist, being mindful of the condition his body was in.

"Ask him his name. Your name. Where he is. How old he is. Any form of coherency and as long as he actually answers the questions, is fine."

I nodded. "Thanks."

He prepared a syringe, squirting a few milliliters of fluid out of the sharp end. "Go. I'm expecting my next patient."

I thanked him for helping Heero and guided my friend out of the treatment room. When we reached the lobby the elevator doors opened and an agent with a bloodied leg was wheeled in in a wheelchair. I looked away when I noticed the bone protruding through the skin. I realized Heero had been lucky, his injuries were relatively minor, just many of them. I didn't worry much about the physical damage, it was the psychological injury he had no doubt sustained that caused me concern.

The nurses had retrieved a wheelchair for Heero, but as high on drugs as he may have been he was also too haughty with pride to accept and stubbornly limped along by my side. Right before the doors of the elevator closed, the kind young nurse informed that with courtesy of Lady Une, a limousine was waiting downstairs to bring us home.

"What time is it?" Heero slurred, leaning his head heavily on my shoulders.

"I don't know, buddy. But don't worry, I'll get you home and into bed quick."

He moaned into my shirt.
With cumbersome steps we finally reached the exit. Another receptionist who had replaced Ona during the night bid us goodbye. The doors slid open with a muted hiss and a black limousine gleamed before us in the orange rays of the rising sun. It was morning already.

The driver opened the door for us and I helped Heero inside. Once I was seated myself and the driver took to the steering wheel I gave him the address that was our home. I couldn't wait to be there. I needed to forget all about this night, but I knew that I couldn't. I knew that no matter how hard I would try to ignore it, it would always be there. I hated this stained memory already.

Home felt alien and strange. When I opened our front door and looked into the living room, bathed in soft morning light, I didn't even recognize it. It was different, somehow. The lie had changed it, I glowered inwardly. I realized my happiness in an earlier moment had deceived me. My life had changed after all, not because of the danger of Heero's mission, but because of Heero's treacherous lie. The trust I thought we shared, what binded us, was gone, obliterated. That was the reality I now had to face. Heero had survived, but I something between us had died.

I sighed, there was nothing I could do to revive it at the time, all I could do was tend to the physical form of Heero. The wellfare of our relationship would have to be put on hold, till he was well enough for me to yell at without feeling guilty and concerned for his health.

"Come on." I groaned and dragged him along the last few feet to his bed. At his bedside I picked him up and gently laid him down. He was barely awake, moaning nothings, making halfhearted attempts to swat my hands away as I undressed him. I took off the sling and his shoe first. Then I urged him to sit up so I could take off the shirt. I pushed his good arm through first, then his head and finally slowly slipped it over his other arm, exposing the brace that was wrapped around his upper-arm and a structured plate over his entire shoulder area, secured by a strap looped around his neck and his chest, going under the other arm. I took my time examining all the little band-aids across his chest and abdomen, smelling the disinfectant in the bandages, the cuts themselves were minor, but as they were probably caused by shrapnel, an infection couldn't be risked. Blood was already soaking through the thick bandage wrapped around his left upper-arm. I discarded the shirt and then fumbled with his jeans, my tired eyes could barely see in the darkness of our blinded bedroom. Bandage was wrapped low all around his waist and I was careful not to let the jeans get caught on it and disturbing the bandage. I hugged the jeans down his leg, cursing under my breath as it caught on the edge of the knee brace. I unhooked it with dexterous fingers and then slid the garment off completely, shortly admiring the leg brace that fully embraced the joint, with the only opening right over his kneecap, which revealed the bandage of the shallow cut.

"You made a mess of yourself." I told him. The only response I got was a faint wheeze as he breathed slowly. Because he was lying on top of his own blanket, I got the extra one we kept in the closet and covered his undressed frame with it. When I was sure he was comfortable and warm I took two steps back and fell down onto my own bed. I glanced sideways at my alarm clock, it was about to go off, but I wouldn't be going to school today. I grabbed the clock and reset the alarm an hour later, in case I fell asleep, but tired as I may have been, sleep didn't come to me and I regretted not accepting the nurse's generous offer for some relaxing pills. In the darkened room, sunlight straining but failing to filter through the drapes, I listened to my own fast-paced heartbeat and Heero's slow, wheezed breathing.

I tried to imagine what happened in Africa, tried to fathom questions that would get me some answers out of him. The ceiling offered no resolve, no matter how determinedly I glared at it.

The hour went by quicker than expected. The alarm went off with a shrill, disturbing cry. I groaned and told my body to move. For a moment it disobeyed and remained limp in my bed but with a little more encouragement I was finally able to swing a leg over the edge of the bed and plant a foot on
the floor and go from there. With an old man's groan I kneeled by Heero's bed and ran a hand through his hair, when that didn't wake him, I tapped his chest repetitively till his eyes fluttered open. He looked at me with large innocent eyes but the blood in the right orb reminded me painfully of what had transpired.

"Time for a little test."

All I got was a confused stare.

I sighed heavily. "What's my name, buddy?"

A deep frown appeared, the bandage over his eyebrow made noise as his face moved. His voice was weak and drowsy as he asked in reply: "Why? Did you forget?"

"What's my name?" I repeated.

"Your name is Duo Maxwell. You are Gundam pilot 02 and... you have a braid."

I chuckled suddenly, even though it cost my body unimaginable effort. "I see you are enjoying the drugs."

He moaned and closed his eyes, rolling his head away from me.

"Not yet, buddy. Now tell me what your name is." I tapped him on the chest again to get his undivided attention.

He kept his eyes closed but a frown reformed nonetheless. "It's not "buddy"?"

"No, it's not "buddy". What is your name?"

"I don't have a name..." His voice cracked and a pained expression appeared on his face. He let out a displeased groan.

"Okay, okay. I guess that's a pretty loaded question. For you and I both." I gently stroked his hair again, feeling the swelling that had caused the concussion. "What colony are we on?"

A victorious smile was evident in the slight curl to the corner of his lips. After a shallow intake of breath he muttered: "Hmm... Trick question, we are on earth."

"Very good. What year is it?"

He groaned again.

"Last question buddy, what year is it?"

"197." He muttered, not a trace of that smile left.

"Good, well done- And you're already falling asleep. Okay." I touched his undamaged ear, feeling the softness of the skin and briefly wondered if the other ear would heal properly. With a deep breath I guided my exhausted body back to my own bed and reset the alarm once more.

I counted the seconds in the hour, cursing sleep for neglecting me.

After turning off the alarm I literally rolled out of bed and crawled over to Heero's side to wake him.
"Hm?" He looked at me sloe-eyed.

Was it wrong to think at such a time that he looked sexy? I shook the thought from my mind and asked him for my name again.

"You forgot already?" He complained.

"Just tell me my name, Heero." I didn't mean to sound angry, but I was tired and consequently; impatient.

"Duo Maxwell." He shot back.

"Do I have a braid?" I resumed in a quieter voice.

"What? Do you need me to check?"

Accepting his sarcasm as an affirmative answer I went on: "Where do you work?" I tapped him on the chest again as he was near sleep. I repeated the question.

"I'm a preventer special agent at... the preventer agency for special agents... very special."

"Now, was that so hard?" I responded darkly.

He looked at me in confusion, he didn't understand the implied accusation.

"Nevermind, go back to sleep."

Heero promptly did, but I couldn't. I couldn't even move from my spot on the floor. I lay my arm along the edge of his bed and rested my head on it. It dawned on me what a long night - or day, rather - it was going to be. I set the alarm again, in case I would fall asleep, but I didn't. I blankly watched the numbers change on the digital display of my alarm clock till it went off again. My head was so heavy it strained my neck to hold it up, I could feel painful pressure building in the base vertebrae. It took more than a tap to the chest to wake Heero up. I shook him by his left shoulder till his eyes flew open.

"Pop quiz." I muttered. I was shocked that I didn't even recognize my own voice anymore. I sounded like an old man who had smoked all his life and had all the life and vividness squeezed out of him forcefully. "What's two plus two?"

"Not again." He grumbled, reaching up to his face to rub his eyes.

"Yes, again. Say it." I pressed, struggling to control my temper, affected by lack of sleep and a betrayed heart.

"Duo Maxwell." He was unmistakably irritated. "Maybe you should write this stuff down."

I laughed, sudden and loud, it had caught me by surprise and simply burst out of me. I noticed a smile on Heero's face at my laughter and reminded myself to reserve my anger for later. "What's two plus two?"

"An easy question."

"You're a smart-ass when you're high. If the question's so simple, why don't you answer it?"

He sighed in defeat. He winced sharply as his broken ribs aggravated his lung. "Four." He ground out through his teeth.
I touched his arm gently with my calloused fingers, hoping to offer some relief. "What's two times five?"

Knowing that I would not allow him to bypass the question with a clever remark, he answered immediately, correctly.

"Ding! Ding! Ding! We have a winner!" I chuckled and ran my hand through his hair again.

Encouragingly he leaned into my touch. "I like winning." He muttered absent-mindedly.

"I'm sure you do." I chuckled lightly. "Go back to sleep, Mister Comedy."

"Next time, come with more original questions." He slurred before sleep overcame him.

I fumbled with the alarm to set a new time. I waited for sleep to take me too, but it refused, sleep was like a train and it raced past my station. I rose to my feet and found my way to the bathroom by touch, not because it was so dark, but because I despite my best efforts, I couldn't force my eyes to open. I stumbled towards the sink and washed my face with ice cold water. When I cracked open one eye and looked at my reflection, I didn't see myself, I saw a disheveled man that looked like he had aged a decade in the last rotation of the earth. With fingers trembling from exhaustion I shaved away the rough stubble that had appeared and then dunked my head under the open faucet, not fussing about getting my hair wet. My face was dripping when the alarm went off, so I wiped it sloppily with the front of my T-shirt as I made my way back to the nightstand. Heero seemed undisturbed by the loud shrieking.

I sat down on the edge of his bed and shook him awake once more.

"What is Marilyn Monroe's date of death?" I asked when his eyes found me.

"What? I don't even know who that is." He grumbled. "Wait, is that that weather girl you liked?"

I chuckled again, I couldn't help but be warmed inside by his uncharacteristic adorableness. "Yes, you are absolutely right..." I realized my changed strategy wasn't working and returned to simple questions. "What's rule number one?"

His face turned serious. "The mission has priority." The words didn't sound like his. They weren't, he was just repeating a recording from a long time ago.

"The weight of Wing?"

"7.1 tons." He closed his eyes again. "It hurts to breathe." He admitted in a whisper and took in a deep breath that caused him to wince visibly.

"I know. I have that too sometimes." But not because a piece of rib-bone is pricking into my lung, I added inwardly, you are the cause of it.

"Go back to sleep." I kissed his lips lightly, but he was unresponsive, already fast asleep.

I continued to wake him up every hour and then every two hours as the doctor had said, remaining on the floor by his bedside. When the twelfth hour had passed and the world was dark again outside, I made my way back to the comfort of my own bed and rather than blissfully fall asleep, I promptly passed out.
I woke up to a new day. I didn't know what day it was. It could be the next day, or the day after that, or a week could have passed, there was no way of knowing. All I knew, by way of pulling back the curtain, was that it was day. Somewhere around midday. The sun was high and proud in the sky, but I didn't like it. It was like seeing a smile on the face of a person you hate, it only brought vengeful resentment. The curtain slipped from my weak grasp and fell shut. Darkness resumed but I couldn't let sleep recapture me, my back was aching, my stomach was growling, my throat was dry and I needed to pee badly. No matter how forlorn a person's mind could get, the brain could not ignore bodily functions.

When I sat up straight, the world started to spin, challenging my equilibrium. I swung my arms around, searching for support and found it; the windowsill above my bed. My painful eyes fell on Heero's slight form, he seemed to disappear into his mattress, being swallowed by it like quicksand. He looked so small. I looked at him for as long as I could stand it, watching the rise and fall at his shallow breaths, accompanied by high pitched wheeze, his mouth was open with his strained respiration. A dark shadow had cast over the skin around his eyes, like it was bruised.

My stomach growled again and urged me to get up. Still in my clothes from God knows how many days ago, I walked into the bathroom and relieved myself. Looking at the mirror and the stubble that had appeared on my cheeks and chin I reckoned I had missed two days, which would make it halfway through Wednesday, but I felt like I had been dead and buried for lasting years. I shaved, even before I ate, to much protest of my stomach, because I didn't like the look of rough stubble on my face. I guess I was just trying to fight the inevitable aging process, growing up, becoming an adult. If my soul got any older than I already felt it was, I would be an elderly man.

There was some frozen bread in the freezer that I impatiently defrosted in the microwave. It tasted stale, in spite of the lavish lathering of peanut butter. The strong black coffee made up for a lot, though. The hot liquid going down my throat was like a soothing burn. When I felt myself becoming normal, regaining some of the strength that had been forcefully drained from me, I walked up to the telephone, where a light blinked red with missed calls.

"You have... Four... Missed calls." A mechanical voice informed me.

I pressed a button.

"Play... All... Messages." The machine said, followed by an intrusive beep. While the messages played, time, date and caller ID were displayed on the small video screen.

"This is Trish MacLeane, from Tampa High school Administration. I'm calling for Duo Maxwell. You were absent from your first and second period today but you did not call in sick. Please call back as soon as you receive this message to affirm you are home sick and call again everyday you will not be able to make it to school. When you return to school, please stop by the Administration desk for an Absence Form. Get well soon, goodbye."

Another beep and the second message sounded through the speakers.

"Hello, this is Trish MacLeane from Tampa High school Administration again. You didn't call in
sick today, again. Please call back when you get this message and don't forget to come by the Admin. desk as soon as possible for your Absence Form, thank you. Get well, goodbye."

The third message was much of the same, with the time stamp placing at this morning at nine O'clock.

Beep.

"Hey, Duo?" Sookie's hesitant voice sounded. "Duo? Duo! I'm downstairs, by the door... Duo? Okay, so I guess yer really not home. Call me back ya get this, okay? I'm worried." There was a long pause before the final beep resounded and the mechanical voice offered me choices of saving, deleting or replaying the messages. I simply pressed "EXIT MENU" on the touch screen, not in any state to make even the most irrelevant, insignificant decision.

Then I was just standing there, by the front door, my hand pressed against the wall next to the telephone, as I leaned heavily. My legs felt too weak to stand on, I could feel the knee joints quivering. I had yet to recover from my lack of sleep, but knew there would be no sense in returning to bed. Instead I ran a hot bath, treading around the bathroom as quietly as possibly for I did not want to disturb Heero. His body was probably in need of some vital resources as well and maybe I should have awoken him, let him use the bathroom, drink something, eat something, help him take a shower if he would be up for it, but honestly I could use the mental distance between us, with him being unconscious. I wasn't ready to face him yet, I didn't know what I would, or could, say to him. All I had to say was that he hurt me, but his body was in pain and he had just lost his partner and was probably blaming himself - he always does - it would be selfish of me to force my own wronged feelings onto him. At the same time it was selfish of him to expect otherwise. So it was better this way, a little bit more time apart.

The warm water enveloped my naked body like a warm embrace and relieved some of the weight I felt in my limbs. The faucet dripped in a slow, but steady rhythm and the sound of every droplet hitting the water and making the surface ripple was all to be heard. Heero's labored breathing, accentuated by sharp wheezes at each intake of breath, was shut out by the thick wooden door and the steam that was gathering in the room provided further protection, fogging up the mirror and the reflective tiles on the wall.

I didn't get out of the tub till the water had cooled off so dramatically my body was shivering in the cold forcefully and my uncontrollable shaking had nearly caused me to slip on the wet floor as I stepped out. I dried up and got dressed in a fresh set of warm clothes and inhaled their clean sent hungrily. For a moment there was only the breezy scent of the cotton fabric of my sweater, the hot steam in my face and the weight of my damp braid against my back, but then something got me to wipe my hand across the surface of the mirror and revealed myself and all my baggage. The lie was evident in the face that stared back at me. I hadn't noticed before, but my expression was caught in a sad frown with the corners of my mouth curving down and my eyebrows low over my sullen eyes. I tried a smile, but my facial muscles had no recollection of the gesture. My face remained unchanged.

I fled from the mirror, through our bedroom, into the living room. Beyond the big bay window I saw the world had gone dark again except for a full moon. I turned on the sci fi channel to, fittingly, a series about a werewolf. The plot was lost on me, I wasn't really paying attention.

Somewhere during an episode of a miniseries I didn't really care for but appreciated as background noise, I must have drifted off, because something woke me with a start. My whole body tensed on the couch as my fogged brain tried to decipher what my senses were registering. I failed miserably the first few attempts but then a tug at my heart strings brought awareness to me and I identified
the sounds that had pulled me from sub-consciousness as painful moans.

As soon as I had figured it out, I jumped to my feet and rushed to our bedroom, flicking on the lights.

Heero was lying on the floor next to his bed, his eyes clenched shut, his mouth open as he gritted his teeth. He had his left hand wrapped around his knee, gripping it tightly.

"Heero." I took the final steps towards him and kneeled by his side.

"I'm fine." He ground out and then slowly relaxed while the pain apparently subsided. He squinted his eyes against the bright light.

Careful to pull him up by his undamaged limbs I helped him to his feet, he leaned heavily on my shoulder, he kept his left foot off the ground, his right leg trembled, trying, but failing, to support his full weight. I maneuvered him around to lay him back into bed, but he stopped me with a soft voiced: "Wait."

"What?"

He didn't look up at me, only showing his tangled mop of dark hair. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"Okay." I understood him to be ashamed of requiring my help for this simple task, but I had been a soldier to, bodily functions are bodily functions, I could reduce it to mechanics like I could reduce Algebra to the variables. Slowly we made our way to the bathroom and I brought him close to the toilet.

He tried to fight my hands away. I had one arm wrapped around his waist and the other hooked under his left arm, going high across his chest, my fingers touching the hard plastic of the shoulder brace. "Thank you." He said urgently and continued to try to pry my grip loose.

"Just do your thing." I said, with no intention of releasing him, knowing he wouldn't be able to keep standing on his own strength.

"I will, as soon as you leave."

I shook my head firmly. "The way I see it, we have three options. One: I support you while you pee. Two: I leave and you fall over, peeing all over the floor and three: You pee yourself while we argue about it. Personally, I vote for option one, because I know who is going to be cleaning up in case of option two and three."

"Fine." He grunted and pulled down his underwear with his left hand.

With my face buried in his neck, averting my eyes to salvage his last shred of privacy, I was surprised it took him so long to start, he was obviously very embarrassed, almost so much he couldn't pull it off, but finally bodily functions won over irrational shame. When he was done after a long time I guided him to the sink so he could wash his hand. I looked at the two of us in the reflection of the mirror, noting, not for the first time, what an odd couple we made. If I'd have to draw comparisons I'd say my face is carved out of the side of a soft stone mountain, terrorized by the eroding forces of the elements. My life showed on my face and in my tired, weathered eyes. Heero, my gaze shifted to his face, was an impassive mold of Gundanium. With his eyes closed there was nothing there to suggest a horrible past of pain and hurt. But when he eyes opened...

He suddenly looked at me in the reflection, his eyes gaping holes into darkness. "I'm done." He announced.
I nodded and brought him back to his bed where I instructed him to sit and wait. I rummaged through our closet, looking for a pair of my own baggy sweatpants and one of my warm sweaters. I brought the mismatched set to him along with clean underwear from his own side of the closet. While he changed his underwear, struggling as he only had one hand to work with, I occupied my gaze elsewhere, where the rough pads of my fingers played with the hem of the sweater. I had chosen my clothes because they were bigger than his and allowed for more space to maneuver his battered limbs into.

I didn't say a word as I helped him get dressed. The sweater in particular was a hassle to put on, he moaned when I forced his arm too far, but I didn't apologize. After the sweater came the sling to support the weight of his arm to relieve the weakened muscles and tendons surrounding the shoulder joint. I felt him looking at me the entire time and it cost me effort not to return the meaningful gaze. I purposefully kept looking at the task at hand till we were finally done and I left him behind to bring him back the crutch that had been leaning against the wall by the front door all this time.

"I'm fine." He said again and he cumbersomely raised himself to his feet without accepting the crutch I held out to him.

"Heero." I warned. It pissed me off that he ignored me.

He gingerly tried to put some weight on his left foot to take the first step, but as soon as his weight shifted to that side, he cringed, let out a high-pitched "Ah!" and would have crashed down to the floor if not for my lightening reflexes. It was by mere luck that I had managed to catch him without upsetting any of his many other wounds.

"Use the damn crutch, Heero." I ordered. "Or would you prefer I carry you around for the next two weeks?"

He took the crutch, though his eyes were furious in protest and hooked it under his left arm. His walk was slow. Glacial. But I remained by his side, not confident that he could make it to the kitchen without falling and hurting himself. He was annoyed by my mothering, over-concerned presence, but might as well get used to it. We were going to be in each others face a lot during his lengthy recovery.

He reached the kitchen table without further accident, but his whole body was trembling terribly from the exertion. I stood by, idly but alert, as he lowered himself into one of the wooden chairs and I couldn't breathe easily till he was finally seated and safe. I prepared him breakfast - even though the hour was near midnight - of defrosted bread with a thick layer of peanut butter and a large glass of orange juice. He looked at the glass full of orange sunshine and then at me.

"Drink it, it's good for you. You're not getting any coffee, you still have some more sleeping to do." I sat down across from him, watching him eat his first meal in a long time. I stared at the red bloody patch in his right eye. "Does it hurt?" I asked, pointing at his eye.

"No." He replied between bites. "Just everything else does."

I nodded, I could tell from his movements that his whole body was sore and painful.

"Aren't you going to get angry with me?"

I sighed, honestly too drained to be angry, besides, I couldn't yell at him when he looked so tiny and vulnerable, that would make me feel like the bad guy and I didn't deserve that. "Don't worry. It'll come to me and I'll make sure you are the first to know."
He looked at me for fleeting seconds with that confused frown to his eyebrows. He was trying to read me, but after all this time he remained illiterate. For that I could not blame him, but sometimes it hurt my heart more than I could stand and I would wonder why, of all people, I had fallen in love with Heero Yuy, subject to the Perfect Soldier.

After he had finished his breakfast I took him back to the bathroom and ran the shower while we worked on undressing him again. I folded the clothes neatly, they could be worn again before needing washing and placed them on the closed lid of the plastic hamper in the corner. I tested the water, reaching out one hand under the diffused spray of water. Normally, hot showers were preferred, but hot water could sting in the wounds. I looked back at Heero, who was sitting on the seat of the toilet, his head leaning back against the cold tile wall. His eyes were heavily lidded, sleep was starting to reclaim him, but we had to get the scent of ash and fire off his skin and redress his wounds.

I took off my own shirt and pants, shivering in my underwear. I tested the water again and it seemed even colder. I dreaded getting under the spray with him, but I knew he needed someone to hold him up. I hoped my own waning strength wouldn't fail me.

I kneeled before him and unhooked the clasps and ripped free the Velcro of his knee brace, with a hand in the hollow of his knee I supported the weight of his leg, which I kept straight. I placed his foot on the floor in a way that would not cause the joint to bend and then moved over to take off the heavy shoulder brace. It took a little puzzling and Heero winced when I tried to pull it off his body when I had forgotten to loosen the last clasp. I left the old bandages on, so they could protect the wounds from the majority of the water while I washed him and the water and soap would help release the medical tape from his skin.

"Come on." I grunted as I hoisted him off the seat. By the bath I sat him down on the edge of tub and helped his legs over the side one by one. Then I stepped into the tub myself and pulled him up.

He frowned deeply in discontent as the lukewarm water - feeling cold to the skin - hit his naked body.

"I know." I was shivering myself. I wrapped one arm around his waist tightly, making sure that even if he slipped or his leg would give out, I could prevent him from falling. With my other hand I searched the wall for the little shelf where we kept our shampoo and soap.

Heero could do nothing but let me wash him as he had to use his good arm to stabilize his right arm against his side.

I flipped the cap of the shampoo bottle open and held it upside down above Heero's head, squeezing to get some of the syrupy liquid out. I literally threw the bottle away, in a hurry to catch the blob of shampoo before it dripped off his head. When I started rubbing it into his hair, the small space that we shared between the wall and the shower curtain was filled with a soft vanilla scent. I deemed my mission successful and completed when the entire mass of his hair was lathered and smelling sweetly. I warned him to close his eyes and then guided the showerhead to focus the spray on the top of his head. I thoroughly rinsed the shampoo from his hair, massaging his scalp with my one free hand. He seemed to enjoy it. I could hear, but also feel - with his back pressed against my chest - his breathing evening out and becoming relaxed.

"Don't fall asleep, buddy." I whispered gently in his undamaged ear. The "buddy"-thing came so naturally to me...

"Hn..."
I soaped up his body, working around all the areas covered in bulky white bandages. Some of them started to come undone and exposed some sutured and some open wounds. Looking at his face I saw he had gritted his teeth and his left hand clutched his right elbow strongly. The soap was stinging in the wounds, but there was nothing I could do to relieve that pain other than pick up the pace a little and once done quickly grab the showerhead and rinse off all the soap.

"We're done." I eased him back onto the edge of the tub. I kept my hand against his back in case he would lose his balance and fall backwards, while I reached for the faucet and closed it. The steady fall of water came to an abrupt end and we were suddenly even colder. I stepped over the wall of the bathtub and got him out the same way I had gotten him in and then deposited him back on the toilet seat. I dried us both off in haste and then wrapped the big towel around him while I went to fetch the first aid kit from a cabinet in the laundry room. It was a good thing that some habits die hard. The kit was a quite a lot more elaborate than the little Tupperware box most people had lying around. The large box was heavy as I carried it to the bathroom and thudded loudly as I placed it on the floor. It was filled with bandages, band aids of different sizes and textures, several rolls of medical tape, a small suture kit, stainless steel tongs for removing bullets, a wide variety of disinfecting crèmes and sprays and a bottle of antibiotics that Heero had wisely salvaged from his Gundam.

I twisted off the cap and filled it with water and handed him one of the large pills, instructing him to swallow it. He did so with effort, coughing and gagging before he succeeded. He was even too tired to swallow.

I worked my way from the bottom up, starting by peeling away the bandage around his left foot, revealing a bruised ankle displaying the whole spectrum of colors possible in a bruise. On the back of his ankle was the neatly sutured incision from the surgery to his Achilles tendon. I examined the work briefly, admiring the evident skills and then used a strong, supportive bandage to wrap the foot again and tied it together with two safety pins. The bandage over the knee had come loose in the shower. The wound was minor but I wrapped it with a thick bandage regardless because it would have to withstand the friction with the plastic knee brace. As soon as I was done, I set said knee brace back in place, making sure the opening in the front lined up with his kneecap, the bandage made it a little difficult to tell.

"Move a little for me?" I hooked my hand under his right knee and eased him towards the edge of the seat so I could tend to the entry and exit bullet wounds on his left thigh. After that I wrapped bandages all around his waist and paused my medical ministrations briefly to help him into his underwear. With his most private parts covered up it took away a lot of the awkwardness of the situation. I dutifully bandaged the wounds on his torso and the deep cut to his left upper arm and then reassembled the shoulder brace back into place.

The last wound I tended to was his damaged left ear shell. His whole body tensed up when I peeled away the bandage and tape that had stuck to the ugly wound. The skin was charred, it was red, raw and hard and there was a deep cut in the top of his ear and lower, just above his earlobe, nearly severing it from his ear.

"Is it hideous?" He asked, his eyes searching mine in vain.

I didn't know why he asked. It didn't sound like he cared, nor did I suspect it to be something he cared about. Maybe he was afraid I cared. With careful fingers I applied several crèmes to the skin to help it heal and fight off infections and decided it was probably better not to bandage it, so the wound could breathe and I wouldn't cause Heero more pain when it would have to be peeled off again later. I didn't answer his question before I had completed my task and cleaned up the mess I had made. I looked him in the eyes, trying to ignore the blood that had pooled in the right orb and
said to him: "You are still beautiful." I meant every word. I sighed and then helped him back into his clothes and after getting dressed myself I took him to his bed. He declared that he wasn't tired, but I ignored him and laid him down.

"Next time you want to get out of bed, call me." I ordered, placing the warm sheet on top of him.

"I shouldn't sleep," He said, disregarding my order, "I need to restore my biological rhythm."

I directed squinted eyes at my wristwatch. It was deep into the night, almost so deep morning was nearing. He was right that sleeping at these unorthodox hours would disrupt his rhythm, but I was also right that he needed more rest. Stubbornness may have weighed in more than anything else and I sided with myself. "Just sleep. We'll worry about your fucking rhythm later." I smoothed the sheets, then wished him goodnight and left, shutting the door behind me firmly. I was tired myself, my bed called to me seductively, but I needed some distance from him. Being around him confused me. I was angry, I had every right to be angry and I deserved to be angry, but when I was with him, all I could do was feel concerned and care. Care so much. I wish I could not-care, just for a little while, but even his lie could not stop me from caring.

I dropped down on the couch, the TV screen still flickering - with an outer space action scene constructed of poor CGI - I shrugged my shoulders and ducked my chin into the neck opening of my warm sweater. I tucked my cold hands in between my thighs and realized I should probably turn the Air-conditioning down, but even the mere though exhausted me hopelessly. I looked at the white apparatus fastened high on the far wall and focused all of my remaining energy into my most intimidating glare, but the AC was comically unimpressed and kept humming a happy tune as it blew cold air into the apartment.

I felt the cold dry out my eyes, so I shut them for just a moment.

When I opened them I realized I had fallen asleep and had been caught into the web of a surreal dream.

I was running up a flight of stairs. Blue illuminated shards of glass assembled into a winding staircase in a vast black space of nothing, with nothing below me, nothing beside me and nothing above me. As I climbed, my bare feet were cut by the razor sharp edges of the shards and it hurt, a kind of hurt that shot through my entire body but centered in my heart. I ran, even though I knew the stairs would lead to nowhere, I understood that they went on forever, every flesh cutting step let to another and another, but I was driven by haste, fear and determination.

"Come on!" I screamed. I thought at first at myself, to urge myself on, even though the pain was evident in my voice, but I noticed the vice-like grip on my left hand and the weight tugging on my shoulder. I didn't look back, I knew it was Heero whom I was dragging forward and I knew I must not let him go. I had to hold on and I had to keep running. From somewhere, from everywhere, echoing through the nothingness was the sound of glass shattering. In the wake of our path the glass steps lost their weightless position in space and descended down by the force of gravity. I heard Heero panting an wheezing behind me, struggling to keep up do to the injuries he had sustained on his mission.

His secret mission. His lied about mission.

"Aren't you angry with me?" He called from behind me.

"Just keep running!"

"Aren't you angry with me?" He repeated, like he hadn't heard me.
I grumbled under my breath. "Just shut up and run!"

He failed to hear me again, with that same tone, like time was being rewound, he asked "Aren't you angry with me?"

"Yes! Yes, I am fucking furious!" I screamed and I stopped my running to turn around. As I did so, I felt his hand slipping from mine. I could have firmed my grip, could have reached down my other hand, but I didn't. I felt him slip and I did nothing.

He fell against the side of the glass steps, cutting the skin of his palms and forearms as he put them forth protectively. With his head down his bangs covered his face.

The steps started to give out, first the one at his feet, then at his knees, his hips and his torso. His whole lower body dangled down into the dark abyss. The edge of the step against his chest cut into the flesh and blood flowed. I heard a dripping sound, the sound of his blood hitting the floor, even though the floor could well be an eternity below us. The final two steps he was holding onto started to fail, small shards of it going down, disappearing from sight, as soon he will if I wouldn't stop it.

"It's okay, Duo." He spoke reassuringly with a soft tone.

"I'll help you." I said in response, but for some reason my body wouldn't move.

"No, Duo. It's okay." He looked up at me. His eyes were frightening, the white of his eyes had turned a blood red and his irises caught the light in a pale, ice blue.

The steps broke and he fell. Seconds later I heard the same shattering of glass on the ground, followed by a thud that was accompanied by sickening cracks.

I opened my eyes and saw the ceiling of our living room. I placed two hands over my stomach, feeling nauseous. I looked down my body at my clean, bare feet. There was no blood there, but I could still feel the sharp pain that had traveled to my heart. I breathed deeply for a few lingering moments. Trying to make sense of things, even though I knew I couldn't. The dream and reality were both equally confusing. With the back of my hand I wiped my forehead, sweat had gathered there in spite of the chilling cold that had overcome the room. I groaned as I hoisted myself into a sitting position and forced my head around to look through the window. Judging by the position of the sun, it was somewhere in the afternoon. The dream had been short, but apparently the sleep had been lengthy.

I snuck towards our bedroom and peeked inside. The ajar door cast a sharp line of golden light into the darkened room and molded to Heero's sleeping form. I stood listening in the doorway. It took forever but I finally heard the wheeze I was growing too accustomed to. I simply looked at him for a little while, enjoying how normal and peaceful he looked with the sheets and the shadows hiding his wounds from sight.

The ringing of the intercom disturbed a rare moment. I shut the door as quietly as possible and hurried towards the intercom. "Hello?" I asked warily.

"Duo."

The voice was cracked over the poor quality of the line, but the identity of the speaker was unmistakable. "What are you doing here?" I inquired breathless, completely amazed.

"Do you mind coming to the door. Talks easier."

"Right. Right." I scratched the back of my head sheepishly. "I'll be right down. Don't go
anywhere." I said stupidly. Running through the hall barefoot probably wasn't the most hygienic thing I had ever done, but also not the least, so I couldn't be bothered if the soles of my feet ended up blackened and filthy. In the reflection of the steel doors of the elevator it was brought to my awareness how ridiculous I looked in my baggy, navy blue sweatpants, bright red sweater, disheveled hair and dark rings under my eyes. Not to mention barefoot.

Once the elevator doors opened I sprinted past the mailboxes to the front door. Eager hands gripped the handle and almost tore the steel door out of the doorway.

He appeared to me like an angelic vision to the backdrop of bright, white light.

I lunged my tired body forward and hugged him like it was appropriate to hug an old friend. I felt the chuckle rumble in his chest as I embraced him tightly. "I can't believe you're here." I said into the juncture of his neck and shoulder, smelling the clean clothes my hug was wrinkling. "You didn't have to come." I said, even though I was immensely grateful that he had.

"Of course I had to come."

We both pulled back to look at each other. "You look great, Quatre." I said, looking at his glowing face.

"You look horrible, Duo." His tone changed as did his face, to something grim and concerned, to something that would never smile again. I realized, with a drop of my heart, he suddenly resembled me. He placed his small hands on my broad shoulders and squeezed them. His eyes were telling, but what they were saying I wasn't sure I understood. "I came as soon as I heard."

"I'm assuming Une made some un-requested calls?" I led him inside and back to the elevator. It was strange, even stranger than when I had seen him at the party, for now he was entering my world, my little niche in the universe, and I wasn't sure he would approve. It's not quite the traditional niche...

"Yes. I'm sorry it took me so long. L4 to Earth isn't exactly a daily flight, I had to make some arrangements." He looked at me in apparent pity.

I disliked it, but I didn't mention it. "You have to stop apologizing. Not everything is your fault... I'm glad you came." I admitted softly. "I've been... I'm sort of a mess."

"Yes, I see." He pinched a lock of my messy hair between his fingers and pulled it away from my head. One of the many bundles of strands that had fought the confinement of the braid successfully. "How is he?"

"Goddamn stubborn."

Quatre nodded and chuckled softly. "I've heard the stories from Trowa."

"Yeah. He's not exactly a model patient. For now he sleeps mostly though. And I'm kind of grateful for that. I don't really know what to do with him."

An awkward silence fell between us till the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. I led the way to the apartment's front door and before I opened it, I gave him a halfhearted, embarrassed warning, that this wasn't what he was probably used to.

Quatre brushed off my concerns with a light comment of previous, grungy safe houses we've all shared.
"Right." I muttered and flung the door open, letting him enter first. I observed him closely as he, in turn, scrutinized the living place that was revealed before him. He stopped two steps into the apartment with a thoughtful look to his face and an insecure way to his stance. I closed the door softly, acutely aware of Heero sleeping in the bedroom, separated only by thin drywall and a single door.

"It's nice." He said.

I didn't think that he was lying, but I suspected him of withholding part of the truth.

"It's a little empty though." He looked at the shelves that only carried dust.

It was a painful observation that I made myself every time I came through the front door. "Take a seat." I urged, hoping to alleviate the suddenly heavy situation. "Do you want something to drink?" I pulled open the refrigerator and offered him the choice of orange juice, beer and water from the faucet. It was all I had.

"No, thank you." He gingerly sat down on the large couch, his hands stiffly resting in his lap.

I took a beer myself. I could use one. "Are you hungry?" I asked, sitting down in the lounge chair. "I could order pizza, or something."

He politely declined once more.

I took a large swig of my drink, eager to occupy myself with anything and change the scene of two old friends sharing an uncomfortable silence, to just two old friends sitting together. But after my third large gulp, I had to give up hope. "So," I started, without any clear plan of action, "How uh... How's life on L4?"

He smiled but his eyes were apologetic. "Good." He was ashamed to elaborate based on my own dire situation.

"Quat, if you're happy, I'm happy for you. You don't have to worry that your happiness is going to hurt my feelings in some twisted way."

He shrugged and looked around the apartment once more. "I don't really know what to say about it. I'm very happy, but it's just my life. I don't feel like there is anything special about it."

"Believe me, there is." I said poignantly, "If your life makes you happy, than that's very special."

He cast his gaze down at the carpet. Shyly he asked: "You aren't happy with your life?"

It was a difficult question with a multifaceted answer I didn't know how to formulate. The clearest I could be about it was: "I'm not sure. I used to be, but now I'm not sure." Unconsciously I looked at the closed bedroom door. I set my bottle of beer away and buried my heavy head in my open palms, groaning.

Quatre scooted closer towards me and hesitantly lay a hand on my shoulder, he grew more confidant and gave my shoulder a firm squeeze and then rubbed his hand up and down my shoulder blade. His hand offered me some comfort, though inexperienced with the notion, it reminded me a mother soothing her child, but I was grimly aware of the blatant fact that nothing he could do could ever be enough to ease all the pain away. If anything ever could.

"I'm fine." I proclaimed, an obvious lie, and straightened in my seat. I looked at him with a grateful expression: "I'm really glad you're here." Even though I didn't know if he could help me anything, I
was thankful that for as long as his stay would last, I wouldn't have to feel so alone.

"Why won't I take care of dinner?"

I quirked an eyebrow. "Since when do you cook?"

He shook his head, his blond bangs dancing. "My chef is at the hotel I'm staying at. He can be here with some groceries in twenty minutes."

I snorted. "I can call "Little Italy" and have them bring a pizza here in seven minutes, ready to eat."

Quatre's face contorted at the thought of being subjected to possibly unhygienic fast food.

A chuckle was released forth from me. I hoped that for as long as he would be here, he would make me laugh some more. It felt good. heavy feelings soon flooded back in with the intake of breath, but for as long as the rumble lasted, I was free. "I'll go clean myself up and I'll go grocery shopping and we'll make something ourselves, okay?"

He nodded, with that he could live. But then he thought of something. "What if Heero wakes up?"

Heero's bad reputation as a patient had preceded himself.

"Don't worry, he'll be out cold for a few more hours." Before Quatre could fathom more arguments on the subject I disappeared into the bedroom, impressing even silence itself with my quiet ways. Heero didn't stir a single time. In the darkness of the room I stripped and replaced the clothes I had been wearing with something more dignifying and less I-ride-the-Special-Bus; a simple pair of faded jeans and a black sweater. I sat down on my own bed, my eyes fixing on Heero's lonely form as my fingers worked expertly to rebraid my hair. I ventured back into the living room where the blonde Gundam Pilot was still sitting where I had left him. I tried to discuss meal options with him but he came with no suggestions, insisting that anything would be fine. I knew he was merely being polite, but it annoyed me a little. I finally grumbled "Fine, I'll figure it out." and stepped into my old sneakers and left.

Walking outside in the crisp air of the approaching evening was a cleansing experience, I felt like I could finally breathe, even though I hadn't noticed before that I was suffocating. The trip to the grocery store was disappointingly short. Inside the store it was frigid, the Air-conditioning blowing with the strength of a mobile suit engine exhaust.

I wandered through the aisles trying to decide on dinner, picking up miscellaneous items the household might need along the way. I settled for the ingredients to make a hearty pasta meal and stocked up on soda cans and bottled spring water for the young man who didn't blink in a storm of gunfire, but squirmed in fear in the presence of bacteria.

At the cash register I pulled out my wallet. Heero's wallet, I corrected myself, looking at the simple, black leather pouch. I was getting sentimental. I opened up the soft leather and pulled out his credit card, loaded with dirty money, money he earned risking his life. Money earned with the lie. It made me uncomfortable and defeated as I swiped the card through the machine, like I was submitting to the details of Heero's actual labor, like I was accepting it as the only possible solution. I hated it. I always hated paying with his credit card, but now I hated it even more. Like during the war I hated paying for spare parts and survival necessities with money that we had hijacked from OZ. It was money earned by actions that we did not support, yet we were dependant of it.

I carried two heavy plastic bags back to the apartment, where I opened the door to Quatre standing in the far back of the living room, by the low chest drawer on which two bolts stood erect but
shameful.

"Hey."

"Hey." He copied and with an honest smile he pointed back at the bolts. "Deathscythe?"

"And Wing." I put the bags on the counter and joined him.

He frowned. "Heero doesn't seem like the type to keep souvenirs." He correctly observed.

"He isn't. I kept it for him."

His frown deepened, grew more confused. "Why?"

"Because some day he would have come to regret it if all of Wing had been destroyed."

Quatre looked at me for a long time, like he wanted to say something but for the sake of leaving the peace undisturbed dared not to. Eventually though, he spoke his mind. Quatre is all about keeping the peace, but he was also about honesty. A trait I appreciated, but sometimes stung, like now. "What makes you think he would ever come to regret it?"

I mirrored his frown.

"I mean," He paused in hesitation, "He is not the sentimental, souvenir type now... what makes you so confident he ever will be?"

"He has really improved lately, he continues to grow!" My raised voice betrayed my growing hurt and rising anger.

Quatre bit his lip and struggled with the truth on his tongue inside his closed mouth for a while. He spilt it: "I'm just afraid you are waiting for Heero to become someone he is not capable of being."

If his comment hadn't stunned me so, I might have punched him in the face. How dare he say that! It was insulting to Heero and consequently insulting to me. What little faith to have in two of your best friends. "How can you say that?" I asked incredulously.

He caught on to the sour taste his comment had left in my mouth and apologized before he tried to explain himself: "I didn't mean it in a bad way. I'm just not sure... I mean..." In spite of his ever proper attitude he cursed under his breath and looked at his polished shoes as if the answer was carved in the luxurious Italian leather.

"Let's just drop it." I snapped. "I'm hungry." I rearranged the bolts on the chest drawer more proudly and prominently to emphasize my point and then stomped over to the kitchen, extracting vegetables and pasta from the bags, ripping the plastic in my aggression. It felt good to let my hands be rough for once and I soon felt most of the anger ebb away to a safe place inside of me. I took a deep breath and then announced to Quatre, who was still standing in the living room: "I'm okay now."

He walked over and helped me unpack the rest of the groceries, cut the vegetables and prepare the sauce. We worked in silence which allowed us to pocket and label our emotions individually and store them for future reference. Hate and accusations was not what we needed to fill the rift that had fallen between us since the war. We needed to use all this energy we easily spent on anger, on pulling our veritable continents back together, so we could truly be friends again, instead of former comrades.
True to my nature, I was first to break the silence, assuming Quatre was too cautious to ever do so. "So, Trowa lives with you on L4?"

"Yeah." Quatre suddenly looked absent, with a smile on his face as he stirred the red sauce that bubbled gently on the stove.

"You guys really got close after the war."

"Yeah."

I looked at the stupid grin on his face and suddenly something dawned on me that maybe I should have come to realize sooner. I smiled, to fully clear the air between us and then teasingly asked: "Are you guys...? Are you guys together? Like me and Heero?"

"No!" He exclaimed and he dropped the wooden spoon to the floor. "Shit! I'm sorry."

"It's okay, no, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... I'm sorry, I just figured..." feeling sheepish I reached for a paper towel to clear the blood red mess off the floor.

Quatre kneeled down too and helped me mop up the spilled sauce. He abruptly stopped and leaned back on his heels. "No, No, I'm sorry."

I looked up from my cleaning task at his forlorn face. "Quat, it's okay, it's just sauce and there is plenty left."

"That's not what I mean. I shouldn't have lied." He said, straightening creases in his khaki pants.

"Lied?" I sat back on the kitchen floor as well, letting the soiled paper towel flop back on the tile.

"We are together." He admitted, his eyes searching me but he would find no contempt, only smiles. "You know, romantically." He smiled sheepishly and scratched the back of his head.

"That's great." I playfully punched him in the shoulder. "You doing the naughty naughty with Barton."

"Duo!" A red blush came to his cheeks.

"Why did you lie about it at first?" I asked seriously, absent-mindedly wiping the floor with a fresh paper towel.

"I guess I've just grown that used to it."

"Used to it?" I threw the used paper towels into the trash bin that was within arm's reach. We remained on the floor for our intimate and honest conversation, hidden between the cabinets.

"We lie about it a lot, on L4. No one knows. Only a few of my sisters. It's not like I'm embarrassed!" He assured me, "I don't think there anything wrong with homosexuality. But I've been trying to restore my father's company and that means working with prominent business men and they already look down on me because of my age and inexperience... I didn't want to possibly give them another reason to distrust and dislike me. Some of them have been giving me a hard time as it is..."

Apparently keeping the peace was a priority that outweighed the value of honesty.

I nodded, understanding of his dilemma. "What does Trowa think about it?"
Quatre shrugged. "He doesn't really mind. I mind it more than he does. He says that love is private anyway."

"He's right."

"Yeah. I guess. I just pictured it differently, I suppose." Then he chuckled. "Look at us sitting on the floor. Good God." He rose to his feet and helped me up. He kept his hands awkwardly away from his body and immediately turned open the hot water faucet to thoroughly scrub his hands. Steam was rising up from the sink but he didn't seem to mind it.

I washed my hands after him, mocking his germ phobia even though it sometimes had me worried.

I related back to me and Heero and I worried that maybe us Gundam Pilots were doomed to keep some things secret forever, for whatever reason. And be hurt every time a lie failed and a facade cracked and a bit of the unwanted truth is right there in our face and we have to catch it like catching a firefly with our bare hands and try to shelter it's light from the outside world, or they would know too.

We ate in quiet contemplation.

"Are you going back to the hotel tonight?" I asked when we cleared the dishes.

He nodded. "I hope you don't mind. I'm not really the type to sleep on a couch."

I grinned. "No, I get it."

"Is there anything you need? Anything I can do for you?"

"Just..." I stopped myself, unsure if it was fair to ask of him, but eventually dared, "Stay, a little while?"

He smiled. "Sure. I have a few days and I would love to spend them with you."

I smiled back. "You sure Trowa will be fine without you?"

"He can take care of business himself."

We laughed in unison as we both realized the innuendo of his seemingly innocent and professional comment.

"Trowa can certainly take matters into his own hands."

"Why his hands? He is very flexible." Quatre was shocked at his own comment but laughed with me nevertheless.

After doing the dishes we settled on the couch and I made him watch one of my dated, pre-colony movies from my growing collection. At least thanks to the increasingly abundant row of classic DVD boxes I had something to fill the emptiness of all the shelves, drawers and cabinets in the apartment. Halfway through the movie which I had seen three times already I rose from the couch to check on Heero. I closed the bedroom door behind me, watching through the layered shadow at his figure. I sighed and walked over to his bed, sitting down on the edge of it. "How long have you been awake?"

His eyes opened, but he didn't look at me. He stared into thin air that grew thicker as the atmosphere between us became uncomfortable. It would stay uncomfortable for as long as the lie
remained unspoken between us, in the silence it only grew more powerful and hideous, but I would have to stand it a little while longer, I realized, looking at his face. The mask of the soldier could not hide the innate sad expression pressed into his Gundanium features.

"A while."

"Why won't you come watch Jaws with us?"

"I've already seen it. Three times."

"Is that really the reason?"

"Yes."

It was a lie but I was afraid to call him on it, he seemed so fragile. Looking at him in the blue moonlight that fought through the curtains, I remembered my dream, my horrible nightmare. Because of selfish feelings my unconsciousness let him go, let him die. I shuddered as I remembered the crack as if I had actually heard it, somewhere in reality.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Thirsty?"

"No." He started to sound irritated.

"Okay." I sat by his side for a little while longer and then left him alone, softly closing the door behind me. Back in the living room I noticed the movie had been paused and Quatre was standing in the middle of the room, looking at me in understanding.

"I should go." He said. "Leave you two alone for a little while."

I didn't say anything, just followed him to the front door.

"I'll be back tomorrow." He leaned in and hugged me.

"Thanks."

"Bye."

"Bye."

I watched him go with hollow eyes. Only shutting the door long after he had gone. I turned off the TV and all the lights and rummaged around in the kitchen a little before joining Heero in our dark bedroom. I sat on the edge of his bed again and gently touched his face, wishing there was a way to turn back time, to turn back lies, so I could feel the way I used to feel when I touched him - warm and whole - instead of distant and alone. I was touching his face but it felt like Heero was miles beneath the surface, still so far away, no matter how close I leaned into him. I searched the bed for his left hand and brought it up from under the covers, watching the glint of his black eyes the entire time.

"Here." I said, I opened his powerless fingers and put my small offering into the palm of his hand, squeezing his fingers around it to form a loose grip. Even in the lack of lighting I could see his eyebrows knit together in innocent confusion.
I shed my clothes tiredly and slipped under the warm covers of my own bed. Turning on my side to look at him. The only thing I could see was the shine in his eyes and the reflection of a sliver of pale moonlight in the spoon which he slowly, savoringly, licked clean of peanut butter.

An old smile appeared on my face, but it felt awkward, for inside anger was brewing. Staring at him in the night, I realized for the first time how much I hated what he has done to us. How could he? We had something good, something honest and precious. But now it had been stepped on. It was crushed. Like my heart.

"Duo?" He softly asked after much time had been allowed to pass and the spoon was discarded on the nightstand.

"Yeah."

"I love you."

Those little words used to bring me indescribable joy. The lie had taken that away from me as well. There was no joy left, only hate:

I hated that I doubted him.

Still I responded: "I love you too." It was the truth and it was what made everything so hard to bear.
"Duo-

There was a long, meaningful inhale.

"Please return my calls. Locking yourself and Heero up in that apartment isn't going to help. I know you just want to protect him, but he needs help that you can't give him. Doctor Borland is free next Monday to assess the progress of Heero's healing. I really wish you would come... I have also arranged for someone else... Someone for him to talk to. A professional. I know you want to do this all by yourself, but there is no shame in accepting help from others. I hope to see you and Heero Monday. Whatever hour works for you. If you call back, I can arrange for a car to be sent for you. Also..."

There was a moment of hesitation or remorse, it was hard to tell.

"Agent Levelt's funeral is tomorrow, at ten, at the Preventers graveyard, which sadly just keep getting bigger... Maybe it would be good for Heero to be there... Bye."

Beep.

"Do you want to 1) play the message again, 2) delete the message, 3 save the message."

With a stiff finger I pressed CANCEL and the display went blank.

"Can you believe her?" I muttered, my pride offended.

Quatre walked out of the kitchen with that look of his. A look I knew well. He had an opinion on the matter but I wasn't going to like it, so he'd prefer not to speak.

"She's butting into business that isn't hers."

"Une just wants to help." Quatre tried, following me as I dragged my body to a nearby seat. "There is no shame, as she said, in accepting her offer. You both just want the best for Heero."

I snorted. "She just wants her soldier back."

"You know that's not true." He said down beside me, his hands, tense and moist with sweat, fidgeting in his lap. In the kitchen the microwave started to beep, the leftovers from last night had been sufficiently reheated, but we both ignored the urgent, high pitched call. "You should go. She made all these arrangements."

"Just because someone went out on a limb for you doesn't mean you have to listen to them." I spat, ducking my head in between my shoulders and stubbornly folding my arms across my chest.

Quatre shook his blond mop of hair. "That's not what a mean. She called for a psychiatrist..." He sighed and that look appeared on his face again, but he continued bravely: "Maybe she knows something we don't. About Heero's mission."

"We don't know anything about Heero's mission!" I exclaimed despairingly.
"You said his partner died."

Quatre's words stung in my heart.

"We both know that would hurt Heero far more than any sort of physical injury. No matter how expertly he hides it."

I sank deeper into the seat, wishing the cushions would swallow me so I wouldn't have to face reality, which had been disappointing me lately. "I don't want him to talk to some stranger who happens to have a degree." I sulked pathetically. "I want him to talk to me. It just doesn't feel right that he would be sharing stuff with someone else, but not with me." I pursed my lips and furrowed my brow, definitively I announced: "Heero doesn't need a shrink. I can help him myself."

"Okay." Quatre said, even though it was obvious by his tone that he did not agree.

"And keep your damn judgment to yourself." I warned, looking at him sideways.

"I'm only trying to help, Duo." He said soothingly.

"Pfff... yeah... I know." I tried to ignore the warm, comforting hand he placed on my knee, trying to remain angry at him - so I could at least be angry with someone-, but I couldn't. He forced a smile onto my lips.

He pulled back his hand to look at the sparkling hands of time on his expensive gold watch. "I'm sorry, Duo, I have to go. I have a video conference set-up waiting for me at the hotel."

"I understand. Go. Go! Go make millions."

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "You know I don't actually make millions, right?"

"Right. Single, not plural." I joked.

He caught on that I was merely joking, so he just chuckled and then shouldered his coat. "I'll be back tomorrow morning. Try to get some sleep." He said by the front door and he refused to leave till I grunted in agreement. "Bye."

"Bye."

I reheated the food again and separated it onto two plates. Carefully balancing the plates on my splayed hands I walked over to the bedroom and worked the door handle with my elbow. Once I was inside I leaned heavily against the wall, pressing my back against the switch, turning on the lights.

Upon my entry Heero struggled to sit upright in his bed. I hurried to place the plates on the nightstand so I could help him up, using both his pillow as well as my own to prop him up and support his back. I placed the nearest plate on his lap, the one where everything had already been cut into bite sized pieces and then I handed him a fork. "Voila, monsieur, a delicious leftover meal with plus bon sauce. Bon appetit." I said cheerfully to keep up the lighthearted pretences, noting my heavy American accents in the French words which I compensated by feigning a heavy French accents in the English words.

He didn't even need to say anything, his eyes communicated perfectly: "That was a ridiculous excuse of the French language."

Maturely I stuck my tongue out at him and deadpanned: "Excuse me, mister I-speak-seven-
languages-fluently-two-of-which-you-have-never-even-heard-of."

He laid his fork back down on the plate before he could take his first bite. He looked at me with a deep frown and soulful eyes. "Why do you do that?" He asked.

"Do what?" I asked with a mouthful of hot food.

"Act." He said curtly with narrowed eyes. "It's been almost a week and still you haven't gotten angry with me."

"No one wants the God of Death to get angry, why do you?" I asked, keeping my gaze focused on my meal for the purpose of avoiding his prying eyes.

"Because it confuses me that you won't get angry." He sounded genuinely lost.

"Well I'm sorry that it's such a hassle for you." I snapped bitterly, instantly regretting my foul tone and spiteful words. "Would you just eat. Please?" I demanded, leaning over and forcing his fork back into his left hand.

He fought my hands away, dropping the fork to the carpet in the process. "Get angry." He challenged, his eyes still searching mine.

"No!" I looked down at the carpet, noticing the blotch of red sauce that had transferred from the fork. "Look what you did!" I bent down to pick it up. "I'll get you a clean fork." I rose to do as I said, but then in a flash Heero's plate was on the carpet, upside down, and he was looking up at me defiantly. "What did you do that for? !" I picked up the plate and scraped most of the food off the carpet with the fork.

Heero didn't say anything, he was looking up at me with a tight mouth, his left fist clenched and white-knuckled, his chest heaving as he panted and the tremble of his entire body was visible in the movements of his bangs.

I pressed my lips together tightly, averted my eyes and firmed the grip I had on the plate and the fork. I stormed out of the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind me before foul words would burst out of me in screams. I threw the plate into the sink and heard the frail porcelain shatter but I couldn't care. I nestled myself into the couch, curling up and turned on the TV for blissful distraction from my own thoughts.

Unbelievable. Unbelievable! I thought, staring at the TV screen angrily, hugging my own shins. I waited till I was calm, till I could think rationally again. It took a long time, in the meantime I paid no heed to the movie that was playing, it was just noise to drown out the scathing voices that sounded too much like my own. When everything was finally quiet, I dragged one of the heavy lounge chairs to just under the bay window and had propped my elbow on the window sill on which rested my heavy head.

What a pathetic sight I had turned myself into, like a forlorn damsel in an ancient myth, waiting for her hero to be guided by the flame of the candle cupped in her hands. How sad. How sad that everything strong can be reduced to weakness. Like a car in a scrap yard I had been stripped and crushed and a mangled mess that didn't even resemble my original form remained. In the pale dawn I was the only guest to my own pity party.

I stayed in that chair all through the need, even though my tired, aching body longed to be reunited with my bed. I couldn't join Heero in the bedroom. I was scared of his emotions and inner turmoil, as well as my own. They confused me equally, even though you would think I would have insight
into my own feelings to a certain extent. Everything was so confusing. One moment I pitied him, the other moment, I felt the love I once knew and then all of a sudden he asks me to be angry, when I don't want to be. He still needed to heal and I was so angry I didn't even know how to express those feelings, no one had ever taught me how to deal with these feelings and rightfully share them. Honestly, I wasn't even sure if it was anger I feeling, rather than a confusing myriad of novel emotions and the only thing I was getting angry at was him wanting me to be angry. I didn't know. I just didn't know!

I cursed my failed teachings.

In the uncomfortable lounge chair, every tendon in my body was strained and started to throb, but caught in a vicious circle I quickly became to tired to move my painful limbs. Yet not tired enough to succumb to unconsciousness. The night crept by without sleep victimizing me. All I could do was listen to the building thoughts in my head. Pondering over the cracks that I had seen in the armor of my only ally.

Quatre had been most helpful and attentive, taking care of me as I took care of Heero. But even the kind blonde had no comfort or cure for the pain I was suffering and in that sense Heero was the lucky one. The alliance was an uneasy one. I was too consumed with myself, to confront anyone other than my own demons, so I neglected Quatre's stares and his own nervous bite marks on his lips, even though I noticed them. My whole body ached as feelings tore into each other, anger, betrayal and concern fought for ground at the cost of me. I felt sick and weak, like I just needed to lie down on the couch and sleep endlessly. Everyday the voice mail gathered messages from school and from Sookie, but all went unanswered as I tried to establish a bubble in which I could be safe and be alone with my thoughts. And around my petrified figure Quatre maintained the household, arranging for groceries and food and found an enjoyable passing of time in the task of cleaning every dusty surface he could find. All the while looking at me, stealing glances - fooling himself by thinking the God of Death wouldn't notice, wouldn't feel the prying eyes.

Something was obviously eating away at my friend, something unspoken between him and me, like the unspoken things between Heero and myself ate away at me. But, so I concluded in the dead of night, my head could not be bothered with more troubles. I could do nothing but trust Quatre with the responsibility of this unspoken thing.

A black limousine glistened in the morning light as it pulled to the curb. The shine that burned my eyes awoke me from my deep and troubled musings. Expecting Quatre, I already walked over to the intercom and instead of going downstairs to guide him up personally, I buzzed him in and cracked the door open so I could return to the only comfort I had left, my chair and my coffee.

Quatre walked in with that same apologetic smile that seemed to have become one with him. He carried a heavy plastic groceries bag and he didn't greet me till he had dumped the weight on the kitchen counter.

"Yeah, hi." I responded with a gravelly voice, watching the limousine pull away.

He immediately noticed the blanket on the lounge chair and must have accurately inferred where I spent the night, but he made no comment on the matter.

"I got you and Heero a lot of fruit." Quatre called from the kitchen as I heard him unpack, the plastic ruffling absurdly loud. "A watermelon, apples, oranges, some kiwi's and strawberries..." Kitchen cabinets opened and closed as did the refrigerator door, repetitively. "And new cereal, fresh bread, milk, oh, and-" His head appeared around the corner and he presented to me the large jar of peanut butter. "Almost forgot." He admitted shamefully.

"Yeah, well, he can do one damn week without peanut butter." I grumbled, staring into the
distance. I felt Quatre approach me and sensed his eyes were prying, so I didn't look back.

"You were the one who told me I should, under no circumstances, forget. You practically threatened me."

"Well... That was yesterday. Today is today and today is a new level of vengeful bitterness."

He was silently contemplative for a while and then responded forcefully chipper: "You should eat something, have some strawberries!"

"A few damn strawberries isn't going to make everything okay, Quat!" I looked at him and saw him flinch. Quatre preferred to see the good in people, when he saw something else - like the God of Death - it scared him. "He hasn't even been out of the bedroom yet! He just lays there all pathetic and begs me to get angry with him! It pisses me off!"

"Then get angry with him." Quatre offered carefully.

"No! I'm not going to yell at some poor crippled guy! He should just hurry the fuck up and get better so I can punch him in the face!"

Quatre suddenly smiled. "You're worried about him."

"Shut up!"

Quatre took a step back.

I sighed and deflated in my seat. I looked away for a moment, outside, to gather peaceful thoughts and feelings. Everything else ebbed away. With tired eyes I looked back at Quatre, relieving another deep sigh. "I'm sorry," I mumbled genuinely, "What I'm doing is not fair. I'm angry with Heero but I'm taking it out on you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." His eyes turned grim right before he looked away. He started biting his lower lip again, fumbling with the hem of his lilac button-up shirt.

"No, it's not."

"Yes, Duo, it is." Quatre suddenly spoke firmly.

I looked at him in surprise and recognized shame but mostly, determination.

He sat himself down on the back of the couch, facing me. He wiped his palms over his thighs, like they were sweating, like he was nervous. He avoided eye contact for as long as he struggled to find words, when he finally opened his mouth, his blue eyes pinned me down. "It is okay. Because you have the right to be angry with me as well."

I could do nothing but look at him expectantly, knowing the unspoken would soon be spoken, but having no clue what exactly he was referring to. He was the only friend who had come to help, to offer what little comfort there was to offered, I couldn't figure any reason to justify being angry with him.

"I have something I need to tell you. I was waiting for the right moment, but I realize now that there will never be a right moment." He wiped his palms again, he was really anxious. My confused frown spurred him on, he released his lower lip from the grip of his white teeth and continued: "You remember the ball?"
There was no fighting the tiny smile that came to my lips as I did indeed remember the ball and one of the greatest moments of my life: watching Heero laugh. Of course it was all bittersweet now.

"When you left, I told you: "I hope it works out". Do you remember that?"

My frown deepened. "Yeah."

His eyes were vulnerable and pleading as he stared into me and allowed me to stare right back into him. "I said that because I knew something you didn't know, yet. Two things, actually." He waited, I guess he hoped I would puzzle everything together myself and spare him the trouble of having to tell me pointblank, but with my brain dead tired, I couldn't connect the dots even if there was already a dotted line assisting me.

"I knew Heero was a Preventer agent."

The words floated around in the air of the living room for a long time till they started to register in my ears and make sense as they slowly traveled up the cognitive pathways in my brain till finally a full understanding washed over me and blood surged into my head feeding my grey matter with a single goal: to produce more anger. "What?" I felt seething rage and betrayal and my fingers gripped the armrests like claws.

"I knew Heero was an active agent."

There were several questions that instantly overwhelmed me but I went with the most pressing: "Why didn't you tell me?" The only reason I remained seated was my tired stature, or else I might have been in his face.

"I didn't want to start a fight between you two! You looked so happy, I didn't want to ruin that."

"That's bullshit!"

"No! I figured Heero would tell you eventually. I didn't want... I didn't..."

"You didn't want to be the bringer of bad news." I accused.

He looked at me with sorrowful eyes and then nodded meekly.

"I never knew you were a coward, Quatre." My feelings of anger started to turn into just being hurt. I pushed myself out of the chair, it took effort and walked over to the cabinet where two twin bolts shared a view of the scene. With my back turned towards Quatre and a gentle finger on the damaged bolt, I told him: "You should have told me. As soon as you found out. It would have been the right thing to do."

"I know that now. I'm sorry."

He was not forgiven. "How did you find out?"

"WuFei told me."

I chuckled bitterly as Quatre continued to explain:

"He heard by coincidence. Usually the Preventer Earth and Space faction are pretty separate, but I guess when another Gundam Pilot joins... word spreads."

My chuckle evolved into a dark laughter. I turned around to look at Quatre, who looked back sat
me like I was crazy and maybe he was right. "You know what the stupid thing is? Of all us Gundam Pilots, I suspected you and WuFei the least of lying and keeping secrets. Especially one that risks the welfare of a friend. What if he had gotten hurt, not like now, but really hurt. The even-Heero-can't-stand-it kind of hurt, the dead hurt, how would you feel then?"

"Terrible. Awful."

"Well, I want you to feel like that right now."

"I do! I do! I would just... if things had been worse, I would feel even more awful."

"You said there were two things I didn't know yet." I interjected.

Quatre shot a worried look at me and swallowed audibly.

"What is it? Do I know it now, or do I still don't know it?" I approached him, trapped him against the back of the couch, I would never hurt him, but I was not above intimidating him to find the answers they had been keeping from me.

"I don't know."

"Then you better make sure and tell me."

He nodded furiously. "I will. No more secrets." He leaned back. "I feel uncomfortable." He needn't fear me, he should know that by now. Despite appearances Quatre and I were often caught in heated disagreements during the war. But no matter how hard we could sometimes yell at each other, trying to out-shout the other, blinded by our differences, we never doubted the strength of our friendship.

But now I was starting to doubt.

I took a step back, exiting his personal space, waiting for him to speak with dark eyes that hid a curious dread.

"When Heero and I were captured and held at the lunar base during the first war, the Treize Faction rescued us from OZ and took us to the scientists who had been hiding there. They gave us a straightforward update on the situation, but after the briefing - Heero had already left - Docter G said something to me."

"G?"

"Yeah. Apparently, he knew quite a bit about Heero's training?"

"Yeah. He thought he could train me the same way, but he wouldn't do it. What did he tell you?"

"Not much. He just told me to look out for myself around Heero and then he said: "it has happened before". He didn't trust Heero, with the missions. He said Heero was warped."

I frowned, not only did I not understand why G would even talk to Quatre, I also didn't know what could possibly be meant by that. I asked Quatre.

"I didn't know either, at first. Later though, after we separated, I did a little research. I had some help, one of Rashid's brothers is the best in finding out everything people don't want you to know. He helped me trace some records. Records related to Heero's training and something that happened during training."
"Ok, Quat, enough with the thriller build-up, just spit it out." I demanded.

"Heero killed someone."

When he said the words, I felt relieved. I had been afraid he was going to confirm something I had been suspecting for a while now. To have it go unconfirmed for another day, eased my aching heart back into blissful ignorance. I took a deep breath but then immediately felt angry at Quatre for scaring me like that. "We've all killed people." I reminded him, knowing that even Quatre's hands were stained with blood - figuring it may be the reason why he washed them so obsessively.

He shook his head. "No. Not like this... I saw the picture. It was only a young boy, but he wasn't even recognizable. And I don't mean that he wasn't recognizable as himself, but that he wasn't even recognizable as a human. He face was just all blood and-" Quatre's complexion turned pale and upset. He wrapped his arms around himself. "I don't know when it happened, or in what context, but honestly, after seeing that I think differently of Heero. He is an admirable young man but... I'm scared of him. I was scared for you."

I shook my head and walked away. "This is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. So you saw a picture! It could have been a fake, a set-up by J to make his Perfect soldier look even more menacing. It doesn't mean anything." Even though I said the words, denying everything, the possibility gnawed at me with painful small nips right out of my consciousness. I would be lying if I ever claimed to believe Heero was incapable of doing what Quatre described. But I preferred to believe that even though he could, he would not.

"I don't think it was fake."

"Frankly, Quatre, I don't care anymore what you think. I want you to leave."

"But-" He started.

"I think you've done enough." I looked at him sternly, to make sure he understood I was being serious.

"I understand. I'm sorry." He walked towards the coat rack by the door and put on his leather jacket. "I'll go back to L4." He said, almost as a warning, a last attempt to inspire forgiveness in me.

"Perfect. Have a safe trip." I deadpanned and sat back down in my seat, my head turned away from him.

"I wish you both the best, I really do."

"That's fantastic Quatre, thank you, now everything will be perfect."

He gripped his hand angrily around the doorknob of the front door at my sarcasm. He ripped it open but before he stepped out and left, he turned back towards me and for a moment all apologies were absent from his face and he spoke: "You may have mastered sarcasm, Duo, but the true winner is the one who has mastered forgiveness. The only reason I kept this secret was because I thought it was the best thing to do. And I believe Heero figured the same. We may have been wrong, but we had good intentions."

"Well, your good intentions hurt!" I yelled and then the door fell shut and he was gone. Five minutes later the same black limousine from before returned under the window where I sat and whisked Quatre off, straight back to the spaceport. I feared I may have been wrong to send him away, the apartment seemed a little duller and colorless after his departure. But at least in my
loneliness, no one could lie to me anymore.

Sinking into the cushions, my body heavy with feelings and thoughts, I grew increasingly annoyed by all the secrecy that had been surrounding me. There were so many things I didn't know because people wrongfully thought they'd be doing me a favor by keeping them from me, I felt like an outsider. There was someone sleeping in our shared bedroom, someone I liked to believe I knew and could trust, someone I called my best friend, someone I called my boyfriend, but there was a veil of secrets and lies that separated us and no matter how often I tenderly kissed his lips or lovingly touched his skin, that veil would always be between us, preventing intimate connection. It was time for that veil to be ripped apart, so I could reach through and we could finally experience a real relationship. Our relationship should be beyond the training and any past or present missions and obligations, rather than be bound and restricted by them.

I took a trembling breath and then rose to my feet to retrieve the answers I needed so I could be then be angry with Heero and then forgive him and then continue to love him unconditionally.

I pushed the door to the bedroom open and mercilessly flicked on the bright light. Heero was directly looking at me, lying on his back in his bed. I didn't bother to demand how long he had been awake and what he had heard of my argument with Quatre. I gently hoisted him out of bed, not responding to his confused and almost frightful eyes, though they wrought my heart. I supported him on our way to the bathroom, stepping around the soiled spot on the carpet. I helped Heero relieve himself and wash his hand and then closed the lid of the toilet and sat him down so he could rest while I ran a lukewarm shower and undressed us both. Without saying a word I guided him under the spray and held his body tight against my chest so he would soon stop shivering under the water.

"Quatre left." He observed as I massaged shampoo into his hair.

"Yes."

"Does this mean you will get angry at me?" I resumed washing his hair, being careful in the vicinity of the raw and burned ear shell. He stood still as I soaped up his skin, not being as gentle around the wounds as I had been before. They were starting to heal and before the skin would close up completely, we had to take extra care to clean the wounds to prevent infections later on. He trembled as my hand moved up and down his thigh, I think because soap was being worked into the exposed bullet wound. Any other possibility would be irrational wishful thinking. I washed his whole body, experiencing some difficulty remaining professional and ignoring the intimacy of both our bodies against one another, completely naked, but I managed and rinsed us both off quickly so we could be wrapped into large, warm towels. At Heero's request I let him dry off and put on his own underwear, trying not to read anything into it and take it personal. I put on my clothes and then redressed all of his wounds, inspecting them carefully and appreciating the quick healing powers of his body. His shoulder and knee, in contrast to the superficial lacerations,
were not an easy fix, not even for his super-human healing capabilities. It would take extensive physiotherapy before he would be his old self again. Luckily, he seemed to conform much better to his role of patient than I had ever dared to expect. If his cooperation would last, physiotherapy wouldn't be all that bad.

I decided not to bandage the little cuts on his chest, it didn't seem necessary and he also started to shiver violently in the cold of the air-conditioning, which I probably should have thought to turn off. I handed him a bottle of disinfectant gel to tend to his ear himself while I went to get him some clean clothes. Even though T-shirts and sweaters were more appropriate attire for his process of recuperation, we had quickly discovered that button-up shirts made getting him dressed a much simpler task and less stressful on the shoulder joint and damaged blade. I brought his hurt arm into his sky blue button-up shirt first and slowly buttoned it up, aware of his eyes on my fingers. Because the fit was too tight, he wore the shoulder brace over the shirt. It was still a hassle to get on, but I became increasingly familiar with the assembly of hard plastic and woven synthetic straps. The knee brace was much easier, requiring no experience nor expertise.

I held his left foot and carefully guided it through his navy blue sweatpants. He put his other foot in it himself and pulled up, only needing my assistance to raise his hips off the seat so he could fasten the pants around his waist with the elastic cord.

In the spirit of rehabilitation I brought him his crutch and made him walk to the kitchen table by his own strength. My hands never wavered far and I made sure to stay alert, noticing every little quiver in his legs and the straining muscles in his arm as he put most of his weight on the crutch. When he lowered himself onto his usual chair at the table his strong knee gave out but I was right there to catch him and carefully sit him down.

Heero rested from the exertion while I made him a peanut butter sandwich and poured him a glass of milk, still no coffee for the patient. He ate and drank without complaint and without making eye contact. I sat across from him, studying the movements of his fingers, enjoying the way his golden tan looked dressed in the blue shirt, which also brought out the ice blue cores of his irises. He looked exotic and fresh, like a summer rain in a foreign place.

I still loved him, I knew, nothing - no amount of lying or secrecy - could cure that, but I dreamed of experiencing how much more I could love him if the veil would be lifted and he would love me back equally. I expected it to be of all-consuming intensity and did not worry about being disappointed.

If only we could get there.

He finished his meal and I pushed the empty plate and glass to the far end of the table, out of our way. He looked at me. His blue orbs pleading. I didn't know exactly what they were asking of me, but I surmised he wanted me to get angry, like he had been trying to coax me to be for the past few days. He wanted to be punished because it was what he knew, but this wasn't going to unfold his way - J's way -, I was in control and even though he looked like someone bracing himself for physical pain, I wasn't going to give him that. Hitting him was the easy way, it solved nothing. We were going to take the long and hard way and neither of us was going to like it.

We shared a calm quiet briefly before I spoke up. With soft and neutral voice I told him about that evening, that Sunday. I tried to relay to him the things I felt, hoping to create understanding in him, even though I didn't think him capable of truly empathizing. I told him everything Une had divulged about the mission and when I was finished I asked him to tell me everything I didn't already know and I strongly urged - forced - him to be detail oriented. "Begin at the very beginning."
"The beginning?" He suddenly appeared so vulnerable and childlike, but I wasn't going to cave because I felt sorry for him.

"When you accepted the mission."

Heero thought for a long time, staring at his left hand splayed on the wooden surface of the table. He shrugged his good shoulder and then started tentatively: "It was about two weeks before the mission. I volunteered." He looked up at me with big, hesitant eyes, seeking approval, but my features were immobilized as I tried to maintain an impassive expression - I had learned from the master by way of observation. "It was a solo mission, but the Monday before the mission, Une changed her mind. She wanted me to take an explosives expert with me." He looked at me again, seeking guidance, but got nothing. "She suggested agent Levelt. You met him."

I nodded.

"I objected, but then... her suggestion turned into an order and Levelt was assigned to the mission." His eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. "He was the best of his class and graduated from the explosives course with honors but he had never gone on a mission before." His fingers idly stroked the smooth surface of the wooden tabletop. "He had only been assigned security details. He needed more experience, but Une ignored my every protest, said his skills and strengths complemented mine and vice versa. I had a week to prepare him. Everyday it became more obvious that he wasn't ready, he did everything by the book but I knew that he would falter in the field."

"So you were actually training a newbie as you said that time." I asked when a silence fell.

"Yes."

I didn't know what that meant, how that made me feel. I just waited for him to continue, not passing any judgment or making accusations that weren't going to help us.

"Friday was the last day of preparation, we did a dry run at a Preventers training facility and I checked his math. It was sound. The rehearsal went well. At the airport at the head quarters, I had an opportunity to leave him behind. To dump him and go by myself..." He looked down into his lap and mumbled: "I didn't take it. I figured it was too late to figure out how to do things by myself." He clenched and unclenched his fist, blaming himself for not making use of that opportunity as, in hindsight, it may have been a mistake.

He looked up at me, with his slight pained frown, I just nodded to encourage him to continue.

"We took a Suso 53 to Kenya, where there was a stealth plane waiting for us at the Preventers satellite base, which took us to a secret rendez-vous point in Ethiopia, where we were picked up by a helicopter. By then it was night and the helicopter dumped us into Lake Tana and we had to swim to the shore and get into Bahir Dar undetected. We had orders to lay still for twenty four hours. NGasi's scouts would come in and secure the city before bringing him to the hotel. Levelt was getting nervous, suggesting deviations from the mission."

"What kind of deviations?"

"He suggested to plant the explosives before NGasi would arrive. But then the scouts and security would have found them during their sweep. They are very thorough, they know there are several hits out on the senator." He fell silent again.

"Continue. Please."

He nodded. "NGasi arrived Saturday evening and we were supposed to plant the explosives during
the night and set them off early in the morning. However, our intel had been incomplete. We had been told he would be alone, but we saw that he had his daughter with him. She left the next morning, so we decided to continue the mission, Ngasi would be in his penthouse suite all day. He is recovering from a knee operation that would not only insure he would stay inside, but made his chances of escape negligible. It was the prefect chance... and we blew it..."

"What happened? How did you proceed?" I formed a technical tone, noting how Heero two approached it distantly and officially, speaking out loud what he might have written in an professional report of the mission.

"We entered the building through the roof as soon as the girl left. We had to hurry because we didn't know if she would be back. We set the highest charge first and then worked our way down, three consecutive floors. Levelt set the charges while I stood guard. I should have helped him, he was nervous, but someone had to stand guard." He looked at me expectantly.

I nodded, agreeing with him. This seemed to ease his mind a little.

"He was scared too," Heero continued, "it affected him detrimentally. His expert knowledge of explosives was supposed to make up for his lack of experience, but his fear made his knowledge fail. He was fumbling and it took him twice as long." Heero said accusingly, but laced in his voice was the hint of pain and guilt. "When he was finally done with the last charge, I cleared the hallway and went back to the storage room to get him. We weren't out the door of the room more than a few feet when the last charge went off." Heero stopped, breathing deeply, the sound of his persistent wheeze as his broken ribs agitated his lungs filled the air between us.

I listened to the eerie sound, feeling Goosebumps on my skin and a cold sweat in my palms. I allowed him his time, not rushing him, becoming more sensitive to how emotional it must be for him to open up and talk about this. Also becoming more appreciative of the fact that he did it anyway, for me.

"The force of the blast blew out the wall between the storage room and the hallway where we were and threw us both against the other wall of the hallway, which was reinforced concrete and wouldn't budge. When I hit it, my shoulder budged, it dislocated and I hit my head. I don't even remember falling back to the floor. I lost consciousness only momentarily. When I woke up I realized that falling into the debris scattered on the floor had damaged my left leg and the padding of my earphone had caught fire in the blast and was burning in my ear. I tried to take it out with my right hand, but that whole arm didn't work, it just hurt, I couldn't move it and I couldn't reset it, a nerve must have been caught at the dislocation. I rose to my feet and then realized that my left leg was as useless as my right arm."

I let all the information sink in, picturing the injuries on his body that I had tended to multiple times. Finally everything made sense and though I was difficult listening to how he got wounded, it was good to finally understand where all the cuts and burns originated from. "What about Levelt?" I asked when I noticed he needed encouragement to continue on.

"He was lying a few feet away from me." He stopped and cast his gaze downwards, shielding his telltale orbs with the thick black lashes framing them, he needed a brief moment to compose himself before he dared to continue. "He was unconscious and badly injured. I limped over to him. I knew we had little time. They would be looking for us. I tried to wake him, but he was unconscious. I had to get us out of there but I couldn't carry him. I was too injured and he was too heavy."

I nodded, remembering the impressively tall and broad form of the agent. I doubted that Heero would have been able to carry him even in good health, in spite of his awe-inspiring strength.
Dead-weight was the heaviest and the man was huge and Heero, in comparison, so tiny. I decided it was better not to bring that up at the moment. I did realize that in her lack of field experience Une had made a mistake of which I'm sure Heero tried to inform her, but she wrongfully dismissed. It was a rule that, as individually assigned Gundam Pilots, was of little concern to us, but was brought to our awareness either way: Partners or team members should always be able to carry each other out in case of emergency, the smallest guy on the team must be able to carry the biggest. It's a rule that, in a team effort, could save lives. "It's not your fault." I offered, even though I knew it wouldn't be enough to convince him. "Please, continue."

"I tried to drag him. But that was hard too, I could only use one arm and one leg and the debris on the floor only made him harder to move. I don't think I had got him ten yards from where he fell when the charge on the floor above us went off. This was the biggest charge, it was supposed to mimic the main, initial gas explosion." He released a trembling breath, his frown continued to deepen. "The floor above us gave out and fell on top of us. The bulk of it missed me, but the force had blown out a support beam and it had landed across Levelt's pelvis. He was moaning very loudly. I guess the pain had woken him up. I covered his mouth till he had quieted down. His pelvis was shattered on impact, paralyzing him and causing internal bleeding. Medical help was hours away, he had only minutes. Still, I tried to lift the beam... but it was massive. I couldn't! It was massive!" He said as though he needed to convince me, suddenly raising his voice.

"I know, it's okay. You tried everything." I reached across the table and took his hand in mine.

"So I just sat there." In his eyes was the darkness of self-loathing. "I just sat there. I didn't feel anything, I didn't think anything. I didn't know what to do..." He whispered.

I squeezed his hand, in vain trying to comfort him.

"I saw Levelt... moving... He reached for his gun. I got mine out too, I thought he had heard something I hadn't, but then he brought the gun to his head and aimed it at himself... and he started crying." The lost look Heero must have had on his face at that moment returned to him as he imagined the scene while he was sitting with me at our kitchen table, his hand in mine. "He kept saying that he couldn't. He said it over and over till he suddenly went quiet and looked at me." Heero clenched his eyes shut. He tried to control his emotions. For a long time he just breathed, erratically at first, panicked, but eventually it evened out to the controlled rhythm I was familiar with and he continued: "He said: "I can't, but you can" and he let go of his own gun and reached for the barrel of mine and pointed it at his forehead." All of a sudden Heero's face went blank as he shut out all of the feelings, his eyes slightly turned away from me, his mouth open in breath, detached from the reality and pain of the story, he finished: "He said that he knew I could do it. I pulled my gun free from his limp grip. I stood up, stood by his head. I aimed it at his head and I... discharged a single bullet." He looked at me again, his expression confused and pained. "I killed him."

The words formed a constriction around my chest that made my heart clench and feel tight and made it hard to breathe. I was overwhelmed with emotions and memories. The sights of every person I had ever killed - engraved in my retina, my consciousness as well as my heart - flashed before me and it was no challenge to empathize with what he felt. I realized, then, the gravity of the situation. I had to push my own jumbled mess of thoughts and feelings aside, so I could be there for him and tell him that everything would be okay. Because that's what you do, not because I would ever expect him to believe me.

I had expected tears to flow, but he wouldn't let them. I felt his hand trembling in my hold, trembling with emotions his face couldn't show. I knew there was more. I knew he felt more than he was revealing. It scared and worried me that he couldn't, or wouldn't show me everything. Much
was left confined, bottled up inside, treasured by the darkness of the Perfect Soldier. "How did you escape?"

He was grateful for the distraction. "I knew my best chance was best back to the roof and use the cable to the building next to it, we had used for our entry. I went back up the stairs and... I saw the girl. She had come back. She was all alone... I couldn't leave her there and I couldn't take her across the cable with me. I took her downstairs."

I fought a sympathetic smile, soothed by knowing that he did the right thing, Perfect Soldier or not.

"The guards were outside. As soon as I gave her to them they opened fire, but only managed to hit me twice. I went back into the hotel and used my planned escape route. The building collapsed only moments later, the guards must have figured I was still inside, because they didn't come looking for me. I hid. I couldn't call for back up because I had taken off my ear piece, with the microphone attached, when the padding was burning my ear. I only had the receiver left so I turned it off and on in the pattern of a distress call."

"Morse code."

"Yeah."

"I identified it." My pride may have been misplaced, but it was out there before I could stop it. "No one at the HQ even recognized it."

"They use a different code. But I had neglected to study it."

"What about Levelt?" I asked when I noticed his eyes were going blank and his face emotionless and it scared me.

An uncertain gaze was cast my way, with fumbling voice he completed: "I left him there... I took off his dog tags and ripped all Preventer logo's off his uniform." He seemed to shrink in his seat, disappearing, or at least wanting to. His bangs fell heavily over his eyes, but I caught him peering through them. There was a question in his eyes but I couldn't read it. I rubbed my thumb over his hand, soothingly, I hope. The corners of his mouth turned down and the frown between his brow was deep and troubled. "I did something else too." He said and his voice was thick with a childlike fear of failure - of never being good enough.

My thumb stilled, my whole body seemed to freeze, afraid of what he might say. I waited breathless for him to continue.

His lower lip was caught by the white incisors. "I..." He grunted, like he was annoying himself with his inadequacy of sharing. "I tried to say a prayer for him."

My mouth opened, stunned, but I kept quiet, wondering what more he would say.

He shook his head. "I just thought I should say something, in case God does exist... Levelt believed he does. That is more important than what I think, right?"

I didn't say anything. I was... awed. Awed into silence.

"But I don't know if I did it right." He finished, ducking his head shamefully between his shoulders.

"What did you say?" A whisper was all I could manage, emotions spilling from the heart and caught in the throat.
"I made a cross and I said: "He believed You exist because he was blessed with a family and his family was blessed with him. I hope You do indeed exist and offer them all comfort and peace, now that they are apart. Until they meet again in Heaven."... Was that good?" he leaned in to observe me closely.

I smiled at him, it seemed to relieve him, I felt his hand relax, the tension leaving him. "Yeah, that was good. I'm sure Levelt is grateful for your words."

"I'm sure he would have been more grateful if I hadn't shot him." Heero spoke bitterly.

I shook my head and squeezed his hand, made him look up at me. "No, I think he was grateful for that too." I imagined the scene, a dusty hallway bathed in orange desert sunlight, two black clad men, injured and fallen, trapped, bound to be discovered by the enemy. I saw Heero standing up, over the large man's body and I saw the force go through his body as his gun fired, shaking his arms and swaying his torso. Dust flying up and settling over a pool of dark red blood. I forced the picture from my mind and offered him a genuine smile, albeit one tainted with sadness. "Do you really think he is in heaven?"

"You know I don't believe in God. Heaven is just an excuse people tell themselves to feel better about losing a loved one." He sounded very rational and analytical, but at the same time; unconvinced.

"I think he is in heaven." I said, with a curt, decisive nod.

"That's not logical. There is no proof heaven exists. It's just an idea, a feeling, something people agree on without being able to see or touch it." The soldier argued.

"You might say it's a lot like love."

His mouth became a thin line in thought.

I didn't know if I had just made a valid argument for the existence of heaven or if I had made him more skeptical to the concept of love. I was no experienced preacher on either of the two subjects, I found them equally confusing but believing in their existence brought me hope. Hope needed to sustain life.

"Thank you for telling me."

"Can you be angry with me now?" He asked with a challenging tone.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why do you want me to get angry?"

He shrugged, unwilling to relent his secrets.

"Bullshit." My voice was suddenly loud in the modest quiet we had been sharing. "If you didn't know why, you wouldn't keep asking."

His hand retreated from mine and disappeared under the tabletop, his gaze followed, preoccupied with his lap, his whole presence seemed to be drawing away from me but though it appeared he had shut me out and ignored me, I knew by the tension in his body that he was acutely aware of me and all his senses but his sight closely focused on my being.

"You have the right to be angry."

Damn straight, I thought, but wisely kept my mouth shut, awaiting more hesitant utter from the
young man across the table.

"You have the right to yell at me, to hate me... to hit me." He looked up at me, his face strong.

My deep frown shadowed the shocked look in my eyes. "You know I would never hit you. Not like that. Not for punishment." I said as I remembered my fist impacting his gundanium cheekbone nearing the climax of the Mariemeia conflict.

He looked at me like he didn't understand, I detested that, for it made me pity him and I shouldn't pity him, it was wearing on my heart, like watching a heartwrenching movie over and over again.

I sighed. "You should go back to bed, you look tired." I rose aiming to help him out of his seat but he fought off my hand with his last strength. Finally he roughly pushed me back with his left hand when I wouldn't relent. "What?" I demanded, flustered by his stubborn defiance.

"Why won't you just get angry with me?" His voice was loud, nearing a high pitched scream, he looked desperate and confused, gazing up at me with his piercing blue eyes as they begged me, but for what I did not see.

"I just don't feel it right now." I tried to explain, honestly confused by his desire to draw rage forth from me.

"You got angry with Quatre!" He accused as though he was jealous.

"Hell yeah I got angry with him!" I shot back, not having the faintest clue where this seemingly pointless argument was headed.

"You always yell at Quatre and then you are friends again, you said so yourself!"

"Heero-" I tried to soothe him when I noticed the pain and anguish in his beautiful eyes as he struggled in vain to make sense of everything.

"I just want you to yell at me so you would stop looking at me like that!"

"Like what?"

His lower lip quivered but he bit down on it hard to immobilize it. No tears fell but his eyes shone like never before and I could see my own pitiful reflection in them. "Like you don't love me anymore!"

Wow. Was my most eloquent thought.

I took a few deep breaths as pregnant silence stretched between us like an infinity of space. Like in slow-motion I kneeled down by his chair and placed reverent hands on his knees and I confessed to him in quiet, sincere voice: "I love you more now, than I have ever loved you. And I know that even though it doesn't seem possible, even to me, I will love you even more tomorrow. And that will never stop." I chuckled at my own uncharacteristic romantics, but then smiles, knowing the words were true. I reached up to gently touch his lips with my fingers and make him release his lower lip from his teeth. I wiped away the drop of blood that was there. "Heero Yuy. You make it very hard for someone to get angry with you." I chuckled and felt my heart warm when he was too late in suppressing the beginning of a slight, embarrassed smile. I widened my own smile, in the hope of having it reflected on his face, but he remained in control and made even the sliver of a smile he sported disappear.

With a deep breath I straightened up and eased him out of the chair. I held him close to me,
pressing his body against mine, feeling his warmth and his breathing. I supported him with one arm and with my free hand I brushed dark locks of hair out of his face, exposing his impressive blue orbs to the light. "It's difficult to love you. It's impossible not to love you."

And again he amazed me, proving me right further. He leaned his head on my shoulder and brought his left arm up slowly to wrap it around my neck.

He was hugging me.

He felt stiff and uncomfortable in my arms, his embrace was awkward, his left hand tense on my shoulder, not knowing where to settle, or how long to settle.

"Let's get you back to bed." I said softly in his burned ear when my own arms started to tremble from supporting his weight. I handed him his crutch, but kept my hand on his lower back, needy for the contact and aware of his current physical shortcomings. I made him go to the bathroom again and brush his teeth, he objected like a young child, the young child he never was. His reflection in the mirror above the bathroom sink was unmistakably chagrin as he tiredly moved his hand back and forth, toothpaste foaming in his mouth.

I realized, looking at him - whilst he stubbornly avoided my gaze - , mulling over the impressive story he had shared with me, the anger had been lost in me. I searched in every dark crevasse of myself but none of the rage that had been seething there just this afternoon was left, it had quietly dissipated during our conversation - during his monumental speech - and now all that was left for my soul search to come up with was the rational idea that I should be angry, but it went unaccompanied by the feeling. His words had been like a band aid over my bleeding heart that had smothered all hateful accusations of lies and betrayal. All I wanted was for him to tell me more, tell me everything, to keep on talking, even about the things I probably shouldn't want to know. Interrupting him with angry tirades seemed detrimental to the process. Furthermore I realized there were no ill intentions to blame, only a lacking, ignorant understanding of social conduct for which I should jab insults at J, not at Heero.

A sense of peace washed over me that seemed to cure all aches and pains in my body. By no means was everything magically solved, Heero and I both had problems, individually as well as interpersonally, but at least now I discovered from the knotted mess my true feelings about that: Not anger, but hopeful determination. It was a relief to finally know and to be free of anger. Silently, secretly, I prided my young and bruised ego for with-holding the anger that had seemed all consuming, because now it just felt childish and petty.

We inched back into the bedroom where I lay him down and covered him with his sheets. He complained about the discomfort of the braces. I shushed him motherly and reminded him that he shouldn't move the joints, not even in sleep. Heero argued that he never moves in his sleep, but he stopped himself when he caught my look. I was clearly immovable on the subject. Even he could tell.

I went through the paces of my own nighttime ritual and then settled in my own bed, flicking off the lights. I didn't expect any more words to come from him, he had already massively exceeded his soldier imposed "word quota" for the day, but he continued to surprise me, chiseling away at the barrier I had protectively built around myself these last few days, effectively rendering it useless.

"I didn't not tell you for the reason you think."

I frowned. That's a large preposition if I ever heard one. How could anyone, especially someone as untalented in reading other people such as Heero Yuy - aptly dubbed the Perfect Soldier, with
emphasis on soldier - possible presume to know what I thought? His assertion annoyed me a little, but I inwardly chuckled at the pathetic weakness of the emotion. With a sigh I inquired: "What do you think I think?"

"I don't know."

I propped my head on my elbow and peered at him through the layered darkness, barely able to make out his silhouette. "Then why did you...?" I let my question go unfinished. It seemed obvious and was almost a waste of words to fully spell it out.

"I know you don't know my reason not because I know your reason but because I know you don't know my reason."

My left eyebrow twitched as my face displayed the most ridiculous expression of bafflement. "What? I..." I threw my hand in the air and plopped back down on the mattress. "You really are trying to get me angry, aren't you?"

"I just don't understand why you wouldn't be angry, why you aren't asking me more questions. It's confusing, because-" He abruptly stopped and let silence resume as if he didn't just cut his sentence short.

"Because what?" I heard him moving, his sheets ruffling, his bed creaking ever so softly. When I cast a sideways glance, I saw he had sat up in bed. "Because what?" I repeated, curious.

"Because if you would lie to me... I think I would be very upset."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. But I never wanted to make you upset, in fact by not telling you I wanted to achieve the opposite."

"You didn't want to worry me." I presumed.

"No."

I felt him looking at me.

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

I sat upright as well, looking at his black form intently, wishing I could see his face, but somehow, for some reason, I figured it would do the progress of the conversation no good if I were to turn on the light. I feared that it would scare him and rupture the confidence the anonymity of the darkness allowed him and made it easier to open up to me. I waited for him to continue, knowing that he would. He had been uncharacteristically talkative.

"You've been trying so hard to help me be normal... But still, all I'm good for is fighting. Killing is the only thing I can be trusted with..."

I saw his hand move, it touched his face. I knew better than to allow myself to believe that he was wiping away a tear.

"Even Levelt knew that." He bitterly finished.

The carpeted floor between our beds may as well have been the Grand Canyon, despite the intimacy of the conversation, Heero seemed so far away. Too far away.
Without much thought, relying on my feelings, I pushed the sheets away and stepped out of my bed. I crossed the distance to him slowly, allowing him time to let me know if he rejected or accepted the closeness. As he didn't move, I trusted I was granted access into his personal space. The mattress dipped beneath my weight as I sat down behind him and positioned one of my legs on either side of him. I rested my hands loosely on my own thighs but leaned my chin on his left, unharmed, shoulder, careful not to cause friction with the burned skin of his ear shell.

His whole body was tense, I waited for him to relax before I spoke.

"You were right." I muttered. "That wasn't the reason that I thought."

He turned his head slightly, so his cheek, rather than his ear, was near my mouth. I instinctively placed a light kiss on his cheek. His muscles tensed briefly, but with a sigh he slumped against me, his back against my chest. Encouraged, I wrapped one arm loosely around his waist, careful not to prod any injuries.

"I was disappointed, but not because it meant fighting is all you are good for. That is not true. I was disappointed only because you didn't tell me. To me, it communicated that you didn't think I would understand. And I was sad, to think that maybe you didn't trust me, or that you were shutting me out of your life, creating this second life for yourself that you didn't want me to be a part of. I was angry for a long time too, but that was just byproduct of the other things I felt. I was angry, sad and disappointed, all this time, until tonight. Because you were honest with me... and... the things you said, made up for a lot of the things you didn't say at first."

"What things did I say?" He asked with his familiar, confused and curious voice.

I smiled. "Just things."

He sighed, frustrated that I obviously wasn't going to tell him, wondering how he would ever be perfect at being normal without clear instructions and feedback. But I knew that he would have to struggle through some things himself. I didn't want him to feel like I was controlling him, reshaping him into something he is not, but presuming it to be the way - the only way - I desired him. He may never be perfect. I had long accepted that, as I had long accepted to be far from perfect myself. I hoped he knew that regardless, I would love him the way he was, on the condition that he would be honest with me. I wasn't sure how long it would take for the trust between us to be restored. I still felt like it was damaged, trust was a more complicated restoration than to be done with a conversation, not matter how honest and heartfelt.

But even though my trust was shaken, I had to have confidence that it would return to us.

"But Heero," I started, returning to my warning God of Death tone of voice, "Don't ever lie to me again."
I stood in the doorway, encased by light, but my attire rejected it, absorbed all of it back into darkness. Quatre had taken the job upon himself to get our suits dry-cleaned and pressed and returned to us in pristine shape. However, when we bought the suits, I never expected to be wearing it for this grim occasion. I rolled my shoulders in the confinement of the jacket, trying to make myself more at ease in the outfit that was like a uniform to me. The black fabric rustled in the silence. Adjusting my tie around my neck for the final time I asked: "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"Yes." The reply was very confident.

I sighed. "Okay, maybe "want to go" is a poor way of saying it," I tried vainly, "don't you think you should go?"

"Why?"

"To pay your respect."

"I have paid my respect." He argued. "To pay my respect twice would be superfluous, not to mention he jeopardized the mission, he barely deserves to have respect paid once." His voice was cold and distant, as was his expression. Sometimes it scared me, but I knew what was behind those walls and I knew they were crumbling.

"You don't mean that." I stated.

"Yes I do." The retort was childish.

I reached for my tie again, it felt so constricting around my neck. I stood in the doorway counting seconds, not really sure what I was hoping for, what I could realistically expect from him. My wristwatch counted along with me. If I didn't leave soon, I would be late.

"Why are you going?" He suddenly asked. It didn't sounds like he was actually interested in my reasoning, his voice had the appearance of being accusing.

I shrugged, moving the heavy jacket around my shoulders. "Because I feel it's the right thing to do."

"You barely knew him."

I nodded. "That is true. But he is an agent, like you and in many ways a soldier, like we both were. But more importantly... it could have been you. God, or some cosmic force decided that it should be him. I want to go to show respect and remorse, because even though I'm glad it wasn't you, it sucks for him that he drew the short straw. The least that can be done is show that he will be missed and remembered."

He was silent, perhaps contemplative, perhaps stubbornly rejecting my logic, I couldn't tell with his bangs shadowing his eyes.
"I should go, or I'll be late." I paused, hoping for him to change his mind. I honestly felt it would be good for him to go, to come to terms with what had happened, but he remained silent. "I'll be back in a few hours. Do you want me to take you to the bathroom first?" I asked motherly, not trusting Heero's battered body to be able to go back and forth between his bed and the bathroom, let alone balance on one leg long enough to relieve himself.

His eyes narrowed defensively as he looked up at me sharply. "I can do that by myself."

I decided it was best not to disagree with him, but jokingly I reminded him: "If you miss, you clean it up yourself."

"Hn."

I chuckled. "It's been a long time since I heard that one. Can't say I missed it though. I'll be back soon." I slowly closed the bedroom door, I guess still hoping to be called back to help him into something appropriately sullen and black, but the door shut without protest.

I walked to the train station with my hands stuffed deep into the pockets of my pants as if they were searching for something in the depth of them. The dress shoes made clicking sounds on the pavement as I walked, a delicate rhythm to accompany my thoughts. I realized that in spite of all the death I had seen and created, I had never attended a funeral. What that meant I did not know, perhaps it fuelled my desire to go even more strongly than mere moral implications. I suppose it didn't really matter. I arrived at the station just in time to catch the train headed towards the Kennedy space center and adjoining Preventer headquarters. I caught the reflection of a woman dressed in black, a few rows in front of me and wondered if she was heading to the funeral herself. But then she answered her phone and she became all smiles, giggles and blushes. In a way it was good to see that even thought it felt that way, this day does not evolve around death.

I got off at the Kennedy station and scanned the directory for the Preventer agency graveyard. Finally I spotted an appropriately black arrow with a respectable white print that pointed me in the right direction. I followed the arrows that led me to a long winding path leading away from the tall building. Just beyond the reach of the shadow of the Head Quarters, the path came to an end, opening up to a grassy field. A white marble monument was erected to honor the deceased agents buried in the graveyard, in bronze letters it read: "These grounds are dedicated to the honorable agents who gave their life in the protection of the balance in the world. They will be remembered respectfully as agents and lovingly as family and friends." And underneath the script were many rows of bronze stars, too many to count, to prepare visitors for the site they were about to discover.

The grass was dotted with humble, white headstones. What sent a shiver down my spine was not just the amount of headstones, but the stretch of grass that was yet unused. It sent the clear message that at this amount of death, even though it seems insurmountable, it does not end. Every visitor knows with a single glance how many have fallen and how many will fall in the protection of the peace. Hopefully it will draw more appreciation from their hearts.

Amazed by the gravity of the feelings I was experiencing, I halted for a moment and reminded myself not to make this about me. My hands went to my throat again to finger the green tie I had stolen from Heero's uniform because the bow tie seemed so festive. I tucked one finger in the loop around my neck and loosened the noose a little.

In the distance I saw a gathering of people appearing like a blotch of black ink on a painting of otherwise bright and vibrant colors and I headed in their direction. I passed many headstones, curiously reading the script. They all started the same, stating the name, rank, date of birth and date of death, but the text on the lower half was always different. Famous quotations from passed poets, Biblical lines, or "Here lies my beloved husband". A particularly poignant one made me
stop reading.

"I love you, mommy".

When I neared the group I slowed my gait to assess the situation. A mahogany coffin was being put in place in the center of the crowd and to the right of it was a black and white picture of a man I recognized to be the agent I came for and beside that was a black ribbon with his name at the center of a circle of yellow and white flowers.

I kept my distance so as not to encroach. After all, Heero was right, I barely even knew the agent.

I stole glances at the faces of the people, all sad and solemn. At the center of the gathering of people was an older woman, flanked by two younger, tall and broad men. The woman was crying uncontrollably and needed the support of the men just to remain standing. The mother. The men by her side looked too much like agent Levelt to be mere agents. They were his brothers. Both were struggling to keep from shedding tears.

I felt uncomfortable realizing I had been proven wrong. I always thought I had seen the most gruesome of what death had to offer: the actual sight of someone killed. It wasn't. The most horrible thing about death, was the devastation it left in it's wake; broken families, lonely friends.

"Duo." A hand landed on my shoulder as my name was whispered.

Une came to stand beside me, observing the scene also, with tormented eyes that seemed to have aged a decade since I last saw them.

"So Heero didn't come with you?"

"No." I saw no use in explaining it to her. She must know Heero well enough to know that this is too hard even for the Perfect Soldier.

"Will you bring him Monday?" She turned to look at me but I didn't look back.

"To see the doctor. Not the shrink."

"Really?" Her voice was thick with genuine surprise.

"What's that's supposed to mean?" I shot a foul look at her.

"Well... of the two I think seeing a "shrink" is most pertinent to Heero's recovery."

I rolled my eyes and turned back towards the group of people. "Like Heero's would even say anything to some stranger, just because he has some degrees on his walls."

"She, she has degrees on her walls." Une corrected.

"Well gee, I hope the feminist commission forgives me for my gender discriminatory assumption." I deadpanned.

Une sighed. It was a frustrated sigh. "Heero might not talk, but sometimes it's even more important to just listen. I think she has some things to say that might help him and then he can decide for himself whether he wants to talk or not."

"He doesn't need a shrink." I hissed.

"Duo, you have to accept that no matter how much you love him or how much he loves you back,
you can't be everything to him. You can't be a lover and a mentor and a therapist-

I shushed her for the ceremony started.

For the next half hour we both paid attention to the words of the minister and family members who shared childhood stories, some of which drawing a teared-up chuckle or smiles from the crowd. Rather than a ceremony that mourns his death, it celebrated his life. His brothers spoke of when he was young, a group of friends reminisced an embarrassing year of college life and his girlfriend, barely able to speak through her tears, thanked him for being full of love for everyone, unconditionally. Bible verses were recited by others and after the final words everyone walked up to the casket to place a white rose on top of it. The mother, who came last, lingered and her mouth moved as though she was talking, but no sound came out other than her sobs.

The people started to head off, walking towards the small chapel at the far end of the field. The mother and the brothers stayed behind to watch the casket being lowered into the ground. The woman had suddenly turned very quiet and stoic, she had probably disengaged from the situation to be able to handle it. A young girl played a melancholy song on her violin as the casket disappeared.

"I'm surprised there was something to bury." I mumbled, walking away to offer some privacy to the family.

Une followed me, she walked slowly, having trouble balancing on the grass in her high heels.
"Recovery teams set to work quickly. They found his body Wednesday night. Then ensued a big, political tug of war. I haven't slept since."

Judging by the dark circles under her eyes and her pale complexion I had no reason to think she was exaggerating.

"None of the Preventer agents are officially listed as agents, so they had no proof of malintent. They identified his body but couldn't prove he was an agent so they finally had to release him and he was flown in yesterday."

"Was there... was there much left? I mean... a building collapsing on top of you." I shuddered, G used to scare me with horror stories of only fingers and toes being found, it was a tactic supposed to make me extra careful when handling explosives, because if the boom doesn't get you, the building will.

"Most of him was recovered, but it had to be a closed casket ceremony."

We walked aimlessly through the field. I didn't know why.

"Do you know what happened to him, exactly? I mean... was there an autopsy?"

Une stopped and looked at me with understanding. "You mean did we see the bullet hole in his forehead?"

I could only swallow, not knowing, but fearing the implications this "execution" could have for Heero, legally.

"The coroner declared it merciful euthanasia by an unknown subject. Considering the circumstances there will be no investigation. But yes, I do know what happened to him. Exactly. I deduct you know too?"

I nodded. "Heero told me yesterday what happened."
"How is he doing?"

I narrowed my eyes at her angrily. "I'm not sending him to a shrink."

Une sighed, putting her hands on her hips. "Duo, if you could, for a moment, let go of the idea that sending him to a shrink means he is crazy. Do you honestly think it won't do him some good? He is damaged, he needs help."

"You mean he needs to be fixed!" I spat. "He isn't damaged, he is fine!" I didn't know why I said that, because my heart knew it to be untrue.

"He is not untouchable, or invincible. He's just as vulnerable as the rest of us, perhaps even more so. What do you think shooting someone you know in the head, in that situation, does to a person?" Her tone was almost angry as I was disagreeing with her. She was obviously annoyed that I didn't agree with her logic.

"Well then maybe you shouldn't have sent a five foot six boy to a hostile situation with a 6 foot three man!" I bit sharply, hoping she could see the intensity of my anger in my eyes.

"If I hadn't we would be attending Heero's funeral today!" Une's shout carried across the graveyard and in the distance an old couple looked at us oddly. She took me by the arm and guided me out of their curious line of sight to a tall tree swaying it's leaves in the wind. "Don't you think I know it wasn't a good match in that regard?" She said, insulted.

"Well then why the hell did you do it?"

"When Heero is alone, he takes big risks. Many big risks. When I sent him on missions, he took increasingly dangerous actions to complete them. Even objecting to strict regulations such as wearing a Kevlar vest. He took a bullet to heart once, luckily he was wearing a vest at that time. It saved his life but he was still vehemently against it. He had no regard for his own safety when it was just his life on the line. I feared that that attitude would kill him this mission, that's why I teamed him up."

"But why Levelt?"

"Because none of the other agents wanted to partner up with Heero! I didn't want to force anyone, all my requests got shot down, stating they got wives and kids... I couldn't neglect that! They don't trust him, they know he's a liability. They knew their chances of ending up six-feet-under, right where we stand now, would increase exponentially when with Heero. I was about to give up and call off the mission when Levelt expressed interest in the partnership." She bit her lips and cast her gaze to the grassy ground. "He was eager to learn, dangerous or not, he knew Heero is the best and Levelt wanted to learn from the best. He volunteered... Keeping in mind the importance of the mission I felt I had no choice but to accept his offer. I honestly felt that even though it violated basic rules, it was the right decision and that by sending them out together, they would return together. Heero protecting Levelt and Levelt preventing Heero from doing something stupid. I never even feared that this way it would be someone else not coming back." She rushed her words, like she didn't even want to talk about it, but she had to, I understood, as I saw her eyes begging me for understanding.

I looked back at where we had been. All the family members had left and two men in green overalls had approached the site and shoveled sand into the hole.

"I did it to protect Heero. But as you can see, even though I thought I had the solution, it turned out horrible anyway." She placed her hands on both my shoulders, making me look her in the eye. "I
know you want to help Heero yourself. And maybe you can. But can you really afford to take the risk? You think you have the solution, but what if you too are fooled by your own confidence and care?"

I ran my sweaty palms through my hair, exhaling loudly. "What good would a shrink do for Heero anyway? They base their insight on knowledge obtained by studying the general population and Heero is about as deviant from "general" as it gets."

"I know it's a long shot. I know Heero is... unique and rules don't apply to him, but doctor Nettle specializes in helping agents, much like Heero and she is acknowledged as a leading expert on trauma's. You doubt her because she operates based on what she knows and no one knows Heero. There was a time you didn't know Heero, but you abided your time, you were patient and I see how much you have been able to help him. No one is trying to steal the honor here, or claim that you have been doing a poor job or insinuate that Heero is crazy. I just want to help."

"He vulnerable... susceptible. She can't tell him to do anything. He'll take it as an order and as proof that what he has been doing is wrong. I don't want him to think that, because he has been doing great." I warned.

In spite of my serious warning, Une smiled. "Does this mean you agree?"

I exhaled loudly, not really sure what I would be getting Heero and myself into. "I won't tell him what to do. He has to decide for himself."

Une retreated her arms, wrapping them around herself. "Tell him that if he refuses to come see the Preventers psychiatrist, he will be fired."

"What? So you now you're just going to force him?"

"Duo, calm down! I'm hear on two accounts, I'm a concerned friend but I'm also his boss and breathing down my neck is another, big, boss. As a concerned friend I am suggesting that he'd take this offer and meet with doctor Nettle. As a boss I am required to order him."

I bit my lip and stuffed my hands back into my pockets, fingering the lint I found at the bottom. "I'm not really sure him getting fired is a bad thing."

"Living without purpose is always a bad thing."

I shook my head, feeling my braid move back and forth along my back. "He doesn't want fighting to be his only purpose."

"Fighting is an admirable purpose in life when you consider it saves more people than it kills."

I chuckled bitterly. "You'll have a hard time selling that to anyone who has gone to battle and has spilled blood with his own hands... You'll have trouble selling that to Levelt's mother as well."

"Maybe..." She uttered mysteriously. "Just another thing Heero can discuss with our psychiatrist. I'll send a car to come and get you and Heero at noon, Monday. He'll be examined by doctor Borland first and then, if he accepts, he will meet with doctor Nettle." Without saying anything further, not even a goodbye, she walked off and left me by myself in the shadow of the tree.

With many thoughts on my mind I walked the long way back to the train station to find I had just missed the train. I seated myself on a bench overlooking expansive fields and the air- and spaceport which was void of all activity.
It was hard for me to accept that Heero needed things that I am rationally not capable of providing. I doubted Heero would be willing to talk to this doctor Nettle, though I understood, in spite of my ego, that it might be beneficial, Heero would probably be impossible to persuade. We would both prefer that we could keep this entire issue contained to the two of us, but that desire was faulted by our inexperience with handling, expressing and resolving troubling emotions. Perhaps I should have had more faith in Une's perspective from the start. After all, isn't it reasonable to assume that all us Gundam Pilots are damaged in one way or another? I didn't think it possible for any of us to escape the haunting memories of the war unscathed.

I also found it difficult to believe we could ever be cured from them.

Une's question's weighed on me. Can you really afford to take that risk? What if pride, misunderstanding and jealousy withheld me from allowing Heero to get help? What if she really could ease some of his troubles, save him from his most devious torments? Could I take the risk of denying him that?

I grunted tiredly and rolled my head back, staring up at the pristine blue sky, not a whiff of a cloud in sight.

I got up when I heard the train approaching. The ride home I stared at my own reflection, objectively observing my maturing face and form. In both the literal and figurative sense I've outgrown Heero. I was afraid that though my physical growth was stagnating at almost six feet tall, my emotional growth would continue and I would leave Heero behind. If this doctor could help him grow, speed up his development in ways that I fear I have been lacking, I saw no harm in that. Even if she couldn't help him, if he just lay on her Freudian psycho-analytic sofa with his arms stubbornly folded across his chest and his lips sealed shut, there would still be no harm.

By the time the train stopped at my destination the voice in the back of my head echoing Une's earthly - perhaps naive - reason, convinced me that it was worth a try.

Unfortunately I am much more easily convinced than Heero.

After getting off the train I quickened my pace to hurry home. I had been gone longer than I expected and I didn't want Heero to be alone for too long. I rounded the final corner to the entrance of our apartment building and instantly recognized the short blonde finger obsessively pressing the buzzer of our apartment.

It reminded me -rather stunned : That's right. I have a life. And there are people in it.

Seeing her brought a surprised smile to my lips. I called out her name as I closed the distance.

Sookie turned her head, her blonde curls dancing. When she saw me she smiled too and jogged towards me to meet me halfway, but just before we met in a slow-motion hug, her face went pale and she stopped an arm's length away from me. She looked me up and down, my black shoes, my black dress pants, my black formal jacket. "Oh no." She covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh my God. Why are ya wearin' funeral clothes?" She asked panicked and suddenly out of breath.

"Don't worry. It's not... Well, I did go to a funeral but I didn't really know the person that well."

"I didn't do anything." I pleaded innocently.

"Not returning my phone calls all week and then showing up wearing this!" She hit me again, but not as hard. "Ya scared me, I thought something had happened!"
"I'm sorry! I'm sorry." I calmed her by wrapping my arms around her tightly.

She sighed and relaxed in my embrace. "Where have ya been all week?" She mumbled into my chest. "I missed you."

We released each other and I promised I'd tell her all about my crazy week. I took her up to the apartment. When I opened the door I was surprised to see Heero sitting at the kitchen table, his crutch by his side. On the table top in front of him was a new jar of peanut butter and he had a spoon in his mouth. His eyes widened briefly, adorably, like a child caught red-handed, eating from the cookie jar. But his eyes narrowed again and his lips pursed when he noticed the guest I had brought upstairs unannounced.

"Wow!" Sookie exclaimed, looking past me at Heero. "Ya look horrible! What in tha world happened to ya? !"

Heero put away the spoon and screwed the lid back onto the jar, his face stoic, unresponsive to Sookie.

"Uhm, Heero, you remember Sookie, right? From Aiden's party?" I tried.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were in the bedroom. Otherwise I would have given you a heads-up."

Heero didn't say anything. He struggled to his feet, leaning heavily on the crutch.

"What happened? Were ya hit by a car or sumthing?" Sookie kept questioning as Heero gingerly made his exit.

The bedroom door closed behind him and Sookie turned to me with wide, shocked eyes.

"I told you, I had one hell of a week."

I sat her down on the couch and offered her something to drink or to eat while I cleared away the spoon and the jar of peanut butter but she declined both offers and drilled me for information. I joined her in the sitting area and told her what had happened without getting into too much detail, for example: not informing her of the execution, nor the murder that Quatre mentioned, or even tell her that he is a Gundam pilot as well. The whole time I spoke her jaw was agape and her wide eyes barely blinked. It was almost comical and it made it difficult for me to convey the deep emotions that had been burying me all week. I finished and at first she did nothing but sputter a little, then she blurted:

"Ya must be pissed!"

I smiled. "Actually, no... not anymore."

She raised her eyebrows. "Than he must've made one hell of an apology."

"No... he didn't."

She lowered her expressive eyebrows into a frown. "Then why aren't ya pissed?"

I chuckled. "Heero kept asking me the same thing. It took a while, but I finally realized that you can only blame someone for doing the wrong thing when that someone has a grasp on the distinction between right and wrong. I can't expect someone who doesn't know any better to do the
socially accepted 'right thing'. When he explained it to me I realized he was trying to do the right thing but made a judgment error."

"So yer no longer angry with Heero?" She verified.

"Nope."

"Then why are ya still angry with that other friend of yers? That Quatre guy."

"That's different!" I argued even though I had no defense.

"Why?" She shot back, catching onto my inner doubt.

I bit the inside of my cheek. "I guess..." I offered hesitantly, "because I'm not crazy in love with him..."

She nodded. "He tried to do the right thing as well."

"Yeah, but Quatre knows what the right thing is, he has been raised relatively... normal. He should have known better."

"Well, the right thing is a pretty ambiguous term, ain't it? It seems like even ya haven't really made up yer mind. I mean, yer angry at him from not telling ye Heero was an agent, but at the same time ya say yer angry about something else he said about Heero, because he was butting into ya guys' business."

I blinked. Dumbstruck, I supposed. "I... I guess you're right. Albeit a bit simplified."

"Oh honey, ya should really know by now that I'm always right." She jested with a wide grin.

I frowned. "I'm still angry with him for some reason though."

"Yeah well, were not automatons ruled by logic, we're flawed human beings ruled by emotions. I'm pretty sure in a little while ya'll find yer not angry with that friend anymore, Jus'like y'aren't angry with Heero anymore."

An embarrassed blush came to my cheeks and at her insisting I admitted: "How insulting would it be if I confess that I'm pretty amazed by all these insights you have?"

"Not at all. It's the accent, it throws everybody off." She said, grinning ear to ear. "I could become a rocket scientist and still ride the special bus. Inbred hicks is what they call us, right?"

Though her words were harsh they didn't seem to affect her. She must have been subjected to a lot of prejudice and discrimination in her life, growing up as a young gay woman in the southern states and then migrating down to Florida as a veritable hillbilly. I forgot sometimes, troubled by visions of death and battle, that growing up weighed by a war is not the only poor way of growing up.

"So, how are other things going between ya and Heero?" She asked suggestively, adding a wink for good measure.

I chuckled and that embarrassed blush returned to me with vengeance. "Aside from the roller coaster of emotions this week I've been more his nurse than anything else."

"Hn. A naughty nurse?" She burst out in laughter, I guess my expression in response to her comment must have been hilarious.
I composed my face, erasing shock. I was starting to learn that around Sookie I'd best quickly become comfortable discussing sex because it appeared to be her favored topic. I wasn't used discussing such frivolous things, I was more at ease conversing on the topic of Explosion charts and hard entry tactics. Of course being the citizen that I am now, I should probably start taking sex more seriously, after all, if I'm to believe my biology teacher it's what drives everything. I always thought that was hunger, but with my belly full and sated it became increasingly possible that sex is the main motivator in the normal world.

"Sex hasn't really been on my mind lately." I explained. "When something like this happens," I nodded towards the bedroom door, "you go straight back to survival mode."

"Sorry."

"That's okay. I should probably think about it more often. Not in the naughty way, but I suppose I have my work cut out for me with Heero."

"Do ya know if he was... uhm... or not?"

"He hasn't really said it out loud, but... I'm afraid..." I shook my head. "I really didn't want to circle back to this topic..."

"Sorry. Again."

I smiled. "That's okay. Again."

She looked at her watch a declared that she had to go home. She hadn't really expected to see me, so she promised her grandparents to be home early. I hugged her, tightly and she hugged me back even tighter. I thanked her for her concern, she didn't really know what that meant but she smiled anyway and she said:

"Yer welcome."

As a way of saying goodbye she said: "Take care of that patient of yers, Naughty Nurse Maxwell."

When she left I felt at peace. Her presence had - if only momentarily - reconciled some of the brewing turmoil within me. I realized, though it wasn't exactly an epic epiphany, that it was nice to have a friend like her, someone who just made me feel good. Someone who was honest with me and could help me because she saw things and knew things to which I was blind and ignorant. On the heels of that "epiphany" was the determination to get Heero to see that shrink, Nettle. She would have to be his Sookie, his beacon. Une was right, I couldn't be everything to Heero. Just like Heero couldn't be everything to me, for which I never blamed him.

I made a B-line for the bedroom, all of a sudden overcome with the urge to see his face, even though it was bruised and his right eye bloodshot.

Heero was sitting straight up in bed, his - too - much loved laptop perched on his lap, his fingers hovering over the keys. Though he froze upon my entry, his fingers were tantalizingly close to the keyboard, like a lover yearning to touch skin.

"What are you doing with that thing?!" I demanded to know, slightly jealous of the tender attention Heero was giving the softly humming machine. Oh if he would use his fingers on me just as expertly and delicately I wouldn't hum, I would purr. "How did you even get it in here?" I leaned forward and shut the laptop, grasping it out of his reach.

"Hey!" He protested adorably, his one arm vainly reaching for it.
"Nuh uh. I know you. Laptop is work and you're not supposed to be working."

"I promise I won't. Please."

I chuckled. "Oh, I am so not falling for that. I invented puppy-eyes and let me tell you something, young grasshopper, you have much to learn. What am I supposed to believe when I hand you back that damned thing, that'll you'll be surfing the web for porn?"

His eyes widened minutely.

I groaned displeased. "I came here to do something and now everything got sidetracked!" I sat down beside him on the edge of his bed. He looked at me with a neutral expression in which I detected a warm softness. It made my heart thud audibly. My lips curved in a small smile and I slowly leaned in, keeping my eyes open out of curiosity as the distance to his face decreased. "Sookie reminded me of something I've wanted to do. Since we talked yesterday." I whispered when our noses touched.

Heero didn't respond, his eyes darted back and froth from my left to my right eye.

I brought one gentle hand up to hold his chin and tilt his head slightly before leaning in the final distance. It was a soft, innocent merging of lips that left me longing for more but I restrained the urges that I had restrained so poorly in the past, with disastrous results. Keeping my lips just lightly pressed to his I waited for a response. I did not have to wait long.

Along with an inhale of breath a hand slipped around my neck and pulled me tighter against him. His kisses were cute in their lack of experience but still they set fire to my body and I could not refrain from kissing back hungrily. He opened his mouth to invite my tongue inside and I accepted eagerly, moving my hand to encircle his neck and feel a fast pulse that rivaled my own. When I started the kiss I didn't know it would amount to something as intimate and intense, but as soon as our lips had met, something familiar sparked and fire spread through veins raging with hormones to set alight uncontrollable teenage desire.

Naughty Nurse indeed.

I broke the kiss and declared in between pants to his confused expression: "Air."

He nodded, panting himself.

"You like that?" I asked with a smirk, mesmerized by the way his lips looked, soft, full and red.

He nodded, right before he leaned in and sealed our lips together once more, as always letting me take control from there, enjoying the lead I took.

I didn't know for how long we kissed. Einstein's relativity confused my sense of time, it felt like mere seconds but it could have been lasting minutes, I sure would want that.

"I'm gonna order take-out. What do you want?" I asked breathless, seeking distraction to cool the heat inside my body. Our faces were still close together and our arms wrapped around each other.

"Pizza." He said without hesitation.

"You don't like pizza."

"I know. But I want to learn to like it."
"Sure?"

"Yes." He pressed his forehead against mine, like a cat seeking attention.

I gave him one final peck on the lips before rising to my feet. I chuckled when Heero's hand around my neck tried to stop me from getting up. First I changed into something more comfortable than the from now on known as "funeral clothes" behind the open door of the closet, wondering if that would have the same effect on him as him changing behind the narrow piece of wood had on me. Once done I walked back over to him and helped him out of bed and onto his crutch. The way to the kitchen was uneventful and I noticed he was little quicker than he was before. It was good to see his strength return to him. I called the pizza place and Heero kept me company sitting at the kitchen table while I set the table. After meeting the pizza guy downstairs by the front door I got two beers out of the refrigerator as well, making Heero momentarily scrunch his face up.

I laughed. "Hey, if you want to try pizza, you have to give beer another shot too. Pizza and beer, doesn't get more normal than that."

He didn't look pleased with that.

He ate his dinner staring at his plate contemplatively and I ate my dinner staring at him, studying his incredibly attractive features as well as every tiny cut and the distinctive shape of the spot of blood in his right eye. If my perception was not deceiving me, the spot was shrinking. I couldn't wait for it to be gone, so I could enjoy his stunning eyes in all their amazing glory. Regarding his ear I had lost hope of a full recovery, a burn of that degree would definitely leave scarring. Luckily his wild, plucky hair obstructed view of most of the ear. I wondered if he was still in pain. I wondered what the burned ear felt like and what the bullet wounds felt like. Strangely in my life on the streets and my time spent with the arguably insane professor G, I had never suffered burns nor bullet wounds. My body was preoccupied familiarizing itself with bruises and broken bones. That was odd, considering I had been through a war, fighting in possibly the most dangerous position as one of five hugely outnumbered rebels. My gaze strayed to the two bolts at the far end of the room.

One in perfect condition. One horribly damaged.

I looked back at Heero, trying to read his face. "And? Liking pizza a little better?"

He was mid-way through struggling to take a bite of a slice, fighting with the stringy, molten cheese. He shot me a look that made me laugh.

"Should I take that as a no?"

"It's fine."

"Ah. That I'll take as a no."

"It's not awful. It's just..."

I shrugged. "I don't expect you to like it. Maybe pizza, like beer, is an acquired taste and I don't assume they had dried, military rations pizza-flavored."

"You know they didn't." Heero replied, missing my sarcasm.

I molded my face to express something more serious and announced: "I have something to say. A suggestion... and I think that it will take some time for you to warm up to it."

He quirked a confused eyebrow.
"Just hear me out. Okay?" After he nodded I continued: "I talked to Une today, at the funeral."

The color of his eyes seemed to shift to a darker shade.

"She's made some arrangements at the HQ for Monday. We'll be picked up at noon so that weird doctor guy can examine you and... you also have an appointment with someone else." I gauged his reaction, seeing if anything registered, if he had any clue where this was going, but his face was blank in lack of understanding. "Another doctor, her name was Nettle, I believe."

Heero shook his head. "Nettle is the psychiatrist."

I sighed. "Then it is indeed Nettle whom I meant."

He frowned, lowering his fork to his plate. "Une wants me to talk to a psychiatrist?"

"No. She requires it of you, as an agent. She said you would be fired if you refuse."

"What do you think?" He immediately said.

"Uh... about whether you should go or not?"

He nodded.

I scratched the back of my head, knowing I was approaching a possibly delicate topic. "I can't really decide that for you."

"No, what do you think? It will help me decide for myself."

"Okay. Well... I think... I think you could... benefit from talking to someone. Someone who is a good listener and a good advisor."

"I've found you to be a sufficient listener and advisor." He stated matter-of-factly.

I smiled and thanked him, but admitted: "Heero, I walk the walk and I talk the talk, but most of it is just guesswork."

He frowned. "I'm not really sure I understand what that means."

A soft chuckle escaped me and my hand reached out across the table for his. "It means that I don't have all the answers to your questions, or all the solutions to your problems."

"And you think Nettle does?" Heero sounded openly skeptical.

"I think she'll come a long way. Yes."

He seemed to be thinking things over for a long time, his gaze going around the room, looking for answers in the cushions of the sofa, in the thread of the carpet and in the paint on the walls. "Don't you want me to get fired from the Preventers?"

"All I want is for you to be free to do whatever you wish." I meant that, even though I knew I ran a big risk of being hurt by his wishes, whatever they may be.

He drew his bottom lip between his teeth but released it before nervously biting down. "I'm not sure I want to keep working as an agent..." He confessed and he appeared to be as surprised by that himself as I was. "But I liked..." He frowned and looked desperately lost. "I liked being needed. I liked being the person who knows what to do again."
I gave a small sympathetic smile. "No one knows better than you. I learned a lot from you, things G couldn't even teach me."

"But I don't like being away from you." He abruptly burst, looking at me with pleading eyes, begging me to resolve this issue and aid his confusion out of this world.

I shook my head. "I can't tell you what to do, Heero. You have to figure things out for yourself."

"And you thinks Nettle can help me with that?" He inferred, with a grumbling tone.

"Maybe."

He sighed. "I don't like talking to strangers."

"I know. But if you don't want to talk to her, then don't talk, just listen. Maybe after a while, when she isn't such a stranger anymore, you'll feel more comfortable telling her things." I looked down, damming my selfish jealousy.

He nodded and my heart skipped a beat.

"I that a yes?" I ventured. "Are you going?"

"Just going. But I'm not telling her anything that isn't her business." He retorted defensively.

"That's okay. That's a start." I wasn't going to claim to be happy. Rationally I knew a psychiatrist trained in helping damaged agents could possibly offer solutions that I couldn't even grasp at. Yet like Heero confessed, all I wanted too was just to be needed. It was a hard reality knowing that my best wasn't good enough. But it were selfish thoughts that I ought to banish. I could only hope that this would not mean being shut out, shut out of the truth. I wanted to know everything. I wanted to know him in every way, wanted to know of even the deepest, darkest, self-loathing thought so I could take burden upon myself and smooth away his pain.

We sat quietly across from each other, lost in our thoughts, till I decided it was time for him to return to bed. I accompanied him all the way, shuffling along with his agonizing gait. I inquired about his knee but he just shot me a look and as if to prove his strength, he quickened his pace. I immediately saw the wince with each step, so I grabbed his shoulder firmly and told him: "It's not a race."

"If it was I would still beat you." There was a hint of a smirk.

I chuckled, even though a voice in the back of my mind teased that he probably still could. He would ruin his entire body doing so, but he would do it. "When you're all healed up, we'll race. Settle this." I said by way of motivating him to cooperate in his recovery.

In the bedroom Heero passed by his bed and headed for the bathroom, expecting a shower. I grabbed his shoulder again and slowly turned him around. I fought against a blush but it was useless. "Do you mind if we shower tomorrow? Skip a night?"

He didn't understand, it was apparent in his face.

"After that kiss from before I think it would be best not to lather up naked together. Give me some time to gather appropriate thoughts."

"So as long as I can't shower by myself, we can't kiss?"
"No." Another motivational tool, or so I hoped. "Unless you want me to ravish you." As soon as the words tripped past my lips I realized the mistake I made and it was affirmed by the dark flash that went through his eyes.

Without saying anything he went over to his bed and got under the covers.

I got into bed myself, mulling over my error and it's obvious implications; a nearly unveiled truth. My heart clenched but I willed it into silence and calm. This horrible truth that I expected, though especially painful for me to consider, would be just one of many horrible truths I would come to absorb. It scared me, but at the same time - paradoxically - reassured me, because I knew I could handle it. In all the secrecy I have considered every possible, dark detail and I knew that even if they would all be true - even the rape, even the murder Quatre suggested - I would still love him. It was an immense feeling that went without description.

I pulled myself out of my musings when my brain registered electric blue eyes staring at me. His face was perfect in the soft orange glow of the light, his lashes thick and deep black, his hair playful, his lips could be found guilty of pouting. We stared into each other's eyes for a long time. I was mesmerized by him, even just by the way his eyes fluttered as he blinked. My heart thudded, wildly acknowledging the love that overpowered my entire being. It filled me to a point that it was more than I was. I was just a vessel that looked like Duo Maxwell, filled with love for Heero Yuy. The love had become me. It was my identity. I embraced it, as it filled every space of me that had been painfully empty for a long time. I wondered how he felt. I was certain I would never know until-

"I love you." He said. His voice was crystal clear and his gaze never wavered from mine.

I realized he had never said that to me before darkness took the room. He never said it to me, whilst looking at me. I could never be sure what it meant, I could even argue Heero himself would never know what he meant, but I felt loved. I felt it was a truth. One that would flood the darkness out of all the other truths with it's blinding light.

I smiled a true and honest smile. "I love you too." I hoped he knew how much. I hoped he could tell. I think he could.

I didn't reach for the light switch. I kept my eyes trained on him as he looked back. And suddenly we were both smiling, mine bright and big, his hesitant and small, but beautiful nonetheless.

The light would remain on that night, even as we slept. I woke up occasionally and with hazy eyes I drank the sight of his peaceful, innocent face as he slept. I knew his demons to be hidden deep, for them to even not show in sleep. But I knew light to have farther reaches still.
In the car an awkward and tense silence ruled the space. The driver of the black, unmarked sedan, undoubtedly an agent, turned up the radio in an attempt to ease the discomfort. We left the city behind, following the trail of asphalt through the fields. In the distance a single building neared, the tall high rise of the Preventer Agency; a glass rectangular jutting up from the landscape like an alien structure, reflecting the sunlight to create the illusion of a second sun. I peered out the window when I heard the rumble of an airplane passing low over the earth. As we got closer more shapes became distinguishable, that of the Kennedy center, the flight control towers and the space launch rig.

"Have you ever been to space?" Our apparently clueless driver inquired, catching my focused gaze on the scaffold structure.

"Yes. Many times."

He looked at me through the rear-view mirror. "What's it like?"

I shrugged, trying to see his eyes through his black sunglasses. "Not as different as you'd expect."

The car stopped in front of the main entrance and the driver hurried to the back passenger door to help Heero out of the car. As we had been expected, a young woman in a nurse's uniform emerged from the building, pushing a wheelchair in front of her. Heero impolitely refused, struggling past her, limping with his crutch.

"Thanks anyway." I said to her and then followed Heero inside.

In the lobby I saw a familiar face behind the reception desk. It was the same receptionist that had been there that night. I had lost track of the memory of her name, but wasn't concerned, surely she wouldn't remember me either. "Hi." I greeted cheerfully as I approached the desk.

"Hello, how may I help you?"

"I'm Duo Maxwell, this is Heero Yuy, he's an agent here and he has an appointment."

"Ah, yes." She bent over to open a drawer hidden from sight and produced a security card that read "VISITOR", along with that she handed us both passes that had our pictures and names on them. "Show these to security if asked." She instructed. "The card is for the elevator. Just swipe it front of the light and it will automatically take you up to the hospital wing."

"Thank you."

"Have a nice day." She chirped.

"You too."

Heero and I went over to the elevator and it immediately opened before us. We stepped inside and I swiped the card in front of the light as instructed and as I had seen before, during my last visit. A mechanical voice announced the floor we were headed too and then jolted into motion, swiftly
moving up the shaft.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

Heero frowned. "Why would I be? You really didn't have to come."

"Nonsense. Get used to it."

The elevator came to a sleek halt and the doors opened smoothly to the white expanse of the hospital floor. Another nurse instantly came towards us to greet us. She held a chart in her hands and simply asked: "Yuy?"

"Yes." My stoic boyfriend answered.

"Doctor Borland is ready for you agent." She guided Heero down a hallway. When he noticed I was following him he turned around and asked me:

"What are you doing?"

"What? You didn't think I tagged along because I like waiting rooms, did you? I'm going with you."

"Why?"

"Because I don't trust you as a patient. I want to hear for myself what the doc has to say."

Heero grumbled something under his breath but didn't argue with me further. The nurse waited patiently to finish our little quarrel, smirking, then took us to the right door at the end of the hallway. She knocked on the door softly and announced our presence.

"Send him in."

The nurse left and we stepped inside the examination room. The doctor looked at me curiously for a moment or two but didn't say or ask anything. He patted his hand on the padded examination table and I helped Heero climb onto it. At the医生's order I helped him out of his shirt and pants, noting with motherly concern the Goosebumps that took to his skin.

"Have my instructions been followed?"

"Yes, doctor." I answered, hovering around the two of them, inquisitively peering over their shoulders as the doctor sat on a stool in front of Heero and started the examination of his knee. He removed the brace, taking little care in sparing Heero additional pain. At Heero's hiss I wondered out loud: "Can't you give him some painkillers?"

"We don't prescribe long-term use of pain medication to agents, in light of the highly addictive qualities of the drugs." The doctor stated, never taking his eyes off Heero's leg as his bony fingers prodded the skin and maneuvered the joint back and forth.

"I can handle it." Heero said, but he was gritting his teeth.

"The patella is still very loose, friction with the tendons and other bones is probably what causes the pain. This is best remedied by physical therapy. I will sign you up so you can start next week. It's important you start slowly, otherwise it will only get worse."

"You hear that Heero, slowly." I urged.
"I heard him." Heero grumbled.

The doctor fitting the knee brace around his leg again, with little precaution. Though he understood the physical injuries, he obviously didn't empathize. "Lie down." He said and then his fingers unwrapped the bandage around Heero's thigh. He kneaded the flesh and plucked at the wound, eliciting a moan from Heero. "This is healing up well." He stated. He lifted Heero's leg of the table to examine the exit wound which also had him nodding appreciatively. "This seems true to your reputation. A quick healer." He redressed the wound and then moved over to the next bullet wound, applying pressure on Heero's abdomen with his fingers, causing Heero to narrow his eyes.

"All good." He mumbled. "Sit up." Doctor Borland moved over to the other side of the table, forcing me out of the way. He took off the shoulder brace and even though his touch again was ungentle, it didn't seem to hurt Heero much. With his thin fingers he felt around, feeling the bones and muscles, "Flex your fingers." Heero did as told. Borland took an instrument out of his pocket, a small serrated wheel on the end of a silver handle. He placed it at Heero's wrist and ordered him to notify him if he didn't feel the stimulation and then rolled the wheel up his arm. "No nerve damage." He concluded when he reached the shoulder and Heero had not indicated a loss of sensation. "The tendons are already tightening up, holding the ball joint in the socket. Just the sling will do from now on." Heero was overtly relieved at this news, the discomfort of the hard plastic had really been a bother, the skin around his shoulder started to show the red signs of painful chaffing.

Borland grabbed Heero's chin and forcefully made him look at him. He took a penlight out of his coat pocket and shone it in both of Heero's eyes and then moved it from left to right, studying Heero's eyes as they followed the light as instructed. "Good dilation. There hasn't been any loss of equilibrium, headaches or confusion?"

"No." Heero and I answered in unison.

"Good. The subconjunctival hemorrhage is starting to fade as well. It will be gone in a few days. The pinna is healing without infections. You can get dressed." He announced and then separated himself from us, heading over to a small sterile desk in the corner where he took a chart into his hand and started writing furiously. The sound of his pen scraping across the paper filled the entire room. I helped Heero get dressed, taking extra care of his shoulder now that it was no longer supported by the brace.

"What's the verdict?" I asked when the doctor joined us again.

"Everything is healing satisfactorily. The wounds should still be redressed frequently and monitored for infection. I will arrange for physiotherapy at the Preventers Recovery Center next week. Twice a week for as long as it takes."

"And where is this center?"

"One floor down." Doctor Borland answered in a tone that indicated my question had been stupid.

"Wow, you guess really have everything in this building."

He ignored me and said to Heero: "The knee brace and sling will have to be worn till the therapist sees fit." Then he proceeded to usher us both out of his examination room.

"That was quick." I commented as the door shut behind us. I jumped when I suddenly noticed that nurse was standing right by me. Her white uniform camouflaged her eerily well against the white of the hallway.
"Doctor Nettle is ready for you." She walked off and we followed her. She lead us back to the lobby and then deep into another hallway. We passed a silver sign that read: Psychiatric wing. There were disturbingly many doors and I wondered secretly what was behind all of them. I imaged padded cells and patients strapped into straight jackets, screaming in vain because the doors and walls were soundproofed. I suddenly found my hands were sweaty. I wiped them on my jeans nervously. "You can't accompany him." The nurse informed when she stopped in front of the last door.

"I know. I just want to meet her."

She nodded and then knocked on the door, dutifully announcing us again.

"It's open."

The nurse opened the door for us and then left again.

Cautiously I stepped inside, following Heero who seemed to have no reservations. When I walked inside the room it felt like I had just passed through the twilight zone and landed in an alternative dimension. The walls were covered with rich mahogany paneling, the floor carpeted with a Renaissance design. There was a cozy sitting area with a coffee table with colorful magazines and a large desk in front of a window that overlooked the pristine, untouched field. The office was carefully located so it wouldn't offer a view of neither the air- and space-port nor the burial grounds.

Behind the desk was a middle-aged, attractive woman. Her brown hair fell sleekly around her long, pale face and bangs framed grey eyes. She rose out of her seat, smoothing the wrinkles out of her navy blue, fitting pantsuit and approached us with her arm stretched out, offering her hand. She didn't acknowledge that Heero refused to shake her hand but simply walked over to me to introduce herself. "Hello, I'm Cynthia Nettle. You must be Duo Maxwell."

"Indeed." I said, feeling uncomfortable.

"You don't need to be nervous." She said with a slight smile. "I can't read minds."

"Then what credentials do you have?" Heero asked, his tone insulting.

"You can inspect them for yourself. They are right there." She pointed to a decorated wall of certifications, diploma's, degrees, awards and newspaper clippings.

I wasn't sure if it was displayed so prominently because she was full of herself or if she had been confronted with skeptical patients like Heero many times before and found this an effective way to convince them of her expertise.

"You can take a seat if you want, agent Yuy."

I immediately didn't like her tone. She was talking to him like a mother may talk to a young child. I scanned the room for more detail. Noting the many thick and old books on the bookshelves along with artifacts and figurines from all over the world, including a selection of intimidating African masks. "Did Une talk to you?" I asked, prying my eyes away from the frightening hollow eyes of the masks. "I mean, do you know..."

"You don't have to worry about anything, mister Maxwell." She interjected before I could gather and organize my thoughts. "I know what I'm doing." I honestly doubted that.
"You can wait in the hallway, I've asked the nurses to come bring you a chair, you can wait right outside." With her hand on my back she guided me to the door, where I indeed noticed a metal chair had been placed just outside, facing the door. She had obviously been informed of the obsessive behavior I had depicted during my previous visit.

"Uh, thanks." I stepped over the threshold, back into the white twilight zone and the door was immediately shut behind me. It sounded so definitive. I quickly figured the rooms were in fact sound proofed, because no sound was heard from past the door and even though I knew Heero to keep his mouth shut for a long time to come, I trusted Nettle would be quite talkative to live up to her reputation as exhibited on her wall.

The appointment only lasted an hour, that wasn't a long time. It was certainly an amount of time that I could normally easily span, but time dragged it's feet and each time I checked my watch even less time had passed.


I stretched my arms and legs. The chair was agonizing and the discomfort was only enhanced by the wait. I started tapping a made-up rhythm on the side of the chair, which reminded me of an actually song I half-remembered so I took to that tune and softly sang the lyrics, humming when I couldn't remember verses.

13:31

"Oh God." I exclaimed, forgetting about the song. I kept adjusting my body in the seat but there was honestly no comfortable position to take. The seat was too hard and the back too straight, slowly starting to increase the painful aching in my body. "Where did they get this thing, the torture room?" I asked myself. I stood up, seeing no sense in remaining seated.

I paced back and forth. Wondering what she was telling him. Even more curious about Heero's reaction. It wasn't in the best interest of his recovery but a deviant, devilish side of me wished he was giving her a hard time, letting her know that you can't generalize human beings. Letting her know that there is a uniqueness to all of us that should never be evened out. I supposed that was just the jealousy conspiring.

At 13:44 the door opened. Nettle smiled at me. "We are done for today. We made appointments for the following week, preceding each physiotherapy session." In the doorway she tried to shake Heero's hand again but he simply walked past her. It didn't seem to affect her. "I hope the wait wasn't too long."

"Not at all." I lied and I shook her hand out of politeness.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye." I watched her close the door and then looked over at Heero, waiting for me at the far end of the hallway, by the lobby. I raised my eyebrows at him in question. "So?" I asked when I had caught up to him and we waited by the elevator.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Okay, I'll believe you said nothing but I have trouble accepting she said nothing."
"She did talk."

The elevator dinged and its doors opened for us. I waited for the doors to shut again, allowing us privacy before I continued: "What did she say? Did she ask stuff?"

"It was more like..." He frowned, pausing to think. "It was more like a presentation. She told me everything she knew about me."

I snorted. "That couldn't have been a hell of a lot."

"It wasn't." He said, his frown deepening. "But I think that was the point. I'm not really sure, I don't understand psychology."

I chuckled and patted his shoulder. "That makes two of us." I bit my lip and hesitated momentarily before asking: "So you didn't say anything?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"She didn't ask me anything."

"She didn't?"

"No." He affirmed.

"Then what did you two do in there for an hour long?" I insisted.

"I sat on the couch ignoring her and she sat behind her desk, writing."

I snorted. "What kind of a shrink is that?"

Heero shrugged, obviously he, too, had no idea.

I wondered how this aloof "method of treatment" was ever going to help Heero, but I suspected there was more to it, she probably had a trick up her sleeve. I didn't like that. I liked honesty and being up front with things, not catching someone off guard and stealing private information from them. Of course that might sound a bit hypocritical coming from a former rebel who's job description included, but was not limited to, stealing sensitive information from the enemy. I supposed I didn't like the idea of her treating Heero as an enemy, or target. But like Heero I understood very little of psychology - being more of a tactile person than an "in your own head" kind of guy - on good faith I opted to trust her methods. So long as she didn't give me the slightest reason that yank that trust - and Heero - away from her.

Outside the driver was waiting for us, leaning against the side of his glossy black vehicle. As he saw us approach, he scurried to open the doors to the backseat for the both of us.

"You okay?" I asked Heero when I heard a faint groan as he crawled into the seat, having to bend his knee a little.

"Fine." He reached out and shut the door.

Ignoring looks from the driver I walked around the rear and got in on the other side, the driver closed the door for me before I had a chance to it myself.

"Back home?" He asked, adjusting his rear-view mirror and pinning his black eyes on me.
"Yes, please."

The motions of the car; the rocking of the suspension as we passed bumps and the swaying as we rounded corners, threatened to lull me to sleep. I had been getting too little of it lately, having as much on my mind as I had. Heero's biological rhythm was starting to restore itself but mine was only becoming more skewed.

I jostled awake from a shallow slumber when the driver abruptly hit the breaks and honked at the same time. My body was snared and held in the seat by the seatbelt, as was Heero and the driver. Even though no danger had come to us, I was instantly on high alert. I saw the blurred tail of a eighteen-wheeler truck pass right in front of us across the intersection.

The driver cursed colorfully and finished: "You've got to be psychotic to run the red light like that!"

I took a relieved inhale and then checked with Heero, to find him already looking at me.

He took my question right out of my mouth. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah... Just scared the shit out of me." I breathed. Then a smile. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I'm fine."

The car slowly, cautiously rolled on. The driver kept muttering obscene things all the way back to the front door of our modest brown-stone apartment building. I patted him on the shoulder before he could race out and around the car to gallantly open our doors. "Don't bother." And I smiled at him. He smiled back, thanked me and wished me a nice day. Heero didn't pay any attention to the small, mundane exchange, already climbing out of the car, hoisting himself up by the roof.

"Stubborn little..." I muttered, walking around. Instead of instantly offering my help, I crossed my arms in front of my chest and quirked an eyebrow at him.

He glared at me and exasperatedly blew a lock of chocolate brown hair out of his flustered face.

Knowing he would rather faint from exhaustion than ask for my help, I offered it without needing to be invited to. I helped him up and then leaned back into the car and got out his crutch. He snatched it out of my hands and hooked it under his arm, sticking his nose up at me. "I can do it myself." He started towards the front door while I said goodbye to the driver. He tipped his hat and then drove off.

With one arm leaning on the crutch and the other immobilized in the sling, Heero could only wait for me to open the door.

At his persistent glare I chuckled warmly. "Feisty." I joked.

As soon as I opened the door to our little apartment Heero nearly sprinted - to the best of his momentarily limited abilities - to the couch where he dropped down with a heavy sigh and leaned his head back. He let the crutch fall to the floor that it hit with a thud muffled by the carpet.

"I told you, you should have sat down on that bench in the elevator." I went to the refrigerator and got out two cold bottles of water. It was really hot out. I plopped down on the couch next to him, absentmindedly handing him one of the bottles and then using my free hand to open the top buttons of my black shirt, after which I wiped the sweat off my brow. "Thank God for AC." I spoke solemnly, looking at the happily buzzing and humming white machine on the wall.
"God didn't make air-conditioning." Heero noted, characteristically oblivious to my sarcasm, "If anything - if you insist on believing in a divine entity - he made the heat, for which man," he emphasized that word, "had to create air-conditioning."

"God made man. Man made AC. It's too hot to get into it any deeper than that." I put the bottle to my lips and tilted it back, drinking till the bottle became light in my hand. I wasn't even sure if I believed in "a divine entity" but it seemed useful to entertain the thought. If only for the purpose of contradicting Heero and provoking a conversation out of him.

The incident in the car and the heat outside sparked the revival of a dated memory I cherished, but lately had no time to reminisce about. It brought a smile to my face and then I laughed at myself for smiling so goofily.

Heero lazily turned his head to look at me. "You seem to be amusing yourself."

"I was just..." My own chuckles interrupted me. "Do you remember the get-away, when we planted that ghost drive?"

"I do. But considering we narrowly escaped death I'm assuming one of us has his memories mixed up."

I prodded him in the side. "Was that sarcasm, Heero Yuy?"

"No."

I ignored him because he was lying, a smug smirk was pulling at the corner of his mouth. "I'm not smiling because it was fun at the time, but in hindsight it's a good memory, don't you think?"

"We successfully completed the mission." He said, but his voice had a tentative, questioning tone.

"I wasn't exactly referring to that. It was the first time we were really partners."

He frowned deeply. "We had partnered up many times before that."

"Four times. But those didn't count. We were partners but not really partners. We didn't act like partners, we were just two individuals with the same goal."

He looked at me sideways with desperately confused eyes.

"Never mind." I said with a smile. I reached out and gently touched his face with my fingers, my fingers pads mapping and memorizing the contours of his exquisite features and the softness and warmth of his skin. I leaned to the side, making our shoulders bump.

"Tell me." He pleaded in a whisper.

"No. You'll figure it out." I closed the distance to kiss him briefly.

He flinched and pulled back, stopping my heart and making it sink to a pit in my stomach.

"What?"

"I want to shower." He said dryly.

I was relieved it he didn't flinch for the reason I feared, but groaned nevertheless and buried my hands in my hair. "No kissing while you can't shower by yourself." I repeated my own rule, regretting the weakness of my self-control. But I knew it was a matter in which I could take no risk.
I couldn't push the sexual aspect of our relationship without his full consent and own desire for it. I knew I would never harm Heero in any way, but with perception and introspection blurred by lust, the line between okay and harmful could be faded and I might inch past that boundary and have it reaffirmed even more strongly.

Subconsciously I tucked my hands into the pockets of my jeans, sinking back into the cushions of the couch.

"For what it's worth..." Heero started, not looking at me but at thin air straight ahead, "I really wanted to kiss too."

A happy smile spread across my lips. I sat up on the couch and reached for his neck with my hand, pulling him towards me so I could place a light, chaste kiss on his cheek, completely innocent. Then I jumped to my feet and hoisted him up at well. "Let's go shower." I announced, handing him his crutch. "A cold shower."

We showered together and the added chill of water pouring onto our bodies ensured a mechanical nature to the process. We were both shivering, our near-violent tremors traveling through our own bodies and then passing onto each other. It had been good at the beginning, washing away the heat and the dried sweat but soon the cold water became agonizing and relentless and I had little control over the motion of my hand as it rubbed soap onto his chest and abdomen. Then I forced my body to be still, for against my chest I detected a shaking of his body that was not the result of the experience of cold, it was stronger than the shivers and when I realized what it was, I wasn't cold anymore.

Heero was chuckling.

The soft, delicate sound was lost under the roar of the icy water hitting the porcelain bottom of the tub at our feet, but his body shook unmistakably against me and when I looked over his shoulder I caught a side glimpse of exposed pearly teeth as his mouth had opened and curled into a smile.

"What's so entertaining?"

"... It is a good memory. But that's so..."

"Fucked up?" I offered, laughing myself.

"Yes."

I marveled at the sight and feel of his laughter, it was over too soon. He became self-conscious when he noticed my close attention to him and he formed his lips back into a taut line.

Disappointed it was over - for now - but grateful for the little intimate, heartfelt moment, I buried my face into his wet hair, the locks darkened, nearly to black, by the water. I placed tiny, feathery kisses on the back of his neck, just overwhelmed with a giddy, happy feeling that I wish I could hold onto forever and share with him. My lips traveled to his shoulder, no longer placing individual kisses but dragging my lips lightly across his skin. I felt a particularly strong shiver go through him but forced myself not to read anything into it.

He cocked his head to the side, but didn't look back at me or say anything. I took it as an offering of his cheek, so I place a final kiss on his shoulder and then kissed his cheek. He moved his head again without me noticing and my next kiss landed on his lips. I opened my eyes - forgetting when I had closed them - and saw him looking at me, his eyes so brilliant.

I didn't kiss him again. I just smiled at him sheepishly and - whether it was my imagination or not -
saw the gesture returned in kind. I took hold of the showerhead and purposely directed it to wash
the last of the suds off both of us and then quickly reached to close the faucet. I wrapped him in a
towel and seated him on the toilet seat while I dried myself and quickly got dressed so I could
perform my duties as his "nurse", tending to his wounds and helping him into his clothing. I could
feel his eyes on me the entire time, but whenever I looked up at his face, his eyes would quickly
turn away and his cheeks were slightly tinted. I celebrated the emotional victory quietly in my
head, but remained focused on my task.

We had a quiet dinner with stolen glances and then we both went to bed early.

My bed felt delicious. My body became weightless. Instead of slipping into a surreal, ominous
dream, the memory of the mission I mentioned resurfaced in detailed clarity. It was a memory that
I had always treasured, even though I was ashamed to admit my reason, especially to Heero. It was
the first time I realized he was no "robot", "freak" or "dead on the inside" as the Sweeper's crew
often accused him of being, softly over breakfast, lunch and dinner, casting suspicious glances at
him as he ate in a corner, by himself, secluded from everybody.

The mission had been straightforward, but it was a Gundam-less mission and those always
frightened me the most. I felt exposed without Death scythe. His armor did not only offer
protection from physical harm, the anonymity of being encased in a Gundanium cockpit protected
me from moral implications as well. Inside the cockpit a separate world was created in which the
hostile mobile suits that I blew up and cut into pieces were simply projections on a screen, not
actual human beings, with families and friends who would miss them and would never have
anything to bury, pay respect to, come back to, find solace with.

A fully automated Alliance space shuttle and missile launch compound was scheduled to send a
space carrier out through the atmosphere the next day, transporting cargo of hazardous, volatile
nature to the Lunar base. It was protected only by a small group of soldiers, limited in both their
skills and resources. The objective was to break into the base, undetected, and replace the main
drive with a ghost drive that would fool the regular, remote check-ups, whilst spreading fatal
viruses through the entire system. The personal design of one Heero Yuy. By the time they would
find out an alien drive had impregnated their system, it would be too late, with the virus spreading
to other bases. The launch would be prevented, without them even knowing until three days later
when no shuttle would arrive at the moon and all remote controlled bases on the continent would
be rendered useless for as long as it took them to figure out and extract the virus. Which Heero
boasted - that is a personal interpretation of his mechanical, monotonous way of speaking - would
take them a long while.

The mission itself went perfectly. Even Heero, so I would read over his shoulder, reported it to
have "transgressed satisfactorily". With our stealthy ways we managed to get past the guards
unnoticed and Heero had a solution to every locked door. In the underground computer room,
washed in blue light, he located the main drive and performed mechanical surgery to replace it with
the virus riddled ghost drive he had brought along, without the digital security system noticing it's
brief absence. Once the drive was planted and the original drive tucked into Heero's backpack, we
left trailing the shadows of the angular concrete building and disappeared into the surrounding
forest. Normally we blazoned our way with blood, bodies and shrieking alarms, but then there
ruled a quiet in which I could hear my own soft pants and the rustling of leaves as we passed
through the low foliage.

Relying on the map I had memorized and the position of the moon and the stars I guided us to twin
tracks of train rails cutting straight to the forest. We had to follow the tracks North, across a deep
ravine, to a small pass-over town where I had parked a restored old car I had nicked from a scrap
yard in advance, for our getaway. We treaded through the undergrowth lining the forest edge and
ducked and held still when a train approached from the opposite direction, roaring past us. It was a ribbon of steel, unmarked containers employed by OZ for transportation of heavy goods.

We watched it race by with our eyes glistening in the impressive pale light of the full moon.

"Let's go." I said, pulling Heero up out of the bushes once the train had fully passed.

We continued our way, an hour's worth of jogging, till we reached the ravine and we had to leave the protection of the plants and the shadows of the tall trees behind. I cautiously approached the edge and looked down, whistling appreciatively of nature's spectacular handiwork. The rocky cliff went straight down, far down. Below a river churned, I could hear it and sometimes catch white caps on the wavy current as it maneuvered around the wooden legs of the double track railroad bridge.

Heero stepped onto the tracks that were still firmly embedded in the ground and then started moving forwards towards the bridge. When he stepped on the first of the railroad ties that hovered far above the river, it creaked, making me nauseous. The next tie was quiet as he crossed the open distance between them and settled his weight on it. Satisfied that the ties would hold him, he started walking across.

I was far more hesitant. With the interspacing of the ties you had no choice but to look down at where you planted you feet, but beyond that was the promise of a nasty fall. Not lethal if you managed to clear the cliff edge and the structure of the bridge, but definitely painful and then you had the strong currents to worry about.

"Hey, Heero!" I called. He was already one third of the way across.

He stopped and turned around, balancing on a single tie. "What?"

I looked back. Then at him again. I could barely see him. "Maybe we should wait for the next train to pass before we cross. That will give us a window of a few minutes."

"There aren't any trains now." He argued impatiently. "Even if one would appear in the distance right now, we would still have enough time to cross the bridge. Or jump onto the opposite track." He gestured to the twin track next to him. I didn't like the three foot space between the two but I ignored the sick trepidation in my gut and accepted his logic, following him.

Some of the ties creaked like a haunted house when I stepped on them, others were brand new and strong, reviving my confidence. I got into a steady rhythm, stepping from one sleeper to the next, thanking the bright moon for accompanying us, otherwise there was no distinguishing between the ties and open space. I was halfway and I remembered hearing a lot of creaking when Heero cleared that point, but before it even registered as a threat I put my left foot down, adjusted my weight onto it and there was a loud snap. I started falling, but not far. The rotten tie had broken down the middle, but the sides remained intact and attached to the tracks. My leg sank through the gap that was created, right up to my thigh, where the jagged edged of the sides cut deep into my flesh, stopping my descent, pinning me in place.

"Fuck!" I screamed, trying to vent some of the immense pain. I looked down at my leg, the trousers had been cut open and I could see - to my dismay - where the splintery jagged edges cut into me. "Fuck that hurts!" Using my free leg and my arms I tried to free myself, but my leg was stuck. Instinctively I called out Heero's name, not liking how hoarse my voice sounded.

"What?" Came his voice from the distance. He must have already been on the other side because I couldn't see him.
"I could use some help over here!" I deadpanned, gritting my teeth at the throbbing pain. I fixed my gaze up ahead and saw his silhouette near me. "Be careful!" I warned as he neared me. "These things are rotten as hell." I didn't know why I even cared about him, he certainly didn't seem to care about me.

"What did you do?" He asked as he closed the distance. His face was stoic as he crouched down on the tie nearest to mine and fixed an unwavering gaze on my deep wounds.

I glared at him, but the impact might have been limited by the sickening sensation of my own warm blood dripping down my legs and then falling down. Way down. "What do you think, genius? I was rehearsing my tap-dancing routine!"

He frowned at me, insensitive to sarcasm.

"Just help me get up, okay?"

He nodded and took strong hold of me, trying to pull me up.

I groaned as some movement was created and the jagged points only cut me more. But even through the sounds of my own pain and my pants ripping to shreds even further, I heard creaks coming from the tie Heero was standing on. The added weight of my own body as he tried to lift me was putting unbearable strain on the equally rotten board. "Heero, stop. Stop."

He let go of me and the creaking stopped.

"Oh fuck, I got myself into a butt load of trouble now, haven't I?" I muttered.

Heero paid me no heed, he was inspecting the situation, his face deeply thoughtful as he tried to summon a solution. He grabbed one side with his hands, they immediately started to bleed as the sharp edges cut into them. He tried to break it but he couldn't exert enough power, it only splintered and bend slightly. When he removed his hands they were completely red and the blood trailed down his arm.

"Lean to your left." He ordered and without a second thought I obeyed. As soon as I was out of the way and slammed his foot down on the side of the tie to my right.

I felt it move, prodding and cutting my skin, but his plan might work, so I forced myself to keep quiet. Heero slammed his heel down on the wood again, which started to splinter and break at the edges. I held onto the steel track tightly, prepared for the side to give out. With my hands clamped around the cold steel, I detected faint vibrations through the pads of my fingers and my palms. The track was vibrating, ever so slightly, but it seemed to be getting stronger.

My heart dropped.

"Heero?"

Heero didn't listening to me, tirelessly working on the rotten, but annoyingly strong wood.

I looked at his face which was illuminated far brighter than the moon, even at it's fullest and brightest, was able to and the light hitting his face only seemed to become whiter and stronger.

"Heero?" I asked again. "The track is vibrating..."

He looked at me sharply, annoyed with me for breaking his concentration. In the light I saw a sheen of sweat on his face. All of a sudden, it seemed like the same conclusion was dawning on
him. He slowly moved his head and directed his eyes past me, over my head. His face remained impassive but his eyes widened slightly.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed as I saw my suspicion confirmed in his blue orbs. I twisted my head around to look over my shoulder and saw a single, bright light - the headlight of a freight train - in the distance, but approaching fast. Too fast. "Oh shit! Oh shit! That's a fucking train!" I tried to pull myself out again, ignoring the pain, but it was hopeless. I was stuck.

"Move your hands. Move your hands!" Heero practically screamed.

I let go of the track, exposing the wooden tie on both sides.

Heero stepped onto either side, they creaked and moved, slipping away from the bolts that tied them to the tracks. He jumped up and down a little and managed to coax more movement out of the wood.

The tracks were vibrating so hard that I could feel it passing through the tie to my body. "Heero, it's not working! Jump to the other track! It's not working!" I screamed not because I was in pain or afraid of the inevitable, I screamed because the train was getting so close the noise was deafening.

Heero heard me, but he didn't leave me. He kept forcefully applying his weight. Shamefully he didn't have much weight to work with, not even with the added load of the twenty pound hard drive in his backpack.

The train blew it's horn and the sound shook me to the core. "Heero it's not working!" I tried to convince him. Being as outnumbered as we were I couldn't allow two Gundam pilots being killed on such an unspectacular mission. I even tried to push him away but he resisted my halfhearted attempts. He had his bloodied hands on my shoulder to help with his balance as he kept slamming his feet down.

There was a snap, but neither of us would hear it over the roar of the approaching train. I realized we were becoming weightless and my leg was free. In the moment that was caught in slow-motion, I saw Heero's face lit up bright, his whole complexion snow-white and his eyes appeared like the most treasured sapphires. Angelic, that's what I thought, but it was merely the near-death-experience talking.

In freefall, as our heads just cleared the gap between the tracks and flanking railroad ties, I heard the train thundering over us like a stampeding herd of beasts. I prepared myself for the impact with the water's surface, bracing my feet together and crossing my arms in front of my chest. Not only was our timing impeccable, our spacing was as well. Neither one of us got caught by one of the crisscrossing support beams. The fight for survival continued the moment my feet hit the water, it hurt my ankles and knees but I had to start kicking my legs immediately to keep to the surface, struggling with the current that tried to pull me under. We were washed out from under the bridge, along the river. We had no choice but to ride the wave and hope it would lead to an opportunity to escape the water that was hell-bent on drowning us.

Occasionally I caught glimpses of Heero, sometimes heard his gasps above the rushing of the water. He went under more than me, weighted down by the heavy hard drive and impaired by the bulky backpack itself on which the current could get a good grip. I tried swimming towards him, to help unleash the clasps that secured the backpack around his chest, but it was of no use, we were at the mercy of the river's will.

We were carried far away. My legs and arms were burning, as were my lungs. The ravine started to get more shallow till finally narrow shores appeared on either side with only slight slopes heading
back into the forest. The current calmed down as well. With the last of my strength I paddled towards the side, like Heero. When my feet first felt the sandy bottom of the river I was relieved but it was quickly washed away as I lost my footing and was dragged down river a few more yards. With a few more strokes I was close enough to the river banks to dig my heels into the sandy bottom and from there on crawled out of the water, collapsing as soon as my hands touched dried soil.

A few meters back Heero was catching his breath, sitting in the sand on all fours, his backpack still with him. He unleashed the clasp in front of his chest and shook the dead weight off his shoulders. He sat back on his heels, I could see his chest heaving with pants. Then I noticed he was looking at me.

Effortfully I raised my hand I gave him the thumbs-up sign.

Heero got up and walked towards me, dragging the backpack behind him through the sand. "We should get under the trees." He said and then helped me up. He slung one of my arms around his shoulder and I limped along with him into the thick forest. Once we were inside deep enough he sat me down against a tree trunk and kneeled by me. He opened the watertight zippers of his bag and retrieved some supplies that had been kept dry; a roll of gauze, medical tape and a bottle of Povidone-iodine. With the knife that he had strapped around his ankle he cut off what was left of the left trunk of my pants, revealing every hideous, bleeding gash. Using his teeth he tore off some gauze and dried away most of the blood. Then he unscrewed the bottle.

I braced myself.

Instead of delicately applying the bactericide with a cotton swab, he hooked his hand in the hollow of my knee to hold my legs steady and then poured the liquid onto the wounds.


Heero emptied most the small bottle on my leg, a lot of it spilling along the sides and used the rest to drench his bleeding hands. "You're going to need stitches." He observed, reaching for the gauze again. He wrapped the entire roll tightly around my thigh, tying the ends together roughly. The tight constriction stopped the bleeding.

I groaned again, having been stitched-up by Heero before, I knew I was in for a long, unpleasant night. He did good work, could make even the deepest cut disappear with only minor scarring, but he was dutifully merciless and we had nothing more powerful than an aspirin to help with the pain.

"We need to head back."

I shook my head and patted the dirty ground next to me. "We need to rest first."

He sat down at my side, leaning back against the wide tree trunk.

Luckily it was a hot night, my wet clothes barely drew a shiver out of me. I looked up at the bright stars through the canopy. Shamefully aware of how happy I was to be alive. A little uncomfortable knowing I had Heero to thank. Uncomfortable because lately I had treated him as abrasively as he treated me. Never knowing there was a person under that facade that cared and was willing to risk his life for me. What he did was stupid. He risked bringing a good end to the war to save one life. I was grateful nevertheless, even though that was selfish. "So," I started and I faced him with a grin - my strength in my weaknesses -, "Are you just suicidal or are you in love with me?"

He frowned.
"Come on man! It was mere luck that that board gave out when it did. We could have both died just now. You must've had a damn good reason."

"But we didn't die." He stated.

"No, but we could have."

His frown deepened. "It seems highly inefficient and time-consuming to consider all possibilities after the fact."

I chuckled. "Fine. Whatever. Just one thing though." I turned my head to look at him and Heero seemed to purposefully look away. With a stretching smirk I teased: "I know you're not suicidal..."
That Monday was a weird day. A paradox. Because it was the first normal day in over two weeks...

The morning started early. I left the warmth of my bed, keeping quiet eyes settled on Heero as I blindly groped the room and closet for clothes. His wheeze was gone, his breathing silent; a dead clam. He was lying on his back, with his face turned away. Shadows and bangs obstructed my view, but I comfortingly knew his expression to be peaceful. Only in sleep though.

I stepped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind me. The thick curtains of the bedroom window had kept away all the light, but in spite of the early hour, the living room was washed in warm sunlight. I slipped into my coat, checking the pockets for the keycard and my wallet and then passed through the front door. To wake myself up I took the stairs down and outside the only person I saw was the mailman, delivering letters to the only few remaining people who refused to receive their mail digitally.

With my hands deep in the pockets of my jeans, absentmindedly plucking at the inner seam, I walked down the street almost suspiciously casually. I felt like a complete alien, an imposter. Back from a life that I tried to reject, but seemed to be inextricably woven into me.

I had walked this trail many times before, but after being plunged back into the world of soldiers and survival for the past two weeks, it seemed I would have to rebuilt all the comfort and confidence that I had previously acquired. I felt exactly the same as when the war had just ended. I was eager to shake that feeling, embrace the normality.

I stopped in front of the door of the bakery, nervous and hesitant and I entertained the thought of shrugging my shoulders, ducking my head between the collar of my jacket and going back empty handed. But the decision was taken away from me. The elderly baker walked to the front of the store, to neatly rearrange her products. She glanced up and froze when she saw me. Then all of a sudden her face broke into a smile and she hurried towards the door to open it for me.

I smiled at her sheepishly.

"You're back! You want breakfast?" She exclaimed excitedly. "I have your bagels ready. I always have your bagels ready. I knew you would be back." She shuffled through the back door where I heard her talking loudly and excitedly in a foreign language.

Her warm welcome eased away some of my discomfort.

She returned holding a familiar paper bag.

I accepted it and felt it was still warm. "Thank you."

Her smile widened. "Do you want anything else? Do you want cookies? Do you want bread? I have cake too. Do you want cake?"

"No, thank you. Nothing special. Today is just a normal day. Are you sure..." With my free hand I pulled my wallet out of my jacket, but as soon as she saw it her hands enveloped mine and she tuck it back into the pocket, out of sight.
"No money." She said, her kind eyes sparkling gleefully.

"Thank you."

As always - as usual - she had work to do, so she ushered me out of her little, traditional bakery and before closing the door behind me she said definitively: "I will see you tomorrow."

I could only nod, knowing she would accept no objections. I walked the way back home and upon entering the apartment I saw Heero sitting at the kitchen table, wearing clean sweatpants and a button-up shirt, hanging open, struggling to tie his shoes with his one available hand as the other arm, in the sling, could not reach down. I put the bag down on the kitchen counter and kneeled down in front of him, tying his shoes, after which I buttoned up his shirt. I could feel the tension in his body.

"This is stupid." He said, displeased with his independence.

"It'll get better soon." I didn't mention that it was already a great improvement that he could dress himself, it sounded so belittling. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you again?"

"Yes."

I prepared our breakfast with my back turned towards him, hiding my thoughtful face as I contemplated whether or not we were moving too quickly. I understood his reluctance to have me with him during physiotherapy. The therapist had him performing the most basic exercises, no more difficult nor straining than bending and stretching his leg - slightly - and maneuvering his arm around. Though Heero would never admit it, it was a strike to his pride. His body was capable of doing things no one else could claim to be capable of, but that had been temporarily taken from him. He didn't want me to see him in his most vulnerable and exposed state, I was sympathetic to that, knowing I would feel the same way if the situation was reversed, but sometimes the way we want things to be, is not the right way for things to be. Maybe it was too soon to let him go by himself, even though he adamantly insisted.

"Maybe I should come with you. It's only your second appointment." I tried as I put a plate in front of him.

"There is no valid reason for you to accompany me." He stated flatly, taking a bite. I knew by the tone of his voice and the way he averted his face, there was no way of peacefully convincing him to let me go with him. I spite of my personal doubt, I didn't argue further and dug into my own breakfast, reveling the taste of the warm bagel as opposed to the frozen bread we had been eating lately. "Maybe I'm just trying to find an excuse not to go back to school." I joked lightheartedly, though there was truth in my jest.

"You don't want to go back?" He looked up with an endearing frown as he tried to understand me.

"I'm just a little nervous. I like doing the "regular teen thing", but after the past two weeks it's hard to go back to lunchboxes, algebra tests and paper airplanes, it all seems so damn insignificant in the great schemes of things. It's a completely different mindset." I explained, though uncertain I could ever make him understand.

We finished breakfast without further conversation and as I cleared the dishes I watched Heero limp into the office. He was becoming quite handy and nimble with his crutch. I walked after him and saw him sit down in his seat and boot up his laptop. I put my hands on my hips and sighed to catch his attention. He quirked a questioning eyebrow at me. "You're on leave. That's means you
don't work." I explained. There was something about seeing him retreat back into this tiny office
and disappear behind the screen of his laptop that frightened me. Like he had one foot dangling
over the edge and the fall was a spiraling way down a path we had already taken.

"What am I supposed to do?" He asked pathetically.

"Anything you want!"

He frowned and looked back at his laptop. "But I want to work."

I leaned forward and pushed the screen down to the keyboard. "Anything you want. Except work."

Heero's frown only deepened. "What does that leave me with?"

I chuckled. "Watch TV. Take naps. Ponder the meaning of life..."

"I have no particular interest in any of those options."

"Okay..." I looked around the room and my eyes settled on the row of books I had borrowed from
the school library for my classes, among which Colony Literature, French and Arts and Crafts. I
bend over to scan the titles on the backs of the thick books and with a smirk hooked my finger onto
one of them and plucked it from the shelf. The book made a loud thud as it landed heavily on the
desk in front of him.

Heero scrutinized the colorful book cover while I walked over to the printer and got out a stack of
plain white paper and placed it next to the book.

Heero glared at me. "Zen and the art of Origami?"

"Yeah, it's supposed to be relaxing." I tilted my watch to face me and blinked at the time. "I gotta
go, buddy. You have fun with that." I grinned and leaned in for a playful, small kiss of his lips -
parted in surprise. I grabbed my backpack and hurried out the door, my feet moving in a quick jog
not because I would otherwise be late, but because I shouldn't leave myself time to change my
mind. Pulling the door shut behind me was bitter, but I continued at my rapid pace without looking
back, convincing myself that some time apart would be good for us, space to be ourselves again,
individual entities. But I dreaded the separation of our beings, not liking that I was going back to a
life that he was no part of and that he was going to a life I was no part of.

I arrived at the gate of the school yard just as the crowd was pushing to get through the doors into
the building. The bell signaling the beginning of the first period still echoed. I remembered my
way to the right classroom, but still it felt strange. Like my feet knew of a destination my mind had
no knowledge of.

Teenagers bustled through the narrow hallways, their fashionable sneakers squeaking on the ill-
colored linoleum floor. Nearing the end of the hallway the crowd got smaller and quieted down. I
slipped through the doorway into the classroom, passed the teacher who welcomed me after my
long absence and reminded me to stop by the administration desk.

Someone in the back of the classroom squealed.

I twisted my head around and was suddenly, for lack of better words, glomped. I smelled
strawberry shampoo in the blonde, curly hair. I chuckled and hugged her back before prying her off
me.

"Yer back!" Sookie, Queen of stating the obvious, said and pulled me to our neighboring desks.
"Yeah..." I sat down, groaning at the hard, wooden seat that I landed in. It felt surreal to be back but Sookie assured - to the dismay of the impatient and old-fashioned teacher - that I would soon be completely up-to-date. Though not a fan of gossiping I listened to her presentation of elaborate and detailed rumors and observations with a smile, my eyes sometimes following her hands as she wildly gestured around herself.

Her stories continued and reached their climax as we met up in line at the cafeteria. As we fought other students for scraps of the most edible dishes, she informed me with overt content that Aiden had misstepped once more, with serious consequences; a week of suspension and a month of lunch-duty. Whilst giggling my Southern friend pointed a colorful fingernail at a particularly chagrin girl in the back of the open kitchen, hiding her hairnet from sight. Sookie seemed delighted when I inquired about the reason Aiden had misbehaved, she took me by the arm for a veritable "show and tell". She guided me through the masses of students and approached a table. I waited for her to say something, but when my eyes settled on the students seated at the table I realized no explanation was required.

Sitting with his legs thrown over Hunter's lap, cupping his face as they met in a passionate kiss, was Aston. Surrounded by a selection of jocks and cheerleaders who didn't seem to be bothered by the sight in the least.

I sputtered something incoherent, making Sookie burst into laughter and pull me back to our regular lunch place, outside under the tree. Once there I managed to compose myself and blurted: "I've been gone for two weeks and there is a new world order!"

"Well, teenagers..." Sookie mused, eating her lunch with her hands. "They can change on a dime given there's someone to prompt 'em to turn. Hunter is like a God in this place, they'd rather change the way they believe than the person they believe in."

"So... Gay is okay?" I asked, baffled by the display that I had witnessed.

"By God no! Though that would be a nice slogan. Some people never had a problem with gays but pretended to, to fit in. The people who do have a problem with gays pretend they're okay with it to fit in. Monkey see, monkey do." She shrugged. "I'm just enjoying it while it lasts. As soon as Hunter loses a game things'll change again. People need only one rational excuse to hate ya irrationally." She caught the straw from her small pack of milk with her lips and slurped up the last of the drink.

"High school is so disturbed."

She smirked. "Amen."

The bell rang and we returned to class, going our separate ways. I looked at the clock on the wall above the digital smart board and compared the time with my wristwatch. It was just past noon and I knew Heero would be arriving at the Preventer HQ. That brought me a heavy feeling in my heart and in my gut, drawing my focus elsewhere, making the Spanish rambling of the teacher even more incomprehensible than usual.

All of a sudden there was a loud bark going through the classroom with my name attached to it: "Preste atención, señor Maxwell!"

"Yes." I stammered, but at the high rise of her penciled eyebrow I realized my mistake. "Si, señorita."

She nodded and continued to address the class about the grammatical pitfalls of the upcoming
I sighed and lowered my eyes to my textbook, squinting at all the unfamiliar words and signs, like inverted question- and exclamation marks. Aside from a matter of pride and heritage, I didn't understand the necessity of all these different languages we were supposed to learn. Not many students would discover this, few would ever cross RUSA borders, with strict travel and immigration laws, but I had traveled across the world and with my minimal - more or less non-existent - expertise of foreign languages I never had any trouble making myself understood.

I grumbled at myself. Only two weeks I'd spent away from school and already I was second-guessing the system, just like I had in the beginning. I felt like I had awoken out of a coma and had to learnt to speak and walk all over again. Whether that was because I was inept at this normal life, or simply didn't care for it, I did not know. It confused me. All I knew for certain was that I was suddenly immensely annoyed by the guy in front of me shooting spitballs at a girl in the front row, and the two cheerleaders passing notes to each other under their tables, accompanied by giggles and blushes and the teacher reprimanding me like I was a child. Everyone was so caught up with themselves, the proud center of their own universe. None of them even knew that kids barely older than them were going into secret missions woefully unprepared, because they - as one of few - appreciated peace and the effort it took to protect it.

The day dragged on and I dragged my feet keeping pace with it. During math I observed Aston, who paid me no heed - apparently having completely overcome his affection for me. He wasn't paying much attention to anything the elderly teacher mumbled into his old-fashioned chalkboard. Instead he was bent over a notebook, doodling purposelessly, but in the seemingly random scribbles of black and blue pen I detected a pattern, a name. Hunter. His infatuation was endearing. I could only hope Sookie was wrong, that things would not take a turn back for the worse.

I looked down at my own notebook. At my irregular handwriting neatly between the lines, no script beyond the borders. I clicked my pen on and off a few times and wiggled it playfully between my fingers.

The teacher spoke to his class, with his back turned to all of us as he wrote. "We can determine our own confidence intervals of certain percentages with critical Z-scores outlined in table D in your books. I want you all to write down the standard formula for confidence intervals, which is your mean X, plus and minus the margin of Error. Write this down everyone! There may or may not be a pop quiz next Friday, who knows!"

All students bent over their desks and put their pens to the paper. As did I. But I did not note the formula. I placed the tip of the pen at the top left corner of the page and with deliberate motions I wrote neatly: HEERO and added a whimsical heart experimentally. I tilted my head as I scrutinized my creation. In a suddenly overpoweringly silly mood I wrote his name again and this time shaped the O into a heart. I chuckled, because it was stupid, but at the same time it solidified something. There it was in writing, my love for Heero Yuy, but the expression on paper came so epically, pathetically short of the actual feeling, it made me chuckle again and harder.

"I see mister Maxwell is amused by the margin of error."

The whole class turned around to face me, causing an irrational blush to come to my cheeks and my hand inadvertently covered the twin names at the top of the page.

"No need to be embarrassed! I get quite excited from ANOVA. But that is next week."

The bell rang and in an instant all bodies rose out of the seat and started towards the door.
"Remember everyone!" The teacher called after them. "Next Friday. Pop quiz or no pop quiz. But if there was a pop quiz I'd probably focus on Z scores. Z scores everyone!"

I shook my head at the man's antics, he was desperate to crank up the class' average. I was nearly at the door when he coughed and said my name, calling me back.

I turned around and at his gesture approached his desk. "Yes?"

"You've been gone for a long time..." He said, his eyes peering at me through his glasses.

"I'm still ahead on the assignments." I pointed out.

"I know, I know. I was very impressed with your research paper. I was merely wondering if everything is okay. Principal Murphy of course informed me of your adult, emancipated status and the fact that you dropped out during the war. Our school has a great financial support system for students who live on their own."

"I don't live alone. I have a roommate and he has a good job, so he pays for everything." That admission had a sting to it that I felt in my heart. Spending Heero's money had always caused me guilt. After the uncovering of his lie, even more so. Blood money.

"Okay. That's fine. I just thought I'd check." He smiled at me kindly.

"Thank you." I walked away, feeling uncomfortable with his interest in my personal life that I wish to keep personal. His intentions were good, honorable, much like Sookie he acts out of general love and a desire to help, but sometimes I just wanted to lock the front door behind me and have it be just me and Heero, tucked away in our hole-in-the-wall apartment. It felt like I didn't need anything other than him to sustain my own life. Food, shelter, education, friends... I would wipe my life clean of them, erase every trace of them, if he ever required me to do so.

That couldn't be healthy, I realized, but I smiled anyway.

My final period of the day was P.E. With astounded eyes I watched a surreal scenario unfold. The group was divided by gender. The girls were directed to the hockey field and the boys were split over four teams and tossed two basketballs. We jogged towards the twin basketball courts. Most of the guys in my on either team I knew very little of. One of the few I knew by name was Luke and the only reason I remembered was because he was abnormally tall and emaciated looking. With just a tiny hop he could dunk the ball. Unfortunately he was not on my team. The familiar face that was part of my team made me grumble in pubescent despair. Danny. The narrow-minded follower who can't distinguish between friend and foe.

There were horrendous yellow vests by the side-lines so we could clearly separate the teams, but such an argument ensued over who was to wear the ridiculous canvas monstrosities that one of the nameless boys prompted the suggestion of one team having to take their shirts off.

Being more physically developed and not at all insecure regarding my appearance, I had no problem with the decision that my team would be the bare-chested team. However I was conscious of the fact that the exposed skin could lead to conflict between the heterosexual boys and myself. That is until shirts went flying and in the distance I saw the girl's game of hockey come to a halt and various gazes and grins were aimed our way. And all of the males' attention was sidetracked to beyond the court.

A blonde at midfield jumped up and down and waved at me.

I waved back at Sookie. Noting she was quickly bored and trying to inspire her teammates to
continue the game. Her "residual heterosexual desires" were limited in their capacity and
endurance.

"Yeah, Ladies!" Danny yelled, hitting his chest like a gorilla. "Take a good look at this!"

I rolled my eyes at the repulsive display of testosterone that the others quickly joined.

"You should have bare-chested teams as well!" One of them yelled across the field.

Sookie, wearing one of the yellow vests, raised her middle finger.

"Come on guys. Let's play." I tried. I took the ball and started bouncing it on the concrete court.
The sound immediately got their attention. We were joined by the coach who officially started our
game with a sharp blow of his whistle.

The game was quick and edgy. Even though the girls had lost all interest, it was obvious most of
the boys were spurred on by the vivid memory of their curious gazes, imagining that they were still
looking. There was a lot of physical contact within and between teams; shoving and pulling. It was
like a national geographic special on male dominance rituals in underdeveloped primates.

I steered clear of most of the action, especially at the times the coach was over at the hockey fields,
as then the game got particularly feisty. Occasionally I managed to snatch the ball from someone
and in spite of the impressive defense of the freakishly tall Luke I scored a couple of times. Every
time thoughts of Heero surfaced, I pushed them away and focused on the game more strongly.
Trying not to smother him and not have myself be consumed.

Despite the testosterone fuelled roughness of the game, it proceeded fairly. We played as a team,
using each other as assets instead of individuals trying to be stars.

By the time the coach whistled, signaling the end of the match, my team was proudly ahead by
four points, but we were quickly disappointed when the coach announced we would be running
laps in preparation of the fitness test we had coming up. Dragging our feet and muttering under our
breath, we approached the sideline to gather our shirts. I reached down for mine but saw it
snatched away right before I could get it. I looked up at the thief, Danny, angrily, but he surprised
me when he immediately handed it back to me.

"Here. Good game, dude." He said and he patted me on my shoulder as he walked past me.

"Thanks," I managed to call after him, stunned, "you too." Well, that was weird, I thought to
myself. But I shrugged it off and joined the other guys and the girls on the tracks.

Sookie walked up to me and curiously inquired: "What did Danny say to ya?"

"Just complimented me on my game."

She smiled at me. "Pretty cool right?"

I frowned, not really sure if I agreed with her. "I don't know. I mean... it's not real. He still hates
me."

"Well, let 'im! At least he's not bothering ya anymore."

"He wasn't really that much of a bother. Obviously, I have had to deal with worse. I guess I just like
honesty, even if it's hurtful."
Our conversation was cut short as the girls were called to the other side of the track. To much protest from the ladies the coach announced that they will be starting half a track ahead of the boys, so they wouldn't have to keep up with the males. The goal for everyone was to run ten laps around the wide looping track and the girls started with a half lap advantage. Once the feminist ranting had died down, the race started. It wasn't originally a race, but boys will be boys.

I started off in an easy pace, a comfortable jog, while the other guys sprinted off at the start signal. I knew running ten laps at full speed was unrealistic. The coach had made clear none of us would be going home before we finished the ten laps. I decided it better to take more time, than to exhaust myself and not have the strength left to finish. The coach was not above making you crawl the final laps.

Into my third lap I passed two boys who were walking slowly, clutching their sides with their hands and panting like a woman in labor. This pattern continued. In my fifth lap I passed a small group who had dropped down in the grass lining the track. The coach was already walking up to them to force them to their feet. In my sixth lap I passed Sookie, the fastest of the girls. She stuck her tongue out at me.

The final two laps were hard on me, I had to slow down my pace. My shirt was sticking to my back with sweat, much like my bangs were sticking to my forehead. At the encouragement of the coach I picked up the speed again for the second half of my final lap and I was the first to cross the ten lap finish line. I walked leisurely around the track an eleventh time, knowing that a dead stop would only make my muscles ache later. I caught gazes laced with animosity from the boys, but their mouth contradicted their eyes as they complimented me on my success as they barely managed to pass me in a tired jog.

After my eleventh lap I was allowed to return to the lockers to shower, which I gratefully accepted. Crossing the field I peeled the soaked shirt off my body and enjoyed the way the wind cooled the sweat on my skin. But I did not linger, knowing that a cold shower would feel even better especially when you don't have to worry about sharing the shower space with the other guys.

The cold water from the showerhead did not disappoint. I let out a moan of appreciation as it washed my skin. I combed my fingers through my loose, wet hair. I couldn't help but think about all the times I shared the spray of the shower with Heero. I could clearly imagine him pressed against me and my hands running over him in worship. Not being able to be intimate with Heero in the least had only amounted to stronger sexual fantasies. And I often had to excuse myself and take extra showers by myself just so I could relieve the build up of sexual tension in secrecy and not risk scaring him with the strength of my desires.

I started rushing through the shower ritual as I noticed I had gotten physically excited in spite of the cold water and really dreaded being caught by the other guys with an erection in the common shower room.

Think different thoughts. Think different thoughts. I told myself repetitively as I dried myself off mechanically and avoided only stimulated myself further. I chuckled at being such a typical teenager. It was silly. You fight wars. You kill people. You save people. And still you are subjected to the same things that every guy in his late teens goes through.

My situation was thankfully resolved when the first of the guys from my class started walking in. I was already in my jeans, sitting on a bench braiding my hair. It was still damp, nearly wet, but I still had to go by the administration desk and I was eager to get home quickly.

"Man, that sucked!" Most of my male classmates complained.
"And to think that for the test we have to finish twelve laps and we will be timed! They just want us to kill ourselves out there, drop dead from a heart attack or heat stroke!"

"Yeah!" The others agreed.

I ignored them and searched my bag, the bench and the floor for my elastic hair band, fumbling around with one hand as I held the end of my braid together with the other.

"Here." Eduardo, another guy I knew not to be pleased with my sexual outing, handed me the black elastic band.

"Thanks." I securely wrapped it around the end of my braid. I was acutely aware of Hunter at the far end of the room, getting dressed next to Aston after a quick shower. The other guys seemed to be perfectly aware of his presence as well.

"You did really good, Duo." One of them, whose name I didn't even know, said.

"Thanks."

"You'll probably get an A for the fitness test." He continued glibly.

"I uh... I'm not really good at cardio."

"You did better than us."

"Yeah, way better!" Another joined in.

"Thanks." I mumbled and turned my back to the group to put an end to the awkward, confusing and unnatural conversation, pulling a clean shirt over my head. I stepped into my sneakers without putting socks on and stuffed my belongings into my bag. I swung it over my shoulder and walked out of the locker-room. The plastic ends of my loose shoestrings ticked softly on the tile floor with each step. I was startled by Sookie, who appeared out of nowhere and threw her arm across my tall shoulders.

"Ew, yer braid is still wet." She teased and let go of me.

"It was a fucking freak show in there!" I exclaimed. Far away from the entrance to the gym I stopped and bent over to tie my shoes, explaining: "They were all so fake, being so goddamned nice to me."

Sookie sighed and shook her head. "I honestly don't understand yer problem. Isn't this better than getting bullied? Even Aiden is leaving me alone now."

"I don't like fake." I muttered displeased. "I don't like ass-kissing either."

"You don't?" Sookie asked with a wink.

"You know what I mean, Sooks. Come on, this is serious. It's like the opening scene of an alternative universe zombie slasher horror flick. Yeah, everyone is nice to you at first, but in the third act, when you have your guard down, they eat your brains out."

"Ya and yer movies..." Sookie commented with a shake of her head.

"Well, what I lack in personal experience I make up for with memorized movie scripts."

"And ya use zombie movies as yer reference?"
"Those American high school movies are just way too surreal..."

Sookie chuckled and followed me to the administration desk and stood by idly while I got the mother of all lectures from the clerk for being home sick as long as I had and not notifying the school. After what I can only assume was a psychological meltdown on her behalf, I signed a form that would solve all the paperwork issues and I had a week to forge a doctor's note to validate my lie of being struck by a severe ear infection.

I may have to amend my trademark phrase to: "I run and hide but I never tell a lie. Sort of..."

After walking Sookie to the bus stop and waiting for her to be picked up, I walked home, with my hands casually in my pockets but my pace quick and eager. In the lobby I waited impatiently for the elevator and when it took too long I decided to take the stairs, taking two steps at a time. I had a warm flush to my face by the time I reached my floor. I walked past the doors of all the neighbors I didn't know - had never even met - and slid the keycard through the slot of our front door. Inside the apartment air was fresh and cool, but my face only grew hotter and redder at the sight that welcomed me even more so than the chilled air.

Heero was standing in the middle of the living room, nonchalantly leaning on his crutch. I looked him up and down with my jaw agape. His bare feet were planted firmly on the soft carpet. My instantly hungry eyes traveled up bare, toned shins to a barrier of skintight spandex just above the knee. It was no secret that I loved the spandex shorts. The black fabric left nothing of the strong, perfectly formed thighs to the imagination. He was wearing the short sleeved, sky blue button-up shirt that I loved so much on him as it accentuated the gold hues of his skin and the ice crystals in his eyes. It was unbuttoned to reveal a defined abdomen and smooth chest. It wasn't hard to ignore the sling, the knee brace and the burnt ear when confronted with such an expanse of golden skin.

My stunned gaze finally settled on his face. Not only did I love the shorts and the shirt on him, I also loved his expression; relaxed but with the tiniest smirk and his colorful eyes narrowed sensually as they peered at me from under thick, black eyelashes.

My throat was dry but yet I managed: "Hi."

"Hi." He said and he tilted his head slightly as he kept looking at me while I was nailed to the floor by the doorway.

I was so distracted by his divine appearance, I briefly failed to notice a key feature. But after the completion of my second shameful look up-and-down his body, I aimed my gaze at his hair; darker, spikier and glossier than usual. "Your hair is wet." I stated dumbly.

"Yes." He responded. In the silence that stretched he seemed to lose some of his confidence to the claws of uncertainty. His expression became a little bit more self-conscious as he pointed out with a softer voice: "I showered."

"Oh." Wait. "By yourself?"

"Yes."

"Oh." I said again - so poetically eloquent - but this time through lips formed in a devilish grin. We stared at each other for a long time as a sense of discomfort suddenly took to us both. Finally, I chuckled sheepishly and noticed Heero seemed to be fighting an embarrassed smile himself. I walked towards him, but I supposed "stalked" would be a more accurate fit. I stood in front of him, honestly taken by his beauty. I reached out and touched his throat with the tips of my fingers, dragging them down to the hollow of the collar bone and then, after a brief stop, lightly down his
chest. His skin was still damp and I could smell the familiar scents of his shampoo and soap. The way he was looking at me was intense. I saw trust and - if my eyes weren't deceiving me - desire. "How was therapy?" I whispered, wrapping a hand around his prone neck and pulling him closer.

"Fine." He said and I could feel his breath on my face.

"How was physio?"

He brought his face closer to mine, our lips almost touching. He seemed to be tempting me. "Shut up." He ordered softly.

I did. I leaned down and locked our lips together roughly, having no interest in talking for the time being anyway. I took in a deep breath through my nose before deepening the kiss. His lips parted for me without hesitation and his shy way of returning my kiss soon equaled the intensity and the hunger that drove me. His tiny, breathless moan between kisses encouraged me boldly. I brought both my hands down to rest on his hips and draw him closer to me. His arm in the sling in front of his chest prevented any direct contact between our torso's, but our lower bodies were flush against each other. Becoming more certain that he wasn't going to pull away from me as time passed, I encircled his waist his one arm, to hold him close to me and to offer him support in the absence of his crutch that had fallen to the floor during the process. I used my free hand to explore some of the golden, damp skin.

I was hard and my erection was evident as it was pressed against his hip, but I wasn't embarrassed nor worried, for - as I said - Heero's spandex shorts left nothing to the imagination and it was obvious he was enjoying it as much as I was. It seemed I hadn't been the only one to be plagued by sexual frustration during our brief but too long "no touch" period.

I bravely but reluctantly left his lips, curious to kiss other parts of him and see, hear and feel him respond. I trailed my lips to his ear where I placed open-mouthed kisses along the shell. I chuckled soundlessly when I felt him shiver and barely heard the appreciative sounds he made as he bit his lip. Apparently embarrassed, he buried his face between my neck and my shoulder. I allowed him some privacy to compose himself should he so desire and lightly trailed my hand up and down his spine, dipping lower each time. When my fingers touched the spandex on the downward stroke I didn't descent any further, knowing I should consider myself lucky for the leaps in intimacy we had already made and I wasn't going to push it. I patiently listened to his pants, my hand on his back stilled and I enjoyed the closeness rather than the physical satisfaction.

I felt him kissing the side of my neck a few times, his breath hot on my skin. He then pushed me away slightly with his hand splayed on my chest.

Through my pants I asked him, with genuine concern, if he was okay, leaving him to interpret the inquiry in any way he wanted.

"Yeah." He took his hand away from me and used it to bring the sides of his open shirt together. The long shirt covered up what the shorts could not.

"You sure?" I gently titled his head up by his chin to face me. I loved the way a red blush colored his cheekbones and his eyes were hazy and passionate.

"Yes." He answered more confidently and he showed me a tiny but reassuring smile.

I gave him a last kiss, small and sweet on his soft lips. "Thank you." I said and my fingers worked to button up his shirt.
"For what?"

"For being amazing."

We stared into each other's eyes for a while, enjoying the silence and the atmosphere as we both spiraled down from a pretty satisfying high. I was the first to break the quiet, asking him if he wanted something to drink.

"Water." He replied, to ensure I would not fetch him a bottle of beer. He moved over to the couch and sat down with a long sigh while I got us both a bottle of water.

I sat down next to him and we both savored the refreshing liquid. "So, how was your day?"

"Fine."

I snorted. "Gee, thanks for that elaborate description of your day."

Heero frowned. "It's an overall assessment."

"If I ask about something specific, will I get a specific answer?" I asked, looking at him.

"Likely."

"How did it go with Nettle?"

He opened his mouth but then shut it again. I smiled because I knew him well enough to know he was about to say "Fine", but managed to stop himself. He contemplated shortly and then decided on: "Quietly."

"You didn't say anything again?"

"No."

"So she didn't ask you again?"

"She asked me a few things."

"Okay. What?"

Heero frowned again. "I'm not sure I'm supposed to discuss this with you."

"I'm pretty sure you aren't, but I'm also pretty sure I'm going to pry it out of you anyway." I said teasingly, even though I was actually being serious.

"She asked me about some of my missions with the Preventers."

My turn to frown. I had expected her to be more interested in past, considering that his upbringing was the underlying cause of everything. "Like what?"

He shrugged. "Like how they went."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"No."

"Why?"
"She has my files and mission reports." He stated dryly. "It's useless to elaborate on a matter that is already in writing, in accurate detail."

I laughed. "And then what? Did she get pissed?" I didn't mean to voice my question in such a way that it was obvious I hoped the answer was yes, but sometimes I had ridiculously poor control over myself. 

"No. She stopped asking me questions and just started writing again."

"Oh..."

"Why do you want to know all this?"

I looked away, sighing. "I just don't want to be left out. I don't like the idea of her knowing things about you that I don't know."

"She's a psychiatrist. If I am to accredit her profession, it seems inevitable that she knows things that you don't." He leaned in, his shoulder touching mine, causing me to look at him. "Lucky for you then I don't believe in psychology."

I kissed away the hint of a smirk on his lips. "Lucky me." I mumbled, satisfied and overcome with a delirious happiness.

As dinner time came round I sat Heero down at the kitchen table and ordered him to slice a variety of vegetables, while I riffl ed through a free-with-purchase cookbook looking for the Lasagna recipe that had my mouth watering at the sight of the images the other day. I prepared the onions and the meat at the stove. During the final twenty minute stage in the oven I set the table and did some small de-cluttering tasks around the apartment. I gathered my study books and walked them to the office, placing them on the shelf that bent increasingly far under the added weight.

I turned around and on Heero's desk I saw the origami book I had given him. It lay open and in blue lettering the page read: How to make a Japanese Origami Crane. The stack of white papers I had given him was practically untouched. But a pair of scissors and white clippings cluttered the desk. He had cut one of the rectangular papers into the desired, perfectly square shape, but the piece of paper wasn't square anymore. Delicately sitting on the open pages of the book was a small, crisp white crane, perfect in it's sharp angles and edges.

Even with one arm in a sling, the Perfect Soldier could master even the intricate art of origami in a single try.

I picked it up gingerly and placed it in my open palm, smiling at it. I walked it back to the kitchen and could only continue my goofy smile as Heero frowned at me. "It's beautiful." I said.

"The book said that if I fold one thousand cranes, my greatest wish will be fulfilled."

"Why didn't you?" I asked, though not seriously, as I took the crane to the dresser in the back of the living room and gently placed it on the dark surface by the two bolts. I smiled as I walked back to the kitchen and Heero answered:

"Because I don't believe in such superstitious things."

"Of course you don't." I responded in between chuckles. I peered through the glass front of the oven to check on dinner.

Heero surprised me when he continued pensively: "But even if it did work..."
I turned around and waited, watching his downward cast eyes, subconsciously holding my breath.

"I don't have anything left to wish for anyway." And he punctuated his admission by looking up at me with honest eyes.

I took in a breath and smiled, casting a glance at the feather-light paper bird. The white crane was a bridge between the untouched bolt and the damaged bolt, one built of much sturdier material than paper; hope.

That Monday was not a normal day. It was a special day.
The clock ticked and I tapped my finger on the surface of my desk in rhythm with it, my gaze tracking the cumbersome, slow motions of the long hand of the clock. It crawled like it was fighting against time, instead of merely indicating it. The teacher's words were a distant murmur, indistinct and incoherent. He might as well be a lawnmower, a washing machine or a jet engine. I was thinking about Heero, but pretended not to. I carried a heavy frown on my forehead to uphold the illusion that I was giving the complicated chemistry formula on the blackboard my best cognitive efforts. In reality a fleeting glance was no more it took me to identify the parts and bring them together as a whole. In large quantities it makes a big boom, in tiny quantities, as the teacher was about to demonstrate, it just made huff of a smoke and would elicit gasps of surprise and giggles, rather than screams of terror and agony.

I looked down at my hand, which had been irritating the sheet of paper in front of me with the tip of my pen. Amongst the non-discriminate doodles and something that could possibly be chicken, there was Heero's name, nearly carved into the paper with the black ink. It looked more like the paper bled his name in oil.

"Maxwell!"

The sudden exclamation of my name startled me. I jostled upright in my seat, my pen went flying somewhere. In the back, someone not important went: "Ow."

"Maxwell," The chemistry teacher repeated, closing in on me through the aisles of desks and students turned backwards in their seats, "surely you know what chemical we end up with if we mix these four." He gestured back at the board.

"Uh..."

Before I could even sputter something, he was right next to me and he said: "I'm sure you know, show me your notes." He was smiling, confident that his prodigy student knew the right solution. His smile started to vanish as he fought me for my notes, finally tearing the paper out of my hand, ending up with the more incriminating part of it. A scowl settled on him. "Though it would be a thrilling magic trick, I don't think when I add this final component, a pigeon will come flying out of the glass." He squinted at the paper. "What's Hero? With two E's..."

"That's Duo's boyfriend, sir." Danny, who shared this class with me, spoke up. His eyes were kind but his tone was venomous enough to kill small livestock, unhinge his jaw and swallow it whole.

"Oh." The teacher seemed perplexed and he struggled for words as he was obviously left uncomfortable and witless in the situation. Luckily for him, he was saved, not by the bell, but by my cell phone, which gave him the escape to the well rehearsed: "No cell phones allowed in the classroom!"

But I paid him no heed, his order was useless, he might as well not have wasted any breath on his loud, stereotypical bark. In a heartbeat I had my phone to my ear and hurried out of the classroom without excusing myself. My heart rate was furious and anxious. As I pressed the door shut behind me, I realized I had never received a call on this phone before. It felt like an emergency, like the
Une's voice sounded familiar across the line, like an old friend, but she spoke in a tone you never wish to have a good friend speak to you. After her introduction and prompt apology she allowed for an ominous stretch of silence. "You'd better get over here." She finally spoke vaguely.

"Why? What has happened?" I felt panicked. I sounded panicked.

Une responded with calming words. "Heero's is fine, don't worry, he's fine."

"But?" I hurried her along as she stalled again.

"His physical therapist is currently in our hospital wing, having his broken jaw tended to..." She continued.

"I'll be right there." I said, noting how much I sounded like my old self, when I accepted another hazardous mission from G, or tagged along with Heero down suicide lane. There was no hesitation, only determination. With my wallet and keys in the back pocket of my jeans, I saw no need to accept the confrontation with the fuming, disappointed chemistry teacher, nor the prying eyes of my Gossiper Anonymous classmates to gather my belongings, so before the teacher could reel me back, I sprinted down the hallway. My feet carried me to the train station faster than they had ever taken me anywhere. In the train I felt my phone buzzing in my back pocket, accompanied by a cheesy, standard, monotone jingle. I checked the first time and I noticed it was Sookie, probably wondering why I hadn't shown up for the next class by then. I didn't answer it. This was Gundam Wing business and I was a Gundam Wing pilot again, that went with forsaking some of the luxuries that are granted an everyday person; such as the comforting words of a friend.

It rang again. It was Sookie again. I didn't answer again. When I ignored the third call, my stomach started to hurt, yet I still did not answer at the fourth attempt. Just as the train halted at the appropriate station, the calls stopped and I forgot all about them, shoving the pesky feeling of guilt away.

Like a racehorse being released from the holding area at the firing of a gun, I pushed through the doors of the train before they had even fully opened, squeezing myself through the narrow opening. Momentarily disoriented by the alternative arrival platform, I used the signs to guide me down the paths and ended up at the glass doors of the Preventer HQ. It took no more than an angry glare to an unknown receptionist to get a visitor's key card to activate the elevator. I was expected.

Waiting as the elevator climbed, I felt like I was being summoned to a high court meeting. I shared the same dread that I presumed seasoned felons and criminals of war felt when approaching their sentencing. I shrugged the feeling off, casual as you please. The doors opened to a floor I didn't recognize. At the end of a long, brown colored hallway, I spotted the most miserable looking boy ever. With a wrenching of my heart, I approached him.

He made eye contact with me as soon as he noticed my presence nearing him through the stretched corridor. They were intense as they always were, but not intense with strength and passion but intense with frustration and anger. I couldn't look away from him. His strong hands had taken me by the shoulders and he was drowning me in the cobalt blue sea that was him.

"Duo?"

I jerked my head to the side and frowned at doctor Nettle. I hadn't even seen her. She was sitting in the plastic chair next to Heero, her eyes were unreadable.
"Do you mind waiting back there?" With a fine, feminine hand she vaguely gestured at a door I passed way back near the elevator.

"Yes, as a matter a fact I do mind." I bit, glaring at her like the master taught me how to.

She was completely unimpressed with my furious gaze, either because I had yet to reach a respectable skill level or she just couldn't be bothered.

I ignored her as I realized I should. I turned my gaze towards Heero and molded it into something questioning and concerned. "What happened?"

"I punched the physical therapist." He stated, much like I - just yesterday - announced that I had bought a new carton of milk.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Yeah! Why?"

"Duo," Nettle interrupted the starting of Heero's explanation, "if you would-"

"Would you just shut the hell up?" I blurted. "What are you even doing here? Aside from the fact that you are paid by the hour..."

Her lips tightened, I had insulted her. "I am here," she spoke all high-horsy, "because Heero just had a psychological break through."

I snorted. Loud. It just erupted out of me, as did: "Break through? Him socking a guy is a break through? Then what is even your purpose? Heero hits people all the time!" From my peripheral vision I noticed Heero looking away, his eyes shadowing over by his lids lowering his dark eyelashes over them. "I didn't mean..." I whispered, but I had nothing sensible to say.

"Not by his own personal motivation."

"So your objective is to turn him into an ill-tempered, ill-inhibited Ultimate fighter?"

She sighed, obviously annoyed with me and trying to explain herself to me. I didn't make any retorts to her sighing and grunting though, as without further ado she rose to her high heeled feet and promptly walked away.

"She doesn't like you." Heero said.

"Well, the feeling is mutual." I grumbled and took the seat that Nettle previously occupied, placing a hand on Heero's thigh.

He looked at me, first a little shocked at the unanticipated contact, but then he relaxed. His lips parted, like he was about to say something, but his tongue lingered in silence.

"Why did you hit your therapist?" I asked with a hushed tone.

He shrugged defensively. "He annoyed me."

"Why?"

Heero sighed and he looked down at his knee, still immobilized in the bulky brace. "He keeps slowing me down. I feel like there is not progress. It doesn't hurt anymore, it's just stiff, I need exercise but he just has me bending and stretching!"

"Heero, you're making great progress! Look at you, you are already out of the sling and walking
without a crutch! It's only been four weeks!"

"It's not helping! Nothing is helping!" He yelled angrily, surprising me with his outburst.

"Oh... So, I'm guessing this isn't just about physical therapy." I inquired.

"Nettle is not doing anything. She's not helping. She's just like that therapist, she isn't doing anything! She's not helping me change!"

I moved my hand from his thigh to his shoulder, rubbing my thumb in gentle circles. I searched for eye contact, but he stubbornly refused, with his gaze cast down at the linoleum floor. "Heero..." A sad smile came to me. "Heero, the goal was never to change you, just to help you accept yourself. No one wants you to be anyone other than you."

"I do." He said and he looked at me with pitiful eyes.

"I don't."

"I'm not normal Duo. Sometimes I feel like I'm not even human. She needs to make me normal." His voice was almost a whisper.

"You have proven your humanity to me time and time again." I tried to convince him. "But you are absolutely right, you are not normal. You are special. Why would you want to change that?"

"Is special not being able to sleep with the window open? Is special never having your back turned to the nearest exit? Is special not knowing how to shake people's hand?"

"I can help you with those things." I held my hand out between us and smiled as he looked at it in confusion. "Shake my hand then."

He glanced up at me questioning and I just waited patiently. Finally, after studying my hand from several angles and retrieving information on how to complete the task in perfection, he wrapped his hand around mine and he shook it three times, slightly and curtly. Then he released my hand and looked at me expectantly, his expression nearly fearful as he sought feedback.

"Good. One down."

"Many to go..."

I shrugged and offered him a genuine smile. I wasn't phased, nor discouraged, but I didn't know how I could convince him. I saw in his eyes the struggle of his mind. I wished, more than anything, for him to be at peace with himself, but I knew we were long strides removed from that destination, being that he didn't even know who he was and who he was supposed to be, caught in a tug of war between the obsessive urge to be perfect - the Perfect Soldier - and the childlike desire to be normal. I leaned in a planted a chaste kiss on his cheek. He remained unmoved, staring at the marble pattern in the linoleum.

"Heero..."

He gaze was redirected and pinned me down. I was confronted with naked fear in the pools of his eyes. A fear of his own depth, of sinking in it.

"Let's go home."

He nodded in agreement. I rose first and helped him to his feet, he didn't hesitate to accept the
support of my outstretched hand. He limped down the hallway next to me, sometimes our shoulders brushed. Even the smallest physical contact with him affected me deeply and multi-dimensionally. So it is no wonder the hairs on the back of my neck were electrified and stood on end when halfway down the corridor I felt warm fingers tentatively search for grip on my limp hand swinging at my side in rhythm with my steps. At his shy nudging, I sealed the deal more confidently, firmly taking his hand in mine, wrapping my fingers around his. I felt the frailty in his slim digits. I knew I had to be the strong one from now on, like he had been the strong one throughout the war. He saw me through, he saw us all through, now he is the one who needs to be pulled along and I would oblige without hesitation. I would carry him if I must, for however long it would take.

Love is a source of strength that never exhausts.

In the lobby the meekly voiced receptionist informed me Une wished to speak to me, but I told her I had more important things to do at the moment and to relay the message. The car was waiting for us, as Heero was always chauffeured around on behalf of the Preventers.

At home I told Heero to go to bed, he looked tired. My suspicion was confirmed when he didn't argue with me and soundlessly crawled under the thin sheets of his bed. I let him sleep till dinner, cheating by ordering in. The informal setting of dinner suited me, on the couch with our plates in our laps as we both sat with our feet propped up on the coffee table and a stand-up comedian on the TV blurring rude and provocative things to receive laughter from a faceless audience. Even though maybe I shouldn't laugh, he made my lips crack into a smile occasionally. I threw quick, sideways glances at Heero, who was staring at the screen analytically. Of course he did not laugh or smile. Firstly because he just doesn't, secondly because the double innuendo of most wise-cracking was completely lost on him.

The comedian's encore was interrupted by the obnoxious ringing of our telephone, with a grumble that sounded suspiciously much like an obscene curse I got up and answered it.

"Duo."

I hated it when people use my name as a manner of greeting, but I had long surrendered to this pet peeve of mine. "Une." I flatly retorted.

"The receptionist informed me you were too busy to meet with me."

"Well, Une, I lead full and fulfilling life."

"How is Heero?"

I frowned, looking back at the sad boy sitting curled up on the couch, staring at the screen with desperate eyes in a final attempt to see the humor in the seemingly random string of topics. "Why would you ask? I should ask you about your therapist." But I don't because I don't care, I admitted to myself.

"He'll be fine. But I think it is best to terminate the partnership."

"Ya think?" I replied dryly.

"We'll find him a different therapist."

"Don't. Heero and I will handle it ourselves. Your therapists don't understand his body."

"Oh and you do?" She asked sarcastically.
A grin crept to my lips and the outer shell of my ears got flushed. "I understand his body perfectly." Heero looked at me and quirked one eyebrow. I waved off his questioning stare but of course he kept looking at me, studying me.

"I do hope you are not considering quitting the other therapy as well."

I sighed. "Well, so far it has had disappointingly little effect. None, to be specific."

"Give it time. You expect too much too soon. You must know healing a state of mind takes longer than healer a wounded body. Even when it concerns Heero."

"Especially when it concerns Heero." I whispered into the receiver.

Her deep sigh came through like garble across the line. "Exactly. And in light of today's events, I am even more convinced it is useful for Heero to continue seeing Nettle."

"Look, let's not blow this out of proportion. We both know the injury isn't representative for what actually transpired. He just got impatient with the slow progress of the therapy."

"That is not what I heard."

"Oh God." I closed my eyes, feeling a sudden headache. "I dread to ask, but: what have you heard?"

She sought for politically correct and professional wording. "There was a case of physical contact that was perceived as inappropriate by one of the two parties involved."

"Inappropriate?" I asked in a hushed, but demanding tone, cupping my hand around my mouth and the receiver. I saw Heero reposition himself on the couch, but pretending not to be eavesdropping.

"Apparently to adjust his range of motion the therapist's hand wondered a little too far up Heero's thigh to Heero's liking. The account from there on forth is hazy, as the blow didn't only break his jaw, but knocked him unconscious as well. I had hoped Heero would have some answers for me."

"He doesn't." My fixed gaze on Heero's face turned into a glare. I watched his own expression change; realization, then shame. "Not for you."

"It's time for me to get some answers, instead of being locked out of the loop again." I promptly hung up the phone, barely catching the last of her incoherent sputtering. "That was Une." I told him. "You didn't tell me the whole story."

"It didn't seem important." He defended, but from his expression I could tell he was unconvinced even by his own words. "Nothing really happened, it was just an accident to which I overreacted."

I snorted, approaching him and dropping my suddenly heavy body down on the couch close to his. "I don't like this Heero. I don't like you keeping things from me and keeping me out of the loop. All these things are happening that you don't tell me about. Each time I discover something, I just can't stop thinking what other secrets there are, or just stories you've shared with others and not with me."

"You're talking about my therapy with Nettle." He opted carefully, unsure.

"That's part of it."

"I told you, I don't tell her much. Nothing important."

"Yeah, so you keep saying... but obviously our definitions of "important" differ. What happened
"today was important, why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I guess..." His teeth grasped his lower lip tightly. "I guess I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Afraid of what questions you will ask." He bit his lip again but caught himself in the act and stopped himself. "Nettle's questions are easy, because they are about my missions, but mostly... because I don't care what she thinks of the truth. But I also hide things from her, because I can't tell her things that you don't know about. That doesn't feel right." His eyes searched mine and in them I saw the turmoil, as always the emotions were being restrained by the grip of the soldier, but I could tell he was moved.

"Then tell me. Answer my questions."

He shook his furiously, squeezing his eyes shut. "There are hideous truths to me that I fear will drive you away."

I instantly answered, for there were no second thoughts necessary: "The truth will never drive me away. Only lies and secrets carry that threat."

"I do want to tell you things, I'm just not sure if I want you to know those things." He frowned and shook his head, his bangs swaying. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It does, actually." I comforted him.

"I don't understand it." He admitted in clear frustration.

"That's okay. You will." We shared a silence together for a long time. My hands sought for his in his lap and held them loosely, feeling the warmth of his thigh seep through my skin at where my arms rested on his legs. After some careful consideration, I started cautiously: "Maybe... maybe we should start our own therapy sessions."

He looked at me sharply, a hint of fear in his eyes that was evident in the tension freezing his entire body.

"For every thing you share with Nettle, however unimportant you may deem it, you share something with me. It doesn't have to be the same thing, it doesn't have to be important, just tell me whatever you want to tell me. And then once you've told me, you can feel free in sharing it with Nettle." I didn't like the prospect of her getting to know everything I would, but I was honored by his shy admission that telling her things before me didn't feel right. It made me feel more secure, a more firm and solid part of him and subsequently confident enough to encourage him to share with Nettle even his darkest secrets, as I maintained hope she could provide him with better help on many subjects than I could.

The suggestion appeared to be highly confrontational to him and his gaze sought refuge in the fringe of the carpet.

For lasting seconds I stood my ground and waited quietly for him to come to terms with the idea, but as the seconds stretched to minutes my palms started to sweat and my stomach started to coil. And even though I knew better, I stuttered a way out for him through my lips. "Or not... I mean... whatever. Whatever you want."

"I don't want to." He was quick to say, still enthralled by the woven threads of the carpet. "But I think I must."
He said "think" but he meant "fear". His voice was more adapt at subtleties than he knew, being that the soldier was deaf to them.

I smiled. I felt proud of him. I told him so.

He shot his gaze towards me like an arrow aimed at my chest. I felt pain in my heart as I felt myself being stabbed by their pathetic, honest, raw emotion of self doubt and self loathing. I couldn't do anything for him other than intensify my smile, hoping to brighten some of his darkness with it.

His expressive eyes cowered in the shadow of his thick lashes, creating an impenetrable glaze equivalent to the fortified walls of a stronghold. Retreating into the secluded safety of himself, some of the tension left his body. I hated this. I hated this game of drawing him out only to see him scurry back inside again, into the fort of the soldier. Of all the hours in a day, Heero was mine too briefly, the Soldier's for too long.

"Do you want to start now?" He monotone voice made me feel cold.

"No. That is not up to me. It is up to you."

He nodded but I could see the flash of despair, of not being guided, of not being told what to do. Freedom can be a frightful thing, Heero would concur.

We passed the rest of the evening sharing the space but not sharing any words or looks. I was the one to announce time for bed when in the distance I heard a church bell chime twelve times. In the bedroom I kissed him goodnight, he followed my touch but I pulled away, distancing myself and crawling into my own bed. I had a lot to process, mostly I just dreaded the approaching end of my blissful ignorance. I needed to brace myself mentally, I expected to hear things that no one should hear, let alone go through.

In the dead of the night I was tossing under the summer sheets with terrifying doubt. Was our relationship really going to improve by eliminating all of the secrets? Could we handle it as a couple? Could we handle it as individuals? My stomach twisted and knotted itself up into an aching ball. My eyes burned as I focused them on the white ceiling. My absent fingers toyed with the curtain, creating an interesting but sinister play of moonlight and shadows on the ceiling above. Somewhere between reality and a dream, consciousness and unconsciousness, in the split second that it took my eyelids to succumb to the exhaustion, a voice echoed, in the room or in my head:

"Are you really certain you will still be able to love Heero once you know everything?"

No answer resounded.

The next day I went to school early to pick up my bag at Lost and Found and make excuses for my sudden absence at the administration desk. During first period Sookie and I shared a hushed conversation in the back of the class, behind the unwitting teacher's back. I apologized for ignoring her calls and gave her a slightly altered, indiscriminate explanation of the day before. She seemed intrigued by the proposal I had done and I felt compelled to clarify that whatever Heero would decide to share with me, would remain between the two of us. She was visibly disappointed to have her curiosity go unsatisfied, but she said she understood, though not being able to restrain herself from inquiring about a certain matter that had previously been kindly left in the dark.

Knowing what she was referring to without neither of us using the actual word, I cast my gaze down, taking a few deep breaths. It was one of the things I dreaded knowing. "I don't know if he'll tell me. I guess I'm just along for the ride. He has all the control now."
"That's gotta be hard..." She mused aloud. "Never knowing what's comin' and when it's comin'..."

I agreed with her. It was hard. Hard enough to smother my own curiosity. An optimistic whisper in the back of my head offered the rosy picture that with all the horrendous things I have been imagining and attributing to him, the reality might turn out to be less spectacularly sordid. But that little meek whisper of optimism was quickly silenced by an overwhelming avalanche of "you know better than that", accompanied by the memory of Heero's story of the choke-bag and the clear image of him with his ever pained eyes.

When Friday morning made my alarm go off in the shadowy dawn, long after I had already wakened, I had a sickening feeling in my gut. Today was another one of Heero's therapy sessions. The chauffeur would pick him up at noon as usual. I wondered with what horror tales he would return, suffered at the hand of the degenerate asshole that was J.

Later that morning, after a quiet and awkward breakfast, I kissed him goodbye on his cheek and wished him good luck. He frowned at me but made no attempt to speak.

The lessons of that day were completely fruitless, the people in the world absolutely non-existent, even during lunchtime Sookie's rambling faded to a murmur no more present or more attended to than the distant roar of the highway. She accepted my antisocial behavior due to an understanding of the circumstances and called over a friend from her French literature class to come sit with us in the grass and they lost themselves in talk about clothes and nail polish, as I lost myself in deeper thought.

The day continued with me barely being a part of it. I didn't have many classes and with the teacher of the final period being sick, I was home even before Heero. I rummaged around the house, catching up on some of the cleaning and maintenance that I had let slide, too drained by my thoughts to make my hands work. I furiously dusted every surface, most of which still painfully empty, symptoms of an empty life. The swiftness of my motions set the white paper crane flying. It soared but only briefly. It soundlessly fell to the carpet, landing on it head. Luckily it had not been damaged by it's fall. I pinched two fingers around it's tail and lifted it back on his perch, in the shadow of the damaged bolt.

"Duo."

His voice startled me. Heero had crept into the apartment and stood right behind me. "You scared me." I admitted breathlessly, but smiled regardless.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"No, don't worry, it's fine!" I shook my head. Why was there this discomfort between us? "How was therapy?"

His eyes narrowed at my question but I couldn't read the orbs. "Do you want me to tell you something?"

I sighed. "Heero, it's all up to you."

He didn't say anything, he just walked away. I was frozen in the living room, staring at the doorway of our bedroom where he had left my line of sight. I fidgeted with the dust cloth in my hand. I blinked when he appeared in the doorway and he had that frown on his face, as he yet again struggled to understand something. "There is something I don't understand." He announced, pinning his gaze on me.
"Oh?" I could be so eloquent.

He hesitated, his mouth moving but no sound was produced. He looked away and pressed his lips into a taut line, his frown intensified. When he looked at me again, his eyes were dark with utter confusion. "I thought there were things you wanted to know. You asked about them. But then you stopped asking. And since Monday, you've been avoiding every form of conversation."

I raised my eyebrows slightly, surprised to find him so observant of me.

"I don't understand why you don't want to know anymore."

The dust cloth absorbed the sweat that formed in my hot palms. "I'm scared."

His frown switched between confusion and anger. "You said only secrets could drive you away."

He bit, obviously hurt by my own apparent contradiction.

"I know. I just fear what the truth will do to us. Monday night I started worrying, worrying that maybe we weren't strong enough to handle it. We're both inexperienced when it comes to stuff like this. I still want to know, but at the same time, I'm afraid."

He blinked away an expression of perplexity.

The conversation ended there. Heero walked off and mere minutes later I could hear the shower running. I rubbed the back of my neck with my hand, feeling a cold sweat there. I had been honest. Normally I saw things quite black and white. Honesty is good, dishonesty is bad. But maybe this time my honesty had been too brutal. I toyed with the end of my braid, remaining where I stood, in the middle of the living room. Thoughts stampeded through my head and then all of a sudden one of them separated from the herd and I frowned at myself.

I walked over to the bathroom door. It was wide open. The bathroom was filled with a faint mist of steam, Heero's shape was blurred by the frosted texture of the shower curtain. He stilled when over the roar of the water he heard me calling out his name. I saw his silhouette turn, I couldn't see his eyes, just the vague angles of his face framed by a mop of dark brown hair.

"Yes?"

"You love me, right?" I started.

Though the question seemed to confuse him, he answered curtly and decisively: "Yes."

"Would you still love me if even the most horrible imaginings would turn out to be true?" I didn't even have to wait a heartbeat for his answer.

"Yes."

A relieved smile nearly split my face in two. Breathlessly I said: "Hurry up. We gotta talk." And I rushed out of the bathroom. Knowing that he loved me unconditionally strengthened my faith in the durability of the concept that is us. I knew that if Heero - faulted as he may be - could offer me such love without a moment's hesitation, I would be negligent as his partner to not be able to offer the same thing in return.

I waited for him sitting in my regular chair at the dinner table. I didn't have to wait long. He had taken my order to be quick to heart and emerged casually - barely - dressed with his hair still wet, staining the shoulders and back of his open button-up shirt dark. Keeping cautious eyes on me he seated himself across from me and slowly worked his fingers to button up his shirt.
"I'm ready." I said and molded my face into something serious and determined. "Whatever you want to tell me, I can handle it." I smiled and reached for one of his hands, three buttons short of completing his task. "We can handle it."

He raised a single eyebrow at me. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything. Everything. Whatever you want to tell me." Immediately I could tell from the look on his face that he would require more specific guidance than that. "Uh... the boy that Quatre mentioned... the uh... possible rape..." I suggested with soft voice, but I straightened my shoulders. I can handle this, I decided.

"Those are actually the same story." He said. His eyes were narrow as they were focused on my face, desperately trying to read me.

"Do you want to tell me the story?"

"No." He answered decidedly.

"Oh-"

"But I will." He interrupted me.

I took in a deep breath and offered him a slightly queasy smile. "Okay."

His eyes narrowed further. Almost accusingly, he wondered: "Is there a version of the story that will change things between us?"

I gave his question some thought, I didn't just want to blurt out the proper thing to say, I wanted to be honest with him, knowing that we both deserved each other honesty. Whereas Monday night a similar question had me fretting and sleepless, hearing it in his deep voice put everything into perspective and the answer was clear and indisputable, so much so it's crazy to think I ever doubted it. "No. Nothing can change the way I feel for you."

His expression became more neutral, almost kind. "Promise?"

My smile returned to me, I felt relieved knowing that I would indeed still love him, no matter what. I felt ready, I felt sturdy. I felt like a lighthouse in the rough open sea, confident that even the tallest, strongest wave could not topple me, because I've already been able to withstand them for so long. "I promise."

Then the uncertainty came. "I don't know where to start."

I empathized, knowing that it must be hard for him to have his secrets revealed. There was nothing I could say that would make him feel completely at ease. "Anywhere is fine." I encouraged him.

"I don't remember his real name." Heero started, his eyes darting back and forth as if he was physically searching. "All I remember is that J called him Taichi, like I was called Heero. There were more of us, but I only remember Taichi, others left too soon to be remembered."

"Others?" I asked when I noticed he struggled with how to continue.

"Other trainees. I think we started out with seven of us."

I raised my eyebrows, perplexed at the suggestion. "You mean trainees as in possible future Gundam pilots?" I wondered what happened to all of them.
"Possible future Gundam Pilots 01. One of us would be chosen. The best." His eyes darkened at that final word. "Taichi and I were the last ones. I was thirteen. Taichi was older I think, a lot bigger at least. We usually slept in different cells, we weren't allowed much interaction anyway. But one night J locked us up in a cell together, one without a bed. And unlike the other cells, it didn't have microphones or camera's either. I didn't mind it much, I liked Taichi, he was always nice to me." He stalled, looking down at his hands fidgeting in his lap.

"Are you alright?" I noticed the lost and despairing expression on his downcast face.

"Yes."

"Do you want to stop?"

"No." He frowned at his own admission. He gathered his thoughts and continued: "Taichi said he didn't mind sharing a cell with me for the night. I said I didn't mind either. He said that he liked me and I said I liked him too." His brows furrowed. "Then he came to stand real close to me and said that he had always thought I was very pretty. That I did not agree with. He came even closer to me and when I backed up I felt the stone wall of the cell against my back."

A shiver ran down my spine but I didn't let it show.

"He started to whisper, saying that after that night we would never see each other again because J had announced he would choose the one to be trained further that morning. He said: "This is the final test and I think I know what I have to do to win". I didn't understand what he meant and then he confused me more when he continued: "But first I think we are free to have some fun together"... That's when he started touching me." Heero looked up at me with big, frightful eyes. I scraped my throat to find my voice and could only muster a scratchy: "It's okay. Go on."

He nodded slowly and looked away again, which, I presume, made it easier for him to talk. "I didn't have any fun, I didn't even know what was happening. Taichi was touching me everywhere, hurting me and he kissed my neck and face and tried to kiss my lips. I kept turning my face away and so he bit me a few times. I wanted to push him away, I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't budge and he just said he could do to me whatever he wanted, because I would never be able to stop him anyway. He was very... excited, but I didn't know what that meant. However, when he started taking off my shorts I just knew he was going to do something I really didn't want. I felt... fear. I started struggling more, fighting him, but he was really big compared to me and I didn't really want to hurt him. I thought he was my friend." Heero fell silent for a moment, I let him be.

I myself was trembling in my seat, a combination of intense fear, anger and a sickening feeling in my gut. I hid my white-knuckled fists under the table and hoped my face wouldn't reveal any of the turmoil I felt on the inside. I didn't want him to worry about my reaction, I just wanted him to keep on talking.

"To control me he started choking me. I tried to loosen his grip, but I couldn't and my kicks didn't even seem to bother him. He was so angry, he didn't let me go, even after I stopped resisting and then all of a sudden my training kicked in and I knew what I had to do to get him off. I didn't want to die." He frowned, like that was strange and confusing. "I did what I was taught in those kinds of situations. I struck his nose with the heel of my palm... and I felt and heard it crack. I hit him so hard I fractured facial bones. He immediately let go and fell back like a dead weight." His eyes narrowed, a hint of despise in them, I wondered whom it was meant for. "I'm not really sure if he was dead instantly, but I made sure. I dropped to my knees, straddling him and I just started hitting his face as hard as I could... I was so angry..." He whispered. "He was the only person I knew, the only person I could trust... and it turned out he was just like the others."
"I hit him for as long as I could. His whole face was red with blood, as were my hands. When I finally wasn't angry anymore, I didn't feel anything. I waited in the corner furthest away from his body for morning. Doctor J was the one to open the door, he looked at Taichi's body and then at me. I had expected him to be angry, I always thought he favored Taichi over me, but instead, he smiled... and he said he knew it would be me."

I sighed.

"The final test was killing the other." Heero spat, like he had just come to realize it.

I nodded. I didn't wonder anymore what happened to the others. All of them were dead, as all of them had been disposable. The thought that Heero, too, was considered disposable made my blood boil.

"Is it worse than you feared?" Heero asked, the shape of his eyes narrow and strong, but the emotions in them weak and vulnerable.

"Evil is just evil. There are no gradations. What was done to you was pure evil."

He bit his lip. "And what I did was evil."

I reached for his hand and this time when he tried to pull away, I refused to let go. I looked him deeply in his eyes and stated: "What you did was surviving. Taichi would have raped you and then murdered you." I thought I would feel relief at the fact that in the end it turned out that Heero wasn't raped, but of the many things I felt, relief was not one of them. Mostly I just felt very protective. I wanted to hold him close and convince him nothing bad would ever happen to him again. Realizing there was nothing preventing me from doing so, I stood up and walked over to him, lifting him out of his chair and wrapping my arms around him. I buried my nose in his damp hair, smelling shampoo.

Heero's hands were at his sides, not knowing what to do with them, still inexperienced when it came to hugging.

"They are all gone now and you are still here. Safe." I whispered into the strands of chocolate brown hair. "Thank you for telling me."

"Taichi is not the only friend I killed to survive." Heero muttered into my chest with apparent guilt. "Is my life really worth their deaths?"

I tightened my embrace. "Your life is worth the highest price."

He was silent for short while but then, with a shake of his head he continued: "Maybe Taichi would have lived to be a better Gundam Pilot... and a normal person after the war."

I felt tears stinging my eyes but I was too stubborn to set them free, so I let them sting. "Taichi would have lived to be an asshole. The world is no poorer without him. It is richer with you in it." I pulled back a little so I could look at him. I had expected to see tears in his eyes, but they were dry, I shook off the gnawing feeling that that was a bad sign and ignored the ache in my heart that it caused. I kissed his forehead and when I was left longing for more I kissed his lips passionately, pleased to have him respond favorably. "My world is richer with you in it. There is no one else I would prefer."

"Would you still say that if you knew the other stories?"
"Yes." I brushed some wayward locks out of his face and stared into his eyes momentarily, pouring all my love into him through our eye contact. "But save them for future sessions. For now, let's just have dinner and watched stupid reality shows."

The corners of his lips curved into the sweetest, tiniest smile, his eyes held a sudden mischief. "Yes, doctor."

I kissed him again, holding his body to mine. We had made progress, but I still felt a distance in his eyes. He was holding back emotions, holding back his true self. I feared that if he would keep restraining himself, that true self would be chained within forever, alone with his memories that strengthened the soldier and weakened the boy. I knew now that I would love him no matter what transpired in his past, but would I still love him if he is not completely here with me?
There was a moment of pure breathlessness. A silent moment. The world hadn't been as quiet since the first creature crawled out of the primordial soup, from where life began in all it's busy and noisy glory. Even the anticipating gasps had died down and all that I could hear was the beating of my own heart, pumping blood through my ears in a rhythm of rushes. How time can slow down so marvelously and make even the most insignificant things in the grand scheme of the world seem like a matter of life and death, crushing us all under the thick blanket of illusionary importance... Hundreds of eyes focused on a single point in space, wide and shocked as well as naively hopeful. Our fate would be decided.

The sound to break the immense silence that had taken on an existence of itself, was the sound of the basketball slamming against the backboard. The bounce resounded through the gym like a gunshot, with the same violent effect. The ball bounced back, back towards the polished floors of the court, missing the net by a good five inches. One of the players dove towards it, but before his fingers found the ball, the buzzer rang.

One half of the audience rose with an excited and victorious roar, throwing punches in the air and waving their flags and banners. The other half was quiet, stunned and defeated.

I think Sookie was the first of everyone on our side of the bleachers to speak.

"Wow." Was all she said.

"Wow, indeed." I seconded. My eyes settled on a tall figure at the heart of the court, still staring at the net of the opposing team with a gaze so intense it seemed like he was hell bent on turning back time with sheer will alone.

The winning team didn't congratulate our basketball players for a good game. The rivalry between the two school teams was too deep for that and they were too eager to celebrate their first win against our school in three years. Some of the players were lifted up high and carried off the court by an adoring legion of fans that seemed to lose themselves to Neanderthal ways as they booed at us and laughed at us and shaped their fingers into an L in front of their foreheads. The insult brought our section of the audience to life. The more fanatic sport fans returned gestures using different fingers and were making angry faces and balling their fists at the others.

I leaned in towards Sookie, my lips close to her ear so she could hear me above the growing hostility. "Let's get the hell out of here."

She nodded her head in agreement and followed me to the exit. At some point I felt her take hold of my hand as we wormed our way through the enraged crowd that was bordering on a riot. Alongside us, others fled the scene as well, mostly parents who had taken young brothers and sisters of the players to see the match that they were convinced they were going to win. Insulting banners regarding the opposite team still adorned the walls and ceilings throughout the entire school and had been for over a week. Now they were just an embarrassment.

We calmed down once we were safely outside. The sun was just about to set, a cooling evening
wind was gathering strength, refreshing the land from an uncomfortably hot day.

"Wow." Sookie repeated as we walked towards the bus stop at the other side of the schoolyard.

"I can't believe they lost."

"'s their own damn fault. They got cocky. They haven't trained all week!" She sounded incredible frustrated, even though she wasn't much of a sports fan, basketball in the least. If she wasn't on the field herself, it never really bothered her.

"What are you so pissed off about?"

She shot me a look. "Ye're kidding right? Do ya know what this means? Our days as kings and queens - no pun intended - is over. They're goin' to kill Hunter for missing that shot and blame it on the "gay factor"."

"Surely their eyes have been opened lately. They must know by now Hunter has always been gay, that includes during all the games he won for the team."

"Oh please, like they're that smart. Ya give 'em too much credit."

The bus arrived exactly as we did and Sookie got on. She warned me about returning to school next Monday. I doubted her ominous premonition but she seemed sure there would be another 180 turn amongst the students, backing up her assumption with previous experiences at this school and other's she had attended.

"I hope your wrong." I said with a shrug.

"I'm not."

I had a creeping feeling she wasn't.

The bus took off and I headed back home, my hands deep into my pockets. I walked past the gate to the school yard again and saw people pouring outside in large numbers, being escorted by angry looking teachers. Up ahead I saw a short blonde with his head bowed and his shoulders slumped.

"Aston!" I called.

The blonde turned around and a small smile formed on his lips as he spotted me. I jogged to catch up with him.

"Hey." I said.

"Hey."

We continued walking.

"Where is Hunter?" I asked, looking around us, fighting the awkward silence that threatened to settle between us.

"Still in the dressing room, getting drilled by the coach probably. He told me to leave."

"Oh." I noticed the sullen look on his face. I tried to lighten his mood with one of my famous, carefree smiles, but he didn't even look at me, his eyes traced the outlines of the pavement stones as we walked. "He probably just didn't want you to have to wait."
He shook his head, his hair dancing. "I know what this means. Sookie told me."

I shrugged. "Sookie is a professional pessimist when it comes to stuff like this."

"But she's right..."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"They were proven right tonight. Hunter had been contradicting their beliefs before, making them shut up. But to them, he has just proven that gays are indeed weak and useless and not as much of a man as straight guys are. This school needs a gay guy to prove them wrong and shut them up, but there not going to give Hunter or anyone else a chance again."

"It'll be okay." I said, even as I lost myself in my own dark musings and silently walked at Aston's side till we reached a crossroads and he announced he had to go left where I had to go straight ahead.

"Thanks for trying to cheer me up." He said, unconvinced. "I'll see you Monday."

"Yeah, sure. Have a nice weekend."

He waved halfheartedly and then walked off.

I let out a deep breath, watching him go, watching his head sink between his shoulders again. I felt sorry for him. Not only was his relationship at stake, but his safety at school as well. He must be afraid, I realized. I wasn't, but Aston wasn't a Gundam Pilot who could always secretly enjoy the knowledge that he could floor them whenever he felt like it. And do much worse if when left with no other choice. I walked home slowly, to give myself time to process the game and all of the possible consequences. In a way I was relieved at the possibility that things would be returning to normal. I could handle stares and name-calling and the infrequent kiss with a brick wall or the metal of the lockers lining the walls in the hallways, much better than I could handle the fake compliments they seethed.

"Heero?" I called when I opened the front door. The sky had darkened in the meantime, the apartment was veiled in black shadows. I flicked on the lights when I heard a tired moan. I smiled when I saw Heero lying stretched out on the couch, squinting his eyes at the lamp. I approached him and kneeled next to him on the carpeted floor and leaned my elbows on the cushions by his face. His incredible blue eyes fixed on me. "Hey." I said softly, almost dreamily.

His response was more groggy than romantic, but solidified my smile nevertheless. "Hey."

"We lost." I announced. Knowing he would never inform about it.

"I'm sorry." He said and he was genuine. Losing was something the perfect soldier understood, and hated more than anything else. Even more so than himself.

"That's okay. How long have you been sleeping?"

He considered my question briefly, then answered: "I don't know."

"You've been sleeping a lot lately." I commented, concerned at his lackluster behavior the last few days. He spent most of his time lying on the couch or lying in bed, sleeping or just staring into thin air, with the most pathetic and lost expression on his face. A conflicted face.

"I've been tired a lot lately."
"Why?"

"Because you are as poor of a physical therapist as that other guy."

I chuckled warmheartedly. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." A mischievous twinkle suddenly lit up in his blue orbs and a smirk tugged at one corner of his mouth.

"And why's that?"

"You don't push me."

I leaned in closer to his face, feeling his breath running across my cheek. "Are you going to punch me too?"

His eyes darkened and the smirk melted back into the usual impassive shape of his lips. "I wouldn't do that to you. You know I wouldn't."

"I know." I was quick to say. Before he could lose himself into memories best forgotten, I closed the distance between our lips, locking them together firmly. The kiss was relaxed, almost lazy, our lips moving together slowly and we enjoyed it for a long time till Heero seemed to become dissatisfied with it. I was almost startled when I felt the tip of his tongue touch my lower lip in shy exploration. I repressed a smile and curiously waited for him to take action. I soon felt his fingers lightly and tentatively touch the line of my jaw, but he quickly grew bolder and wrapped his hand strongly around my neck. With his mouth he still lacked confidence, only rarely licking me as he tried to provoke more action out of me.

I couldn't stifle my chuckle, simply endeared by him.

Heero jerked back, big eyes staring at me uncertainly. His hand on the back of my neck slowly slipped away.

I smiled at him reassuringly. Deciding that I had teased him long enough, I cupped the back of his head with one hand and rested my other hand lightly on his chest, causing his breath to hitch. I closed the distance once more, less concerned with waiting him out this time around. Heero took in a deep breath through his nose as I instantly deepened the kiss. I felt the intake of breath along my cheek, heard it and felt his chest rise. His hand returned to the back of my neck, his thumb was poised over my ear, lightly touching it, causing a pleasurable shiver to run down my spine.

My fingers lightly rubbed his chest. When they got caught behind a button, an idea sparked. Being careful not to move too quickly and scare him, I rubbed my fingers near the opening of his shirt between two buttons, cautiously advancing, to give him ample warning of my intentions. He didn't seem to be bothered, he returned my kisses passionately. I pushed three fingers - as much as would fit - through the opening between the buttons, slowly enough for him to stop me should he feel the need to. He did respond to the sudden contact between the pads of my fingers and the sensitive skin of his chest but it was nothing but favorable. He arched up into the touch and for a moment his jaw went slack with the intake of an inaudible gasp.

The loose fit of the button-up shirt - I think it was actually one of mine - allowed for a extensive range of motion across the expanse of his chest and I made good use of that, caressing him with feather light touches, loving his responses, drinking them, becoming addicted to them, wanting to provoke more and more.

My whole body was alight with flames, I felt like they were consuming me, but in a good way. If I
would end in ashes at that moment, I would have been one damn happy gathering of ash.

Feeling bold, empowered by the delightful reactions his body had to my delicate ministrations, I pushed my hand further, towards his side and grazed his right nipple.

Heero groaned, loud enough to hear. It was gravelly and short in surprise. The sound seemed to startle him. His whole body tensed up and he immediately distanced himself from me, retreating his hands and turning his face away. Exactly the opposite of what I wanted him to do.

Afraid of another misstep that was going to set us back, my apology was instant and sincere. I apologized profusely before I had even looked at him. When I did look at his face, the expression was better than I had fearfully expected. Unlike the horror, upset and scared expression that I had observed the last time things went wrong during intimate contact, he mostly just seemed to be ashamed and surprised at himself. His cheekbones were a bright red hue, his whole face had a warm fluster to it, his gaze was cast to the side in embarrassment. His teeth had caught his lower lip, perhaps an attempt to silence his mouth before it betrayed him further; preventing himself from any other possible outcries, unbeknownst to how welcome they were to me.

His embarrassment concerned me. It was so severe it caused him to shy away from me and create a distance with the appearance of being insurmountable. I didn't want him to draw away from me. I didn't want him to feel uncomfortable with me, or with his own body and his sensations and feelings. I longed for him to be able to embrace it all, instead of being scared of it and overwhelmed by it.

Hoping to ease his embarrassment, I said softly: "I love hearing you."

The effect of my - meant to be sweet and comforting - words only seemed to be antagonistic. His cheeks grew redder and his eyes turned away further. His lips became a tense, taut line.

Feeling sad and suddenly cold, I asked him: "Do you want me to stop?" My fingers were still inserted into his shirt, on his bare chest, I didn't even dare to move them, the chill that ghosted over my body froze me solid.

"No."

His answer surprised me, but judging from his eyes which were still turned away, I knew he had more to say and I shouldn't just jump him again. Regardless of how much I desired to do so.

"But maybe we can save some things for next time." He finally looked at me again, when he seemed to have found his strength. The blush left his cheeks.

Though still relentlessly worried and admittedly slightly disappointed, I respected his limits and his assertion of a "next time" made me smile. I pulled my hand out of his shirt and hoped to recapture the mood by initiating a new kiss. Parting briefly, I whispered, with my hot breath running by his ear: "It's okay, we can go slow." I meant it, yet my voice dripped with need, I could not prevent it.

Heero was worrisomely uncooperative at first, keeping his mouth closed, his lips barely moving and his hands to himself. It was obvious he used this physical separation as a continuation of his mental disengagement as he tried to defend himself against feelings of the body and the mind he didn't understand. But his protection - however iron and immovable at first - started to falter.

After a little bit more coaxing, my tongue was finally granted access again and his hands once more encircled the back of my neck as his desire caused him to be bolder.

To keep some progress to the physical interaction, instead of plateauing on the level we had been at
for a while - though enjoyable - I pressed my luck with some traditional "over the sweater action". Stroking my hand up and down his chest and abdomen, feeling the definition of muscles through the fabric. But I was always monitoring his reactions. When he continuously responded positively, I ventured lower, running my hand firmly down his thigh and slipping my hand to his inner thigh and then dragging my hand back up. I never made contact with his groin, but nevertheless it was obvious Heero was enjoying it, writhing on the couch as he returned my kisses distractedly. He was surely making no objections, though - unfortunately - also never encouraging me with any sound whatsoever except for the occasional sharp intake of breath as my hand traveled up his thigh again.

Knowing that what it was, was all it was going to be for a while, I limited my actions to just lazy and comfortable open-mouthed kisses to gently guide us down from our high, allowing for us both to relax and let our bodies return to more "passive" states. Feeling drunk from his kisses I finally parted our lips and I grinned at him. Heero returned a small smile.

I kneeled by the side of the couch for a long time. All we did was breathe in unison, both lost in our own thoughts. My hand idly toyed with a few strands of his chocolate brown hair and he held on to the end of my braid. When I noticed a frown on his face, I questioned: "What is it?"

"I am curious to know whether I am a good kisser." He blurted shamelessly.

I chuckled breathlessly, taken aback by his inquiry. "Why do you want to know?"

He didn't answer. He didn't really have to, I knew the truth. He had be perfect.

"You're an amazing kisser."

He took my comment and processed it privately.

"Am I a good kisser?" I asked playfully. I didn't think I wanted to hear his answer, because I didn't feel like I needed it to feel confident about my kissing, but as soon as my question was out there, I was eager to have it answered. My vanity disappointed me.

Heero was quiet for a while as he seemed to be mentally reviewing my kissing techniques. He eventually concluded: "Though I have no comparison, I presume you to be considered exceptionally skillful."

I laughed. "Exceptionally skillful..." I mused. "I think I'm flattered." I placed a light peck on his lips. "Let's go to bed mister Amazing."

He nodded and accepted my help in getting up from the couch. I switched off the lights and we walked to bedroom through the darkness. Instead of going through the process of changing into nightwear, I simply undressed and slipped under the sheet wearing just my boxers. Heero copied me and I enjoyed the moonlight spotlight on him as he undressed and got into bed in his tight black boxer briefs, smirking like the idiot I was. However distracted I may have been I did notice the stiff movements of his legs and as soon as he had settled I suggested we'd go for a walk the next day to exercise his knee-joint.

"Okay." He simply said.

"Okay." I shook my head, smiling. "Good night Heero. I love you."

Heero turned to lay on his side, his back towards me, but I heard him mumble: "I love you too. Goodnight."
Sleep didn't come easily, it never did. It was expertly elusive, slipping from the grasp of my tired fingers. I tossed and turned under the sheets, torn between delirious happiness and a relentless concern that had lodged itself inside of my heart and I just couldn't shake it. I finally turned to face Heero, staring at his back. As soon as his shoulder had healed enough, he had started sleeping on it again. My eyes traced the elegant long line of his neck and the angles and shapes of his shoulder and bare arm that rested over the sheets, on his side. Barely hidden by the wrinkles of the fine blue fabric was the silhouette of his body, his long legs extending down. My eyes traveled back up his length and settled at the short hairs at the nape of his neck, the base of his deliciously tousled hair. The urge to run my fingers through his hair, sometimes - like that time - became overwhelming. Cupping his head to kiss his face adoringly.

With my lids drooping, my mind started to wander, trailing back down the path of time and then playing back to me, in slow-motion, our making out on the couch. I wished it could always be like that. Just... happier... easier... simple. No need to ravage each other, no need to push boundaries that aren't ready to be relocated yet, but just slow, comfortable progress, tendering my hopefulness. If only I could tell him. Make him understand.

If only it would matter.

The soldier was a worthy opponent to the will of the God of Death, with a firm stubbornness that could withstand tidal waves. There was no making the soldier surrender, no making him kneel. Heero would have to kill him, himself.

Finally sleep became so urgent, my body shut itself down and didn't boot itself up again till morning, later than I was used to. I rubbed my eyes, they seemed to be burning. With a soft touch to his exposed shoulder I woke Heero, to give us both plenty of time to prepare for our scheduled walk. Looking at his face as his eyes fluttered open, I wondered how someone as plagued by demons as Heero was, could sleep so soundly. But I thanked for this one kind blessing that was granted him. I stole a light kiss from his high cheekbone and told him I'd take a shower first.

Standing behind the relative privacy of the frosted shower curtain, I became uncharacteristically self-conscious when Heero joined me in the bathroom and washed his face at the sink. I could see him through the curtain, still only wearing those tight boxer briefs. They were both a blessing and a curse. I turned away a little bit, adjusting my body to face the wall, scared that even through the curtain he would be able to make out the embarrassing silhouette of my body in a state of "morning glory".

I rushed through my shower after turning the temperature to freezing and made way for Heero to take his shower. While I shaved and brushed my teeth at the sink, I was stealing shameless sideway glances. Even blurred his naked body had no equivalent.

At breakfast we were both mostly quiet; I fussed over a razor cut on my jaw line, ignoring his single, oblivious question to what could have possibly distracted me enough to so carelessly cut myself. After I was done feeling sorry for myself I tried to playfully engage him in a game of footsie, but at the initial touch he just looked up at me with his trademark questioning frown, with the addition of a monotone: "What?"

I withdrew my foot and brushed it off as an accident.

I announced our departure shortly after, hoping to leave the awkward atmosphere behind in the apartment, at which point in time an argument ensued about the crutch. Heero didn't want to bring it with him because he had been doing fine without it lately and didn't want to take a step back, but I insisted on it in case he would get tired or the joint would become agitated from over-exertion.
The discussion in which my rationality battled his came to an abrupt end when I burst into laughter and exclaimed at his shocked and confused face: "We are like an old married couple!"

I noticed from the expression on his face that he didn't think that was a bad thing. I abused his stunned frozen state to steal another kiss and then we left. Heero seemed content to engage in an encore of the argument, but I disregarded all comments and took the crutch with me, ignoring angry glares sent my way through the reflective surface of the elevator doors.

The weather was perfect for a laid back scroll. It was warm, but not as hot and humid as it had been recently. The sky was a little grayish, clouds combating the rays of the sun successfully. I enjoyed the breeze that teased the branches and my braid. I remained focused on Heero's movements, noting how he reacted to every step we took. It was a relaxed walk, we didn't say much to each other but I didn't feel the need to share words, it was a good silence. It was almost as if in the silent more was being said than words could ever manage.

We entered the park and I appreciated the way the strong rays which had fought their way through the clouds filtered through the leaves of the tall trees. Stepping into the grass to take a detour off the path, figuring the soft grass would be more forgiving to Heero's footfall than gravel, I searched for his hand and when my fingers encountered his in the endless space they took a firm hold of him, as if my digits were trying to communicate that I would never let him go.

I felt him looking at me, but I stubbornly refused eye contact, just smirking as we walked on. When I noticed he was getting tired and his knee getting sore, I sat us down on an idyllic bench wrapped around the base of an impossibly large tree. I looked up at the branches and exclaimed with youthful surprise: "Look a squirrel!" I followed it with my pointed finger and my gaze till it climbed higher and higher and finally jumped onto a branch out of sight. "Why didn't you look?" I asked, as he obviously hadn't.

He looked at me with a slight frown. "I know what squirrels look like."

I scoffed. "You're no fun." I mocked.

"Sorry." Heero uttered morosely.

I sighed. "I didn't mean it like that. I was joking."

He didn't say anything and neither did I. We just sat under the tree and both found our own points of interest in the scenery to focus on. I stared up for a while longer, searching for the damn little rodent, but finally accepted that it was gone and let my eyes wander to the other people in the park. My gaze settled on an old couple walking down the path, hand in hand. I squeezed Heero's hand - which I was still holding - briefly. He looked at me with a frown and I told him, nodding towards the couple: "That's going to be us, sixty years from now."

Heero squinted at the old man and woman, slowly making their way through the park. The woman held a plastic bag that appeared to be filled with bread, leading to the conclusion that they were going to feed the ducks that always flocked in the large pond that was included in the park.

"I highly doubt it." Heero stated.

"Why?"

"Neither of us is a woman and as far as I know neither of us is planning to become one."

I laughed, very hard and I saw the couple look at me in surprise before continuing along their way. Once I was done laughing - but it did take a while - I turned to him and said teasingly: "You
cracked a joke. That was really funny."

Heero shook his head and then used his free hand to brush a lock of hair out of his eyes. "I wasn't joking. I just stated the truth. But I guess, sometimes, the truth can be funny."

I chuckled and then leaned in for a short kiss. I had to suppress the urge to make the contact more intimate, I heard children playing in the background, I didn't want to scar them for life.

We enjoyed the park and each other's quiet company for a little while longer. Scrutinizing pedestrians and their dogs as they walked by, like a runway showcasing life. One of the dogs that was off it's leash approached us with a happily wagging tail. The dog was beautiful, a near white golden retriever with a feathery tail and bright expression. It made a beeline towards Heero who froze up, his whole body became incredibly tense, so much so that I could see his jaw clenching and the tendons in his neck were standing out. Being experts in body language the dog quickly directed it's attention towards me and I rewarded her kind and gentle demeanor by petting her on her head.

The owner, a man in his mid forties, jogged towards us and apologized for the dog, apparently named Diem.

"That's okay, it's a very sweet dog." I said, petting her a final time.

"She is." The man said, he called her and she detached herself from me and walked back to him. The man looked at Heero, sympathetic. As he leaned down and petted his dog, he said: "Don't worry, you don't have to be afraid of her, she really does no harm." Obviously Heero didn't respond, so the man continued to me: "I'm really sorry, we were in the dog park but some idiot left the gate open. I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to scare your friend. Bye. Come on, Diem." He attached the leash to her collar and walked away with her.

I leaned in towards Heero, making our shoulders touch lightly. "Are you okay?" I whispered in his ear.

Heero nodded curtly, but remained stiff.

"Sure?"

He nodded again.

Deciding not to pry and storing my curiosity for later reflection, I gave up and suggested we headed back home.

This time he shook his head and said: "We could go a little further." The lack of emotion in the tone of his voice was chilling, all of Florida seemed to frost over and the breeze that had felt so comfortable now stung my skin with cold.

"Heero, you shouldn't push yourself." I tried, keeping my voice calm and reasonable, knowing nothing less could ever convince him of anything. "Your leg is already sore and we still have to walk all the way back."

Heero stood up, I caught the wince as he put weight on the leg that was already stressed enough for today. "We can go further. I can walk through the pain." He gave me a challenging look, his eyes were shadowing by his frowning brows.

I rose to my feet as well, trying to intimidate him with my height. Of course that was in vain, his glare never wavered. "We're going back." I announced firmly. "You've done enough for today. If
"You're in pain we have to stop."

"Pain is never a good reason to stop." Heero scoffed and continued to argue stubbornly: "I can push through the pain, it's nothing." He turned away from me and started to walk, in the opposite direction that I wanted us to be heading.

In my stunned and confused state I allowed him to take a few steps away from me but then I furrowed my own brows and something in me clicked and it was decided: No, becoming angry and impatient with his childish stubborn attitude it took merely three large strides to catch up with him. I grabbed him by his shoulders, always being mindful of the injuries he had sustained and turned him around to face me. One determined expression met the other. "Stop this." I told him.

"Stop what?" He spat.

"This!" I let go of his shoulders to gesture in general at his stiff stance and immovable demeanor. "This soldier stuff! Stop being the perfect soldier. I'm not stupid, I saw what just happened here. Something about that dog upset you and now your are retreating back into the soldier routine." I gazed deeply into his eyes, but he fought hard and successfully to keep me out and to keep me from seeing anything other than my own reflection in the brilliant blue. "I want you to stop doing that, that's not you. You don't have to be like that anymore. This isn't wartime, you don't have to walk with a broken foot, you don't have to climb a wall with a dislocated soldier, you don't have to fire a gun with frost bitten fingers! This is peacetime! When you hurt yourself, you don't power through it, you slow down so you can heal properly..."

Heero's eyes were wide and incredulous, his breath came in short pants. I couldn't tell if he was scared or angry.

"I know it's easier to be the soldier," I continued in a softer tone, "but you never did things just because they are easy. You are strong enough to do the difficult stuff. Please..."

He was quietly contemplative, finally his face seemed to relax and a kindness returned to his eyes, something I had grown too fond of to ever go without again. In a softer tone he agreed: "Fine, we'll go back."

That was all he said, so we just started walking back home.

On the way home I wondered what had just happened. It all happened so quickly, I feared I may have missed something that I shouldn't have. I hoped I hadn't been too harsh on him, but it was painful to see our peaceful moment be interrupted by the person I hated the most - the person Heero couldn't let go of. Each time he got like that, each time his eyes shaded over, each time his face went blank, each time his fists were balled and white knuckled at his side, I hurt.

Once we were back at the apartment Heero resumed his recent habit of sleeping more than he needed by crawling into bed, as always facing the wall. I remained in the living room, in absolute solitude, rotating through the many channels but finding nothing interesting enough distract me from my thoughts. In spite of my best efforts, the situation seemed to have stagnated and every push forward was like trying to push a greasy boulder up a mossy hill. Heero had no grip on normal life whatsoever, but I wasn't that much better. I could dig my heels into the hillside as much as I wanted, I still felt like the weight of it all had me slipping. If I believed this method would eventually get us to the top, I would tirelessly continue, my strength would never waver in this regard, but I was unconvinced. Something had to change, that something being both of us. Heero had to find a way to shake the dead weight of the soldier, but first had to find the will to let go of him. I had to find a way to guide and direct him, taking him by the hand and asking him to come along, in stead of digging my hands into his back and shoving him forward while he is resisting my
He emerged late in the afternoon and I made him an overdue lunch, not because he needed me to, but because I wanted to. That creeping feeling of needing to be needed. When I set the plate in front of him, he promptly spoke, without any apparent emotion: "I don't want you to be angry with me."

I offered him a small smile. "I'm not angry. I'm just scared." My honesty frightened even myself.

He took his first bite of his lavish peanut butter sandwich and then inquired curiously: "Scared?"

I chuckled sheepishly and rubbed the back of my neck. "I don't quite know how to explain... I guess... I guess I'm just afraid that you are too uncomfortable with yourself to ever truly be yourself. And I'd hate that." I sighed deeply and pulled out a chair across from him. My body felt heavy as I seated it, but the chair never complained.

He thought about what I said for a long time, finishing his lunch. He didn't say anything to assure me, to ease my concern. He probably still had a lot to figure out for himself. I wondered if either us even knew who the true Heero Yuy was. Perhaps he was lost in all the identities Heero Yuy was ordered to be, overwhelmed by every new layer of soldier he was required to be. I just hoped we could figure out the answer together and that the answer didn't include the extreme and reclusive ways of the perfect soldier. But how many layers were there to strip away? And what is left underneath, shivering in vulnerability?

I lost myself in a dark premonition of a future I wanted to take no part of. I needed to find middle ground between the perfect soldier and an empty shell. I knew Heero was in there, he had shown me, he had reached out for me, but was he too infused with the characteristics of the soldier to survive the extraction of him?

I stared at him and Heero stared back, both our faces unreadable I imagine. My eyes studied his features, the delicate angle of his nose, the arch of the eyebrows and the few scattered hairs, the fullness of his lips, the playfulness of his bangs and the harsh reality of his burnt ear. I didn't need to look at him to recognize how desperately I was in love with him, my very soul felt tied to his, but the bonds with which I carried his weight were cutting into me.

"I just want you to be you." I whispered.

Heero blinked away whatever it was he didn't want me to see in his cobalt orbs. "I just want to be normal."

I pursed my lips and lowered my brows. "You'd be selling yourself short."

He looked away, down at the grain of the table.

Noticing a flicker and running with it, I asked: "What are you afraid of?"

When he looked at me, his expression was blank, all emotions was contained, secretly stowed away. "I don't like me very much."

"You don't know that." I was quick to say. "You don't see what I see when you let go of the soldier attitude. That is the real you and I like him very much." I offered a smile.

"Please," he said and his expression reflected his plea, "just make me normal."

I frowned. "I don't know what you mean by that..."
"I want to do what normal people do and I want to feel what normal people feel. I want to experience... things." His voice carried a wistful innocence that never seemed to be fitting for him, but strangely, in a way, it was.

"Okay." I instantly agreed, reaching for him to feel his fingers were cold and clammy. "We'll do normal things. Whatever you want."

His mind drew a blank, he tried to pull his fingers away but I wouldn't let him. He became uncomfortable in his seat, feeling like he was being tested. "I don't know..." He uttered in frustration.

"Just tell me what you want to... experience..." A smile crept to my lips even though maybe I shouldn't have let it. Former Gundam Pilot or not, my mind worked like that of any other hot blooded teenager.

His answer couldn't have made me happier. "I want... I want to experience what normal couples experience." He seemed to have retrieved his characteristic determination, he even finished his admission with a curt, definitive nod.

Just to have him acknowledge that we were a couple I considered a milestone in and of itself, but the possibilities that his request posed especially piqued my interest. I could almost hear a click as I told myself to shut off some of the more primal suggestions that sprung to mind and the next most logical option blurted past my lips.

"We could go on a date."

He looked at me like I had just used a word that wasn't readily accepted in the English language and carried no clear, specific meaning to him. However more apparently daunting the task before me became witnessing his obvious lack of knowledge, it was endearing and drew a chuckle forth from me.

"You don't know what a date is?"

Maybe I should have kept the mocking tone to my voice in check, he became stiff and defensive as he replied: "I know of dating. It's just that exploring the concept has never seemed relevant, so I may not be aware of the finer details."

I winked at him as I retorted: "Would you like to explore the concept with me?"

"Are you asking me if I want to go out on a date with you?"

"Yes, Captain Obvious."

He seemed insecure. "Will you tell me what to do?"

I smiled. "No. I'll take you and then you can do whatever you want to."

"How will I know if I'm doing it right?"

I smirked. "I'm sure you'll figure something out." I paused briefly before pressing on: "So?"

He shrugged, but however disinterest his body language portrayed him to be, his eyes belied his curiosity. Then his voice became a traitor too: "What will we be doing?"

My turn to shrug, I hadn't given it much thought yet and I realized I had never been on a date
myself, but perhaps that was what was so perfect about it, doing something that we were both unfamiliar with and exploring it together, along with ourselves and each other. "I don't know. Have dinner, go see a movie?"

"We do that all the time." He stated dryly.

I chuckled and reached out across the table to hold his hand. "I know, but on a date it will be different, we would go eat in a restaurant and watch a movie at the theatre."

The prospect seemed to intimidate him, but after thinking it through carefully and lengthily, he consented.

"Great. We'll go out tomorrow, I'll take care of everything." I was excited, as I imagined all normal guys my age to be when the person you can't stop thinking about agrees to go on a date. "We'll just have dinner. We're going to take this slow, remember?"

He didn't respond to my smile nor my words.

Before lazily ordering dinner over the telephone, I called a restaurant that I passed everyday on my way to school and made reservations for two. The man specified whether it concerned a romantic dinner and with a strange, nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach, I confirmed and in turn was assured a romantic table. I briefly wondered what the reactions would be when two young men would show up to claim that special, romantic table, but I pushed the thought away.

During dinner - pizza boxes in our laps in front of the tv - Heero verified, out of the blue: "So this isn't a date?"

I chuckled, covering my mouth with my hand. "No." I said once I had had the opportunity to swallow the large bite of pizza.

"Even though there is food and a movie involved?" He seemed genuinely confused at the concept and frustrated that he couldn't grasp it.

"Well, this is just about eating and enjoying a movie," I gestured at the screen where Indiana Jones fumbled his way out of a hazardous situation, "on a date it's not about the food, nor the movie. It's about enjoying each other."

My poor explanation only added further confusion to his state of mind. His brows furrowed. "If it's not about the food or the movie, why do you pay so much more for them than you usually do?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it's just to show your appreciation of someone. Like when you give someone a gift."

Heero sighed and seemed to be giving up on understanding the ritual of dating. He ate his pizza, slowly, still not enjoying the taste of the combination of all the different ingredients. I watched him, somewhat bemused, as he fought with the stringy cheese. I was looking forward to our date, with an appropriate amount of nervousness and anticipation, which I attributed to nothing other than my own inexperience in the field of romantics, even though I had mastered the expertise of pretending to be an expert. I scolded myself for not coming up with the idea sooner, it seemed so logical - in hindsight - for us to attempt a date in our quest for normality. With all my bundled nervousness and excitement I never felt more normal; more like the adolescent male that I sometimes forget I am.

As much as I had been opposing Heero's desire to achieve normality, it seemed this time his decisiveness had sparked a good idea, possibly a solution to the strain that was wearing on the both
of us. Naively and childishly I hoped this date would make everything okay. The part of me that refused to know better, believed a miracle could happen and somehow everything would turn out perfect and we would not be normal, but just be us. The idea was infectious, spreading through me, possibly false hope in it's wake.

After dinner I cleaned up, endeared by Heero's help even though I could walk to the kitchen and back three times in the time it took him to reach the counter just once. I knew we had pushed it too far today. There was a reason the physical therapist had set such an agonizingly slow pace. He hadn't done it just for the sake of bothering Heero, though obviously he seemed to think so. The bones, tendons and muscles were badly damaged by the penetration of the metal shard and the dislocation of the knee cap. Heero may be willing to accept pain as an inevitable part of his life, something to be dealt with in silence, without complaints, but I wasn't as accepting. Quite the contrary, I wanted him to enjoy a life free of pain, he had suffered enough already.

"Thanks for the help, buddy." I said, waiting by the sink for him to hand me the final glass. "I'll just rinse this and then we'll go to bed."

"It's nine thirty..." Heero stated dryly.

"So? I'm tired and you need to get off your feet." I washed the glass and then ushered him to the bedroom, turning off the lights behind us. Maybe Heero finally agreed with my logic, he didn't argue with me. We undressed together in the confinement of the modest bedroom, using the space between our two beds. I had my back turned towards him, pretending to be ignoring his presence, but in truth I was hyper aware of the position of his limbs in space and sometimes I could even swear I felt his breath on my bare back as I changed into a loose night shirt. I crawled under the sheets, settling into bed, inspecting the ceiling until I could verify from the corners of my eyes that the show was over and he was covered by his own bed sheets. I turned my head and saw him staring up at the ceiling as well.

"Regret it yet?" I teased, but with a hint of curious uncertainty.

"What?"

"Agreeing to go on a date with me."

He frowned, he brought his hands up from under the sheets, placing them on his chest with the fingers entwined. "Should I?" He finally countered.

"Of course not, I'm awesome." I joked and my heart warmed when a brief smile took to his lips. It made the frost that swept through my heart moments later, seem even colder, as he successfully suppressed what could have been a beautiful smile, like the one I had seen at Relena's pretentious ball. Some of it melted away when he said absentmindedly:

"Yes, you are."

"Thanks." Big grin. "So are you."

He didn't believe me, questioned the reliability of my statement, all he ever did was reshape the frown, less confused, more angry and frustrated, with himself.

I rolled over, deciding I didn't want to see his conflicted face anymore that evening, and switched off the light. The image was already etched into my retina, and imprinted into my brain. I knew what it would take to erase these scratchy, heart wrenching drawings; a smile, I just didn't know how to create the smile. "Good night Heero," I said as darkness enveloped us.
"Good night. I love you."

I sighed softly, it was good to hear him say it first. "I love you too." I turned to my favorite side to sleep on - the position from which I could watch Heero - and remembered how I used to gag during movies when the characters got all sappy and caught up in clichéd romantics, so cliché, it wasn't even romantic anymore. I laughed with the Sweeper crew and threw buttered popcorn at the screen at every slowly initiated, innocently performed and lingeringly ended kiss. To myself I had bitterly thought; "real life isn't like that". Now I realized real life is even worse than that. You can laugh at the screen, mock the protagonist, but in real life there was this dire need for the clichés and the only ones who were in on that secret where the screenplay writers. In real life, you're swept off your feet, completely unprepared, when you hear that first "I love", or "I want to be with you forever", because what follows is no sarcastic snort, or bantering scoff, it's an epiphany, a damn scary one: you need that expression on tape and rewind it over and over again.

You become instantly dependent, addicted even.

"I love you." I said through my musings, even though we had already said it. I just felt like it couldn't be said often enough, as much as it couldn't be heard often enough.

Instead of berating me for the double sentiment, Heero just replied with his calm and steady voice: "I love you too." No judgment of my vulnerability, but rather; a mirror image of it.

Sleep killed my consciousness with merciful expedition and a dreamless state of peace ensued.

The Sunday lasted infinitely. My whole day evolved around my first date. Heero didn't seem to be too caught up in any form of excitement, nor did he pay much attention to mine, aside from arching his eyebrow and drawing his eyes away from the nature special on TV to watch me run around the house like a headless chicken. But I was just being a mothering hen, to myself for once. I did the things that I imagined a mother would do for her son in preparations for his first date, arranging clothes and fussing mostly. Standing in front of my closet as evening drew nearer, holding up a bold red button up shirt to a favorite black one, I realized something and with the two colored fabrics draping behind me I left for the living room.

Heero hardly seemed particularly enthralled by the Wildlife marathon on TV, but I supposed if I ever pointed out a lion, a hippo or a wildebeest, he wouldn't look, because he "already knew what they looked like". He sure did seemed to be intently studying them.

"Heero?" I called after a while, surprisingly going unnoticed by the normally ever-alert ex-soldier.

He looked at me and then frowned at the two shirts I was holding up.

"What are you going to wear?"

He eyed me a little while longer and then pointedly, but with a hint of hesitation, looked down at himself, his comfortable jeans and loose, grey sweater.

I knitted my brows together. "I feared as much." I helped him off the couch and escorted him to the bedroom, where I sat him down on my bed, from where he had a good view into the wide open closet and I started pulling shirts and pants that neared the appropriate dress code.

The pants were quickly decided, black slacks much like the ones he wore to work, he looked devilishly good in them. Heero was just along for the ride, too uncertain to speak, fearful of belying his lack of expertise.

My hands searched the neat stacks of folded clothes - folded with military precision - and when
they wondered over a certain item, I knew the right choice had been made. It was at the bottom of the pile, he had never worn it because it wasn't very inconspicuous, as in; he looked so hot in it no one could stop looking at him. I pulled out the article of clothing and held it in front of him, the color of the button up shirt was a perfect match to the electric blue shade that dominated his eyes and merged the icy blue of the center with the dark cobalt of the perimeter. I shamelessly used the moment to not only appreciate the shirt and remembering how good he looked in it when he tried it on at the store, but also to find new appreciation for his stunning irises.

Heero grew uncomfortable with the scrutiny and directed his gaze to the shirt. It didn't seem like he was going to agree to wear it, droning the usual objections, but he surprised me by not saying anything, he just took the shirt from my hands and placed it over the pants we had already draped across my bed. He looked back up at me, seeking confirmation.

"Do you like it?"

"That seems rather irrelevant." He stated in his regular monotone, "I'm not the one who has to look at it all evening."

I guess in his own distorted way he was telling me the decision was mine and perhaps there was some reason to his conclusion. I smiled and said I would love to look at him all evening wearing that. Realizing his logic should apply in the opposite direction as well, I held up the two shirts that I had still been dangling at my sides loosely. "You're the one who has to look at me all night." I noted with a smirk.

The choice was daunting to him, I could read it clearly on his face. "I'm not familiar with what is appropriate attire and what is not." He tried.

"They're both appropriate. Pick one." He kept his mouth firmly shut.

"There is no right or wrong answer Heero." I assured him. "Just pick whichever you like best."

"Black." He hastily mumbled and then looked like he wished I hadn't heard him. "I like you in black..."

Making sure not to make a big deal out of it and add to his discomfort, I just said: "Good choice. Black it is." And I folded the red shirt and put it away. "The shower is free if you want."

He nodded and left to wash himself.

I changed in the bedroom, occasionally peeking around the corner to allow my eyes to soak up the silhouette of his naked body, burdening my mind with the trouble of pushing naughty thoughts away. The largest part of me wanted to walk into the steam filled space of the bathroom, rip the curtain away and join him under the warm stream, fully dressed or not. But thankfully the wiser part of me reigned and controlled those unspoken urges.

Whereas the day had been crawling, the evening moved swiftly and by the time Heero finished his shower, I knew we might have to rush to make the time I had set for our reservation.

He emerged from the bathroom with his body dried and dressed in clean underwear, but his hair was still soaking wet. He was unwilling to admit it, but his shoulder still did not allow for full range of motion and he couldn't hold his arm above his head long enough to sufficiently dry his unruly hair. I snatched a small fresh towel from the linen closet and ordered him to sit down on his bed, angled away from me. I placed one knee on the mattress to help balance myself as I draped
the small towel over his wet hair and started rubbing it, chuckling under my breath as I did so.

"Not funny." Heero muttered, pouted almost.

"Sorry." But my chuckles just grew louder. "Sorry." I said again and then managed to keep quiet.

I let him be as he got dressed as soon as his hair was only damp and there was no threat of him getting a huge wet spot on the back of his shirt. I watched him as he diligently tucked the blue shirt into his slacks and as soon as he was finished I approached him with a smirk and untucked it, my fingers sometimes brushing his bare skin, sending electric surges down my spine. With my face close to his, my eyes staring into him, reading the question in the blue, I explained teasingly: "It's the difference between date night and game night."

He didn't understand what that meant, I'm not even sure I did myself, I just knew he looked better with the shirt untucked. I kissed him lightly and told him he looked hot. I'd swear his cheeks became redder than they normally are. He refused my proposal of calling for a taxi, reminding me I had told him so myself that the restaurant was just around the corner. I shared with him a concerned look, openly expressing my worry for his lasting injury, but he brushed it off and decided we would be walking. I didn't want to ruin the date before it had even started by getting into a discussion, so I let him get away with it.

In the cooling air we walked down the street. I had set the pace, glacially slow. Neither of us said anything, I guess we were both running through our expectations of the evening.

"This is it." I said and stopped in front of double glass doors to a small restaurant, standing underneath curling bronze letters that read: Levata del Sole.

"Sunrise?" Heero wondered, squinting at the letters.

"If you say so." I joked. "I can barely read English." I opened the door and gestured him to enter.

Once we had crossed the threshold, a waiter with a friendly face hurried towards us and greeted us with an appropriate "Buona sera". "Did you make reservations?" He questions, approaching a small desk by the entry and flipping through a planner.

"Yes. Maxwell."

His forefinger trailed the names on the paper. He halted at my name and followed the line to our reservation details. He briefly looked up, his eyes darted towards Heero, standing next to me. If there existed any objections in his mind, he politely did not voice nor show them. His professional smile never wavered and he showed us our table, lighting the candle at the center as we sat down. "I will bring you the menu shortly." He made a curt bow and then scurried off.

In the restaurant there was a nice atmosphere, the space was filled with the indistinct murmur of many voices merging together, the coherency of individual conversation lost in the incoherency of the crowd. The lighting was soft, aside from some additional lights on the walls, candles did most of the work, flickering in the breeze each time the door opened to welcome new guests. The restaurant was furnished with simple wooden tables and chairs, covered with crisp white linen and decorated with blossoming roses and a candle on each table. What made our table special, I supposed, was the seclusion of it, located right beside the closed off annex of the front door and the next table was far off due to a support pillar. A perfect place for private conversation, stolen looks and secretive footsie under the table. In a way I feared this great table was lost on us.

"Sunrise." Heero said.
I tore my eyes away from the gathering crowd to look at him and noticed him staring at the wall behind me. I turned in my seat to follow his gaze. On the wall behind me was a large painting of an idyllic landscape, flowing grassy hills, dotted with tall, green trees and in the backdrop, silhouetted by the brilliantly rising sun, was the shape of an ancient church; the house of God amidst the glory of mother Nature. The painting must be very old, or the artist deliberately let out the antennas and electric cables that dotted all of the inhabited world.

"It's nice." I commented, straightening myself in my seat.

The waiter returned holding two leather bound menus. "Signore" he addressed us both with as he handed us the menus.

"Thank you." I whispered upon receiving, feeling somewhat uncomfortable to be spoken to in Italian when I didn't speak a single word of the language. We were quick to order, we knew what we liked. As the waiter took back the leather booklets, he offered us something to drink.

"Water." Heero said.

"For me too and a bottle of red wine please."

"Si, signore."

As soon as the waiter had left the side of our table Heero leaned in and asked me: "Why is he speaking Italian to us?"

I shrugged. "It's just part of the atmosphere, part of the fantasy."

"Fantasy?"

"Yeah, Italy is romantic, they want their patrons to feel like they are in Italy."

"That is stupid." Heero commented.

I chuckled. "Yeah. Maybe. It works though." I mused, scanning the crowd with mischievous eyes, consisting solely of couples - man and woman, mind you - who stared adoringly into each other's eyes and reached out across the tables to hold each other's hands.

"What do you mean it works? How is it supposed to work?"

I hoped the soft lighting of the candles veiled my blush as I replied: "It's supposed to get you laid. Many guys use the ritual of dating only as foreplay for the woman. A candle lit dinner, a fine wine, sweet nothings whispered into her ears and before she knows it she's on her back with her heels in the air."

Heero blinked away his perplexity and looked around the restaurant. "Oh." He uttered.

I extended my arm across the table and gently lay my hands over Heero, causing him to look back at me. With honest eyes and voice I assured him: "I didn't mean... I'm not one of those guys."

Heero snorted, retreating his hand into his lap. "I'm not one of those girls."

I laughed, the sound almost seemed to startle him at first, but then a smile tugged at the corners of his own lips and he let out a single chuckle which even he could not suppress.

The waiter joined us again and handed us both a glass of water as well as presented a bottle of wine, I tuned out the specifics and tentatively gave it try when he poured a small amount into my
"It's good."

He proceeded to pour the red liquid into both our wine glasses, generous amounts and then excused himself.

"Try it." I urged Heero. "I think you'll like it better than beer."

"Is it custom to drink alcohol on a date?" He questioned in his never ending search for normality.

"Sort of. It makes people feel more relaxed and instead of being nervous, they can just be themselves."

Heero nodded and placed the glass at his lips cautiously and gave me one last questioning look which I answered with an affirming nod. He took a tiny sip and a long time to evaluate the taste. Finally, he concluded: "It is good." and he took another sip before putting the glass away.

As our dinner was being prepared in the kitchen, I carefully ventured into conversation, but all my attempts at small talk were in vain, provoking no more than the occasional "yes", "no" or the dreaded, ambiguous "hn". Knowing that in order to succeed, I would have to opt for a topic of more relevance, I asked him bluntly: "How is therapy going."

He frowned, almost accusingly. "You know how therapy is going."

"I mean... how do you feel about it? Do you think it's working?"

The answer was in his eyes but his mouth contradicted the forlorn expression. "I guess."

"Yeah?"

He looked up at me hopelessly and admitted with a grimace. "No, not really."

I sighed, but managed to offer him a uplifting smile. "That's okay. You'll get there. Does Nettle ever comment about your progress?"

We kept quiet as the waiter interrupted us to present us with two plates skillfully balanced on one arm. He placed our dinners in front of us and wished us a delicious meal, before he retreated with a small bow. The silence reigned as we took our first bite. I enjoyed the taste but it all seemed to be bland to Heero. At least he did seem to honestly appreciate the wine. He sipped it steadily. When he finished it the waiter returned to wordlessly refill his glass and disappear again, finally, he seemed ready to talk, perhaps more assured we wouldn't be disturbed again.

"She doesn't say much about that. She is quite vague." He was obviously displeased.

"She's just being professional." I assumed, not really knowing.

"Why are you standing up for her, you don't even like her."

"I have to keep hope that she can help you."

He reached for his wine again, he seemed to be hiding behind it, occupying himself with it.

"We can talk about something else if it's making you uncomfortable." I suggested, taking a large swig of the alcoholic beverage myself. When he didn't respond, I decided, perhaps unwisely, to stick to the subject and press on. "Did you talk to Une? Did she make any specifications."
"She says I can't go back in the field while I'm still unstable. And that is up to Nettle to judge." He responded candidly. "She did offer me a desk job for the time being."

I smirked and bantered: "So she's actually giving you the job I always thought you already had."

My joke fell flat, Heero seemed to shrink in his seat and I realized we were headed down the wrong road, traveling faster than the speed limit. Still, I had to ask, for I had to know: "When Nettle clears you, do you want to be an active agent again?"

Heero looked at me intently. "What do you want?"

"I don't know. But it doesn't matter, you have to decide."

He gazed down at his plate, moving some of the pasta around with his fork. "I don't know either."

Silence fell between us like a brick being dropped on the table. In a desperate attempt to salvage the situation I mused aloud: 'I'm curious to see how school will be tomorrow."

He must have picked up on my very unsubtle change of topic, but he went along with it. "Why?"

"Sookie and Aston are convinced things will go back to the way they were before Hunter came out. I guess to an extent I agree with them. They didn't all of a sudden sign up for PFLAG just because Hunter got honest about being on the down low, they just went along with it because he has their respect. Now that he has lost that respect, I guess it's reasonable to assume things will change, but I hope it will be a case of two steps forward, one step back, rather than vice versa." I halted when I noticed Heero's frown. "What?"

"Many things you've just said I don't understand... PFLAG? ... Down... low? Came out?"

I chuckled. "Never mind, it's not important."

He looked at me pointedly, like he had caught me in a lie. "It is important to you. I want to know."

"Okay," I started with a smile, "PFLAG is an organization that is supportive of the gay community and being on the down low means that your are secretly gay and coming out is a way of saying that someone got honest about his or her homosexuality."

He nodded, carefully registering all the information. He watched the waiter intently as he returned for another refill and once he had left, Heero curiously asked: "When did you come out?"

I shrugged. "I didn't. I didn't even know for sure I was gay till we started living together. When I realized that I was, wholeheartedly, gay," I winked at him, reveling in his openly surprised expression, "there was no one to come out to. Only Sookie but... she practically knew before I did."

"How did you come to realize it?" He innocently asked.

"I fell in love with you. I didn't know how to tell if I was gay or not, but I did know the symptoms of love... thinking about you constantly, never wanting to take my eyes off you, feeling complete just when you look at me, being electrified when you touch me..." I trailed on dreamily. "What about you?"

He considered my question for a long time, before answering: "I never really thought much about being gay or straight, I always saw myself as... asexual. I didn't feel those things you said for anyone." He frowned. "But now I do. For you."

I smiled in relief. "I'm glad."
"So I guess I'm gay." He said unsurely, as if he had just figured it out.

"I guess you are..." I paused for a moment, studying his features, but they were unreadable. "Does that bother you?"

His answer was immediate, but soft. "No." The was a shy, tiny smile on his lips, barely visible as he tilted his head down to hide it and cover his eyes with his messy bangs. "I'm just happy to feel. Happy they couldn't take that away from me."

I reached out and gently took hold of his chin with my fingers, angling his face up to look at me. "And that makes you the strongest person I have ever met. You, not the soldier." I emphasized.

Heero let out a breathy, sheepish chuckle, one not of happiness but of nervousness.

Knowing that all I could do was convince him of what I thought of him and not what he thought of himself, I let the topic slide, but hoped the sympathetic look in my eyes communicated all he needed to know. Conversation was sustained as the evening progressed. I was mostly the one to talk, but Heero attentively listened and that was something in itself. I steered clear of the heavier topics, even as I realized along the way, that that didn't leave me with much to address. I discussed random nothings, infrequently provoking a reaction from him. After a while we didn't even stall the conversation anymore when the waiter came by our table for our refills.

The restaurant started emptying out, people dripping away in a steady pace. As I drank more, I became more talkative, as Heero drank more, he became - if possible - even more quiet and withdrawn. He appeared lost in the depth of his own thought, less and less interested in the interaction, as opposed to his behavior earlier. Maybe amongst the meaningless blabber, I had said something that got him thinking? Whatever the origin of his train of thought, it seemed to rampage through him uncontrollably and it overwhelmed him. Occasionally he looked over his shoulder, to watch yet another couple leave hand in hand and when he turned back he only looked more dazed.

I wondered if he was nervous or confused about certain expectations he thought I might have had concerning this date.

I touched his hand lightly and watched his glazed eyes focus on me. "Let's go home." I suggested. "You look... tired." Tired wasn't quite the word, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

He nodded and we both got up. I told him to wait by the door while I searched for our waiter to pay for our dinner with Heero's credit card, which had somehow found it's way into my wallet one day and Heero had never asked back for it. It would probably never cease to be uncomfortable to pay with the money Heero earned in relation to "The lie" - as I ominously referred it to - but I had accepted it as something I could not change, not yet, not while I was in school.

The waiter produced the check for me and I briefly glanced it over. I raised my eyebrows at the price of the wine, whistling. "You could have warned me about the wine." I said halfheartedly. "I didn't know it was that expensive."

"It wasn't." The waiter explained as he swiped the credit card. "You just had a lot of it."

I frowned. "I thought I only had three glasses." I mused aloud. I could feel the effect of the alcohol, but, after living with the Sweeper crew for long enough to know that they knew how to party, I wasn't anywhere near intoxicated. If I had had more, I would have known, I would have felt more. Or rather: less.

The waiter fought a smirk unsuccessfully. "You did, signore. However, you're partner," He nodded
towards Heero standing at the door, bemused, "had six."

My eyes went wide and I pivoted on my heels to check back with Heero, make sure he was still standing up. Looking at him I would have never guessed, he stood straight and steady, even with his shot up knee, his arms were stiffly at his sides as they usually were and his gaze was trained on me. I turned back to the waiter and mouthed with apparent shock: "Six?"

He nodded.

How could I have not noticed that? I wondered. I was handed back the credit card and was wished a good night. The waiter even added a playful wink, he probably thought I was going to score tonight, but I was just worried Heero would end up getting really sick from the substantial amount of alcohol running through his system. A system that was not acquainted with the effects, nor accustomed with processing it.

"How are you feeling?" Is what I asked when I joined him at the door.

He frowned at me and attempted a glare, but it didn't have it's usual effect. "Why?"

I took him by the arm and escorted him out, hoping the cooled air of the night would do him some good. "Because apparently you had six glasses of wine over the course of dinner."

"So?" He muttered childishly.

"Heero, you're drunk!" I exclaimed.

"am Not. Besides, I thought that's what you do on dates." He replied, looking confused.

"No, getting wasted is generally not the goal."

"No. Sex is." He said dryly.

I stopped and turned him by the shoulders to face me. I looked down at him with a stern expression. "Heero, I know I said that and in some cases it's true, but that's not what I want, or what I was trying to get you to do. We are going to take things slow, till you are absolutely comfortable."

"It just doesn't fair that you always have to slow down for me and I can never speed up for you."

I sighed. "That's because it's easier to slow down. When you take things quicker than you can handle, you are going to run into boundaries you aren't ready to push yet." I ran my fingers through his tousled hair and held his head still at a tilt to lean down and kiss him. I tasted the red wine and his dinner, but it still managed to be erotic. I parted us and entwined our arms again, just in case he would lose his balance. Drunk Heero made no objections, which was amusing because sober Heero would be challenging me to a debate right now. Or a fist fight. "Come on, drunkie. Let's go home."

A few steps down the sidewalk and Heero commented. "My knee doesn't hurt anymore..."

I chuckled. "Don't think you've found the solution. You're going to regret this in the morning. Me too probably." I grumbled, knowing it would be my responsibility to clean up any possible mess that could be made.

Heero, who had obviously left quiet thinking for what it was, continued: "You said alcohol would make me feel more relaxed and normal... But I just feel weird."
"That's because instead of being happily buzzed, you are hammered."

"I don't know what that means."

"You do now. This is it, exhibit A: hammered."

"I can still walk fine though." He argued.

"Thank God, because I'm not carrying your drunk ass." I bantered.

Maybe it would have been better if I had carried him. Halfway home I became extremely aware of how our bodies rubbed against each other with each step we took. Our shoulders brushed together and our elbows and forearms swept across each other's side and stomach. The contact evoked memories of last night, having Heero stretched out on the couch, writhing underneath my fingertips. As we waited in the lobby for the elevator to descend Heero was less shy in creating more bodily contact that he normally was. Even though he needed no physical support, he held on to my arm, his thumb stroking in circles, which felt impossibly wonderful, even through the fabric of my shirt and leaned his cheek on shoulder. His breath was hot on my neck. A mantra resounded in my head: Stop thinking about it. Stop thinking about it. But my efforts were counter effective. My pants became tighter as I became increasingly aroused. What he was doing to me was sinful and he didn't even know he was doing it.

I pulled him into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. I tried to keep my distance, I didn't want to do anything that would even remotely resemble taking advantage of the situation. Heero searched for contact innocently, not knowing what effect he was having on me. When we reached our floor, I walked down the hall slowly and carefully, the constriction of my pants was excruciating. I made a mental note to never wear a pair this tight again a date with Heero. It was dangerous.

My fingers fumbled as they tried to open the door. My hand kept trembling as I swiped the electronic key through the slot which caused a misreading of the magnetic strip. "Fuck it." I cursed, starting my third attempt. I could not be blamed for the failure, with my hand at the lock, Heero all of a sudden inserted himself between me and the door, with an unfamiliar, wanton expression on his beautiful face. He placed his hands splayed on my chest and then trailed them up to wrap around my neck. He raised himself on the tips of his toes and pulled my head down a little so our lips would meet halfway. The fact that it was the first time he had truly initiated a kiss was quickly lost on me as I became a being driven by desires, needs and sensations alone.

Behind his back, my wrist sometimes brushing his rear, I still tried to work the lock. Finally there was the beep that I was waiting for and I pushed Heero back, through the door. We entered a pitch black apartment but I couldn't be bothered to switch on the lights. I pulled him back against me and then turned us around to pin him against the wall, kissing him hungrily. The position didn't seem to agree with him, his body started retreating, his hands disappearing and I distantly realized it could have something to do with the almost rape. But before I could pull away and ask him if he was okay, his strong arms worked to reverse the roles. I was pushed roughly against the doorpost, but the aching in my back was no competition for the throbbing heat down my front as he pressed his body flush against me.

I broke our passionate kiss and started licking and nibbling his ear and neck, my hands adoring his sides and back through his clothing. I could still feel every muscle and the heat of his skin through the thin fabric.

"I do indeed feel more relaxed now." He whispered, his hands grasping my braid and his lips running open-mouthed along the shell of my ear. Heero was completely absent, as was the soldier,
but his body knew what it wanted and made no other pretences.

"Yeah?" I asked absentmindedly, my hands traveled down his spine and then strongly cupped his ass.

"Yeah."

I whimpered pathetically when he pulled back a little, I immediately felt cold without him pressed against me.

He brought his hands back to the front and placed one of them on my chest. He twisted his fingers, grabbing a fistful of fabric and tugged me away from the wall. I couldn't see his face in the dark but his voice echoed as he spoke: "Maybe I can speed things up a bit."

I should have said "no", I should have instantly stopped him at the reference to the exchange we had on the way home, but I was consumed by lust and my lips asked: "Are you sure?"

Instead of answering me he pulled on my shirt harder, dragging me along in the direction of the bedroom. The couch was closer but he seemed to favor a bed, his bed, to be specific.

We both kneeled on the bed and resumed our kissing as our hands explored, but nothing was unbuttoned. Feeling that he was completely relaxed, I pushed his shirt up with my hands and as the pads of my fingers ran up his back we both gasped at the contact. In addition I ground our hips together, we were both hard and the friction came as a relief, but paradoxically built up more pressure that sought release.

Driven by a burning need I scooted around him on my knees and settled behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist to pull him tight against my chest. From the new position I adored his elegant neck with kisses while my hands hungrily caressed his stomach, emboldened by the positive feedback in the form of soft pleasurable gasps I slipped my hands underneath his shirt. The feeling of our skin coming together was amazing. My devious hands then lowered and unbuckled his belt.

He let out a shaky breath, but unlike last time, he didn't signal that he wanted me to stop.

As I unbuttoned his pants and pushed the zipper down, I brought my lips close to his ear and asked suggestively: "Do you ever masturbate?"

A violent shudder went through him. He reached one hand up over my shoulder and grabbed my braid at the base. His eyes were squeezed shut and his lips pressed tightly together. I barely registered his nod.

"What do you think about when you do?"

He bit his lip, his whole body became increasingly tense but I was insensitive to the difference between excited tension and uncomfortable tension.

"You."

I moaned at his admission.

"And then Taichi." Heero continued, his voice strained.

My hands froze down the front of his pants and my heart suddenly felt frost bitten, every beat was an aching pain in my chest.
The grip Heero had on my braid strengthened and the pull became increasingly painful as he became scared and frustrated. "I can't push him from my mind." He gritted through his teeth. "And then the feeling is gone and I just can't do it anymore."

My hands slipped from his body and my whole body slumped. I reached back to flick on the small light on our shared nightstand and then sat back on my calves. I rested my hands in my lap, covering the bulge, feeling embarrassed about my erection, now that the mood and the lust were gone and I realized we should have never gotten gone that far to begin with. I was overwhelmed with an intense feeling of sadness.

Heero slowly turned around to face me, but for a while I avoided eye contact, I needed a moment to compose myself and to hide the pity that I felt that he would surely not appreciate.

"Why did you stop?" He asked confused. "You asked me what I would think of."

"I know." I sighed. "I just wasn't prepared for that answer." Finally I dared to look him in the eyes, he seemed disappointed, just like I had burdened the date with false hope of a miraculous change in him, he had expected the sexual contact to drastically change him. "I can't touch you like that when you might be thinking of him."

"I wasn't thinking of him."

"You would have. It's good that we stopped before you did. Your body wants it, but your mind isn't ready." I sighed and then leaned in for a chaste kiss, hoping to let him know that this wouldn't change anything between us. "I don't want you to push yourself like this for me. I want to do this at your pace."

"I just wanted us to be more like a normal couple."

"Normal couples have sex when both people involved are ready," I explained gently, hoping not to hurt his feelings. "And when they both are, the sex is... special." I smiled at him.

"There must be something we can do that normal couples do." He mused, appearing determined not to end the night before taking one more step towards normality.

"We already do a lot of things. Love each other, kiss each other, eat together, live together..."

"Do couples sleep in separate beds?" His question sounded challenging.

I bit my lip. I couldn't lie, but I was unsure of the consequences of the truth. "No," I ventured, "they usually share a bed."

Without saying anything on the matter Heero suddenly got up. I curiously followed him with my eyes as he grabbed both sides of the nightstand and lifted it up.

"What are you doing?" I asked in surprise when he carried the piece of furniture away and the light and the alarm clock, still plugged into the wall socket, fell to the floor.

He didn't answer me. He placed the night stand at the opposite wall and then walked back. He bent over and hooked both hands under my bed and started dragging it away from the wall. The friction with the carpet made the bed heavy to move, but I was too confused and shocked to lend him a hand. When my bed had crossed half the distance that had once separated it from his, he turned around and reached for his bed, also pulling it away from the wall, with me still kneeling on the mattress, completely perplexed. With the bed distanced from the wall enough, he walked around it and pushed it the final few inches. I instinctively reached for the lamp and the alarm before they
disappeared underneath our beds as they were joined together as one.

With the light and the alarm cradled in my arms I mumbled stupidly: "Heero?"

"This is normal, isn't it?" He made sure the bed were tightly against each other and then sat down on his half, looking at me expectantly.

"Heero, you don't have to do this."

"I want to." He blurted, surprising me further.

"Oh."

"Do you want me to put them back?" He asked bluntly, his face a blank mask, but his eyes still glazed from the alcohol.

"No, if you want it like this, who am I to object?" I joked, though I felt a bit unsure about the situation. I didn't know if he really wanted to join our bed together as a twin bed, or if he was just acting on the incentives created by the alcohol that clouded him. I rubbed my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. I realized I was tired and couldn't think straight, still processing the crazy evening. "Let's go sleep, okay?"

Heero agreed and we both changed wordlessly, moving around the room awkwardly, unfamiliar with the arrangement of the furniture. We found our way back to our designated sides and got into bed. I balanced the lamp and the alarm on top of the headboard, seeing as our night stand was across the room. As I lay down I was aware of him, so close to me. All I had to do was extend my arm and then my fingers would find him under the sheets. I looked over at him. Heero lay on his back, eyes staring up, inspecting a new piece of ceiling in his line of sight.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Heero nodded, not looking at me.

"You're not nauseous?"

"No. I just don't feel like myself."

"Do you think that's a good thing?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. I feel less... restrained." He frowned at his own choice of words.

"That's good I guess. But maybe next time therapy can help you with that, instead of alcohol." I smirked, but then became serious again. "I don't want you to be anyone other than yourself Heero, I just want you to be yourself, instead of the soldier, to be free to do what you want, not what your training dictates. Heero?" I asked when I noticed he had closed his eyes and was unresponsive.

There was only silence.

I leaned in closer to listen to his breathing, noting with a smile that in contrast with other nights, I could actually hear him, his breathing was accented by the slightest snore. He was fast asleep. I lay close to him for a little while, in spite of the discomfort of lying half on his bed, half on mine. The light just touched his face beautifully and added to the peaceful and innocent aura that had taken over him. With a sigh I rolled back onto my own bed and reached up for the light switch. The room went dark and I waited for my eyes to adjust. When shapes started to appear in the filtered
moonlight, I looked at Heero again. He had turned on his side, facing away from me as he always did. I extended my arm and delved my finger into the dark pandemonium of his hair, partly draped over the light pillowcase.

My heart kept me awake as it soared and sank with my shifting thoughts. The night had been surreal and I didn't quite know what to feel. Eventually the powerful negative and positive emotions seemed to cancel each other out and I was just left feeling flat, empty and confused. My mind was too tired to continue to puzzle the pieces of Heero, myself and us together into a coherent picture. Everything was a disorganized mess of thoughts and feelings, snapshots of my life - our life. Stubborn Heero, Soldier Heero, Innocent Heero, Fun Heero, Frightened Heero, Drugged Heero, Drunk Heero, Horny Heero. His image was fragmented and the Real Heero appeared to be lost to both of us in the confusion. Were both of our expectations of who he was supposed to be reasonable? And could they be married together? I just wanted him to be himself, Heero just wanted to be normal, neither were definiable, just odd, abstract wishes. How can you achieve what

The pieces of the puzzle remained scattered.
When I woke up, it was yet to be morning. The hour displayed on the electronic alarm was ungodly. The sun was still busily preoccupied on the other hemisphere, yet light flooded into the bedroom, pouring white over all the dark surfaces. I squinted at the source, the rectangular shape of the bathroom door opening. In a dazed and confused state caused by the deep sleep I had previously enjoyed, I swung my legs over the edge of my bed as I usually did, but rather than my knees bending and my feet planting on the floor, my legs just ended up outstretched across a second mattress. I felt the softness and cold of the sheets on my heels and the back of my calves.

"Heero?" I wondered groggily, my mind struggling to grasp reality.

Gagging and coughing, barely veiled by an attempt to be quiet, echoed off the bare tile walls of the bathroom.

I immediately crawled off the adjoined beds and barefoot padded across the room. I halted in the doorway, momentarily overwhelmed by the intensity of the light. Soon, contrasted against the white shapes that filled the space, Heero's kneeling, slumped silhouette appeared to me. With both hands he held onto the seat of the toilet as his face, shielded from sight by his messy mop of hair, hovered above it. I approached him slowly and crouched down next to him, placing a comforting hand on his back as his whole body violently convulsed and the delicious, overpriced dinner we had had, ended in the toilet bowl. Knowing there was nothing I could do for him, I tried to show my support by rubbing his back and sometimes, when he leaned forward too far as he gagged, I reached out my hand and pulled back his bangs so he wouldn't soil them.

"It's okay." I whispered.

"I'm sorry." He managed.

"Don't worry about it. It's okay."

He couched and gagged some more, but it seemed he had emptied out his stomach and all he did was dry heave. "Don't you have something to cure this?"

I smiled sadly. "No, I'm sorry, just aspirin to help you feel a little better. But the most important things is for your body to get rid of it. Then it'll get better soon."

Heero remained hunched over the toilet for many more minutes and I simply quietly accompanied him, stroking his back and sometimes running a hand through his hair, on his forehead there was a cold sweat.

"Done?" I asked after a while, no judgment passed.

"I think so." He muttered and sat back on his calves. He hooked his hand under the hem of his night shirt and reached it up to wipe his mouth as I flushed the toilet.

I rose to my feet and reached down to hoist him up. He felt like a dead weight, his limbs were completely limp. I hooked my arm under his knees and lifted him off the floor, carrying him back to the bedroom and gently sitting him back down on his bed. I helped him change into a clean shirt,
being reminded of the days just after the mission that had gone horribly wrong. I also fetched him a lukewarm, wet cloth to clean his face. Seeing his pale complexion and tired eyes, brought aching sympathy to my heart. I went back to get him a clean, cold cloth and draped it on his neck and then left for the kitchen to get him a glass of water and a some aspirin.

I watched him struggle trying to swallow the water with the pills. "It'll be okay..." I spoke soothingly. I brushed his bangs out of his face and stroked his cheek, looking into his unveiled, tired eyes, heavily lidded. "Where you in the bathroom long before I heard you?"

"No." He said with a voice hoarse from gagging. "I didn't mean to wake you. I didn't want to wake you."

I smiled at him to let him know I blamed him for nothing. "Don't be silly. When you're sick I don't want to lay in bed and do nothing. I want to help."

Heero grimaced and looked down at his lap. "But it was my own fault. It's not your problem. You shouldn't have to deal with it."

I kneeled down on the carpeted floor before him to make him look at me again. "It is actually. Looking out for each other is part of a relationship. A normal relationship."

"Yeah?" He sounded hopeful.

My smile brightened. "Yeah. And getting wasted and vomiting your guts out into the toilet is pretty normal too for a teenager. So long as you don't make a habit of it."

"I won't."

"Good." I pushed him down on the bed and draped the thin sheets over his body. "Try to get some sleep."

"Same to you." He muttered, his eyes already closed, his body weak and relaxed.

I walked around to my side of our twin beds and let myself drop down on the mattress heavily. I glanced at my clock and without even realizing it, I had been up and about taking care of Heero for little over an hour and my chances of recuperating before morning were increasingly slim. Yet my concern did not lie with myself, they lay with Heero. In the dim light of the lamp that was precariously balanced on top of my head board, I stared at him intently. He lay on his back, with his arms at his sides, his mouth was open as he breathed, it seemed labored and it sounded hoarse. Sometimes it looked like he was gasping for air. I scooted closer to the crevasse that separated our beds, calling out his name softly.

Heero blinked his eyes open and slowly directed them at me.

"Are you okay? Do you think you're going to be sick again?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head ever so slightly. "I just don't feel good."

I sighed. "Yeah... I told you you were going to regret it."

Heero frowned, his eyes remained closed. "I'm not sure I regret it. The alcohol was nice for a while..."

I chuckled bitterly. "Yeah, I'm sure it was..." I didn't say anything else, mostly because I simply didn't know what to say. In a way I didn't think it to be abnormal for a guy Heero's age to be
experimenting with alcohol, quite the contrary, still, for some reason, I didn't think I should encourage the behavior. "Go back to sleep." I told him, flicking off the light and I reached out for him in the dark, my hand landing on his torso, somewhere low on his ribcage.

He covered my hand with his own and I briefly feared he would remove my hand, instead, he relocated our hands to his chest, right over his heart and I could feel it beat.

I felt like he was trying to tell me something, but I wasn't sure what. "Is something wrong?" I asked, absorbing the heat of his skin through the palm of my hand and feeling the thuds of his strong heart through the tips of my fingers.

"No." He said, with a serenity to his voice. He kept my hand to his chest. Our breathing and the beating of our hearts aligned. We were both enveloped with an overwhelming sense of calm and I felt like I was dreaming, even though I was still staring at Heero's form in the dark. I watched him fall asleep, his body losing its tension, his heart rate slowing down. I kept my hand to his chest, enjoying the feel of the steady thud that vibrated through his torso. The rhythm eventually lulled me to sleep.

I loved being so close to him as we slept.

After an interrupted night like that, the alarm sounded way too harsh, way too obnoxious and most importantly: way too early. I hit "snooze" a couple of times, my arm working with a mind of its own because I don't believe I ever fully regained consciousness till someone shook me lightly but urgently. I cracked one eye open to peer at the intruder of my peaceful realm of sleep which was no more. His face carried apologetic features and the expression made me lose the sharp edge of my morning temper.

"Duo?" His voice was so steady and deep and carried through the air like a drum from heaven.

"Hm?" The tone of my own voice was much more mundane, riddled with an earthly tiredness.

"Duo, it's five past eight."

Electricity arced through my body, stiffening my limbs. When I overcame the initial shock, I jumped up, exclaiming: "Five past eight? !" There was no time for a shower, or even for clean underwear. I jumped in a pair of jeans that had been left on the carpeted floor last Friday, it was due for laundry but I had no time to be bothered. "Shit shit shit..." I rambled as my fingers blindly searched the closet space for a T-shirt. I pulled it over my head and groaned as I pulled my disheveled braid out. But there was no time. However, I couldn't in good conscious leave the house without brushing my teeth. Morning breath is a killer. With my toothbrush hanging out of my mouth and toothpaste foam dribbling down my chin, I realized Heero was probably still painfully hung-over, so I hopped back to the bedroom as I put on one sock and asked him with my mouth full: "Will you be okay?"

"I feel better." His eyes were squinted against the light, he had dark circles under his eyes and his hair looked more messy than ever. He obviously wasn't better.

"Sure?" I grumbled when a glob of toothpaste hit the floor.

"I'll be fine."

"I could stay here."

"That's not necessary."
Even though Heero was my priority, I was glad he did not require my presence, nor seemed to need it. I was never truly excited about going to school, but that Monday, curiosity and protectiveness drove me. I wondered if Sookie and Aston would be proven right and if they were, I wanted to be there for them, protect them if necessary and show whichever bully to rear it's ugly head, just how powerful a "fag" can be. I was ashamed to admit, that a part of me actually looked forward to the prospect of kicking someone's ass. I don't suppose that was very normal of me. Or maybe the contrary...

Before I left, with my shoestrings untied and plain, dry bread for lunch, I advised him to take a few more aspirin, drink plenty of water and rest and reminded him that he didn't need to go to Nettle if he wasn't up for it. In his eyes I saw a flicker of someone who would gladly accept the excuse to escape that responsibility, but I knew he wouldn't. The Perfect Soldier doesn't run from responsibility. In spite of the time pressure, I rushed back to plant a brief kiss on his stunned lips and then I was out the door, running.

My route to school took me past the school building of our rivals, of a prestigious private school with a limited amount of students, yet the building could swallow ours. When I hastily passed their cast iron front gate, I heard deep male voices call after me: "Yeah, you'd better run! Fucking loser!" and the last thing I heard was a roar of laughter. They must have been at the game Friday and saw me there. I always scoffed at Heero when he objected to my braid - claiming it to be too memorable, too conspicuous - but I guess he was right.

My feet carried me unexpectedly fast and even though I should have been late, time must have paused in bemusement at my stumbling antics and allowed me to catch up, for I sprinted through the front gates of the yard just as the bell rang and I followed the droning crowd inside. Squirming between the many bodies that all had to squeeze through the double doors of the building, I noticed sullen looks and slumped shoulders, defeated souls marching inside like to their execution. Both familiar and unfamiliar faces became similar by the cynicism and disappointment that they shared in their eyes.

The halls of the school were barren, no longer did the colorful claims to victory decorate the walls. I broke away from the marching dead, rolling my eyes at them. It's just a damn game, I thought to myself, stricken by the fact that this affected them like war. In the moment I found myself resenting them, even though in turn Heero would condemn me for allowing such a useless emotion. I pushed past the last of them and made my way to the classroom. The teacher was a devout fan of the school's basketball team, I avoided eye-contact to avoid conversation and slipped into my seat, conveniently located in the back. From behind my little desk with proclamations of love scratched into it - for girls, boys and national football teams - I watched morose souls gather. And as the teacher began with soft-spoken words like he was addressing a crowd at a wake, I noticed one chair remained empty: Aston's.

As the philosophy class was shamelessly abused to discuss the tragedy that had transpired the previous Friday evening, I zoned out. Living between war and gunfire and violence had taught me at least one useful lesson in life: how to successfully block out uninteresting noise. My ears were trained for - and only responded to - the ring of the bell fifty minutes later as class ended. But the next class also could not keep my attention. My mind tried to divide itself between worrying about a variety of things, only to end with an incoherent mess; a string of names, places, events and feelings, the majority of which evolving around Heero, but a recurring topic was Aston and Hunter and part of the basketball team, all noticeably absent. In the way that you'd be sorely attuned to the absence of something inanimate yet primary in your life, like chairs missing from the kitchen table; pillows missing from the bed; spoons missing from the cutlery. It was obvious, increasingly so as the day progressed, but no one commented.
During every break I wondered aloud about Aston's and Hunter's absence in the presence of Sookie and even though she was one of the few to have noticed - or at least to have acknowledged her awareness - she did not seem disconcerted, unlike me. She noted, rationally, that they probably agreed to skip school to let the brunt of the force of mass disappointment pass. I didn't share her certainty. Hunter I believed to be able to willingly quit school, much like the other missing basketball players. Aston, as much as his life and demeanor has changed recently, would not. He was in the honors program, he had perfect attendance record and was tendering several offers of full-ride scholarships to prestigious universities nationwide. Moreover, he was a perfectionist geek who prided his school work above everything else.

I told Sookie I was worried, she retorted playfully that I was merely redirecting my concerns from one source to another because the primary source wasn't very susceptible to my feelings. Which led our conversation to a mixture of her extracurricular psychology class by the curious miss Colt and my personal obsession with Heero. Realizing I was being shrunk by someone who isn't even a shrink, I cut lunch short and leisurely trotted to the next classroom, occupied with my own thoughts as my fingers played with lint deep inside my pockets.

I wasn't the only one to arrive ahead of schedule.

Rounding a corner from the opposite end of the corridor were three key players that I had found missing during the day. Danny, Eduardo and a tall guy with shaven head, first string and one reserve player respectively for the basketball team. In spite of their humongous failure right before the weekend, they walked with a victorious bounce in their steps, laughing amongst themselves. I hadn't expected to see them in such good spirit, especially because - whatever they might claim - they were partially to blame for the devastating loss against their arch enemies and the shame the whole school suffered as a result of it at the hand of the preppy private school students.

Apparently not at all laden with the consequences, Danny waved at me after being nudge by the one guy who nodded his clean shaven head towards me. Their gaits only seemed to become more arrogant.

"Duo." He said when the distance between us had closed to about five feet.

"Danny." I nodded towards the other two in greeting. "Good to see you guys aren't as stricken with the defeat as many others are." I commented lightly, though I definitely had my guard up, being alone with them in one of the more secluded wings of the building.

"Well, we just had a very productive meeting and I think it is pretty safe to say there will never be a repeat of last Friday night." Danny responded smugly.

"Oh. That's good. Was Hunter at this meeting?"

The three of them snickered at my question and made brief eye-contact with each other like they were sharing an inside joke.

"I hadn't seen him all day so..."

"Hunter is a coward, he staid home today. But his presence wasn't really needed at this meeting. As three senior members of the basketball team, we decided it's best for Hunter to leave the team."

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "He is the star player and not to mention team captain."

Danny seemed irritated and bit back: "The school's basketball team is not a dictatorship, it's a democracy. It was his vote against ours." The others nodded congruently. "Even if he had been
there, he would have been greatly outnumbered. It would have only embarrassed him. We sent him an email." Danny chuckled.

I squinted my eyes at them, there was no suppressing my disdain and disgust. "He was offered a scholarship! Not only are you hurting your own future as a successful basketball team, but you're also hurting his future. All of you are to blame for what happened Friday, you hardly practiced. You got conceited."

It was a classic case of saved by the bell. It rang at a deafening volume and with a final smirk the threesome, not at all moved by my words, stepped past me and walked away.

Assholes, I thought to myself. It explained why Hunter hadn't shown up for school, not only did he suffer the embarrassment of losing the game, but also of being kicked off the team, with severe consequences to bear. Perhaps Aston had chosen to stay home as well, to support him. In a way I found that to be quite romantic, yet the whole situation still left me with a sick feeling in my gut, especially after being called out by those guys from the other school. I knew Aston passed that private school on the way here as well, I wondered if maybe something had happened.

The bell rang a final time at four pm and I dragged my feet, following the crowd through the hallway. They were all eager to go home and end this awkward day. I was in no such hurry. Heero's appointment had been rescheduled to later in the afternoon and I knew he wouldn't be home for another hour. I used the rare opportunity to venture into the library, surviving the menacing stares of the volunteer librarian as I passed her desk - barely. I downloaded book copies from the computers for my history project, due before summer break. I strongly disliked the assignment, the subject was pre- and post-colonial wars with an emphasis on the difference in politics and strategies. I knew I would ace it, that wasn't the point. The point was that it was confrontational, like holding a hand mirror to your face and focusing all your attention on the ugliness; the imperfections. It was hard, even though it was - apparently - history.

Funny how some things never feel like they will ever be in the past when they concern you. And then you wake up one morning and you realize you are the only one still carrying it with you in the present and to everyone else it's "ancient history", "bygones be bygones", "water under the bridge".

A sign on the door to my history classroom reads in medieval font: "Here, history is being rewritten". It was supposedly a comic pun reflecting the fact that the teacher prefers to dictate the material to his students and the subject matter, but to me it tasted bitter. I was one of few people at this school painfully aware that history cannot be changed, it is despairingly unmovable, like a heavy bookcase of history books blocking the sole fire exit.

Feeling raw and sore inside I left the library, gazing down at the carpet as I passed the librarian once more. In spite of never having met him, she was very skilled at the Heero-glare-o-death.

In the short time it had taken me to download the books, the whole school had emptied, from students to teachers to janitors and other staff. The lights were switched off, leaving the windowless hallways dark.

I reached the main hall and through the glass of the double front doors I saw the threesome from before at the front gate, with smoldering cigarettes limp between their lips that bounced up and down as they talked and laughed. I decided to take a detour, use the back door of the building that opened up to the sport fields. The gate by the outdoor basketball court would be locked, it was only to be used in case of emergencies, but it was low enough for me to scale with ease and without ripping my clothes on the barbed wire. I doubled back through the building, disappearing once more in the dark hallways. It would be a mistake to assume I am afraid of them. I wasn't. I was afraid of myself, of what would happen, of what I would do, should they push me into a corner that
wasn't to my liking. I could harm people with an ease that sometimes frightened me, during war, as a rebellious soldier, you can get away with it, registered civilians do not enjoy the same leniency.

I passed the entries to the locker rooms, going further back into a dusty hallway that led to an emergency door to the fields. The hallway was lined with locked doors, a selection of small rooms used to store the sports equipment that was used during when unpredictable weather conditions forced the coach to take his students inside. I just walked by the final closet door to press down on the lever to open the emergency exit, when I heard loud banging coming from the other side of the nearest closet door. I froze, confused for a moment, my ears trained, waiting for the sound to return. There was only a slight pause when the banging returned, sounding even more desperate. Then there was a muffled voice:

"Help! Is anyone out there?"

Even through the door I recognized the voice. I dropped my bag to the floor and instincts had me grabbing at the handle, even though it was obviously locked. "Aston?" I called, trying to force the lock in vain.

"Duo?" He responded with apparent relief. "Duo get me out of here! Go get the coach, he has the key."

I shook my head, knowing the building was long abandoned. "Step back!"

"What?"

"Step away from the door!"

"O-okay!"

I took a few steps back myself. The hallway was very narrow, so I couldn't get much distance for a running start, but I had faith it would be enough. "Are you clear?"

"Yeah!"

I rolled my neck and shrugged my shoulder; a brief warm-up. With my adrenaline pumping I sped forward, pushing away from the wall and with great force I crashed my shoulder against the door, just above the lock. Like any door in the past had, it opened. It swung round on it's hinges and hit a mat leaning upright against the wall. The room was completely dark, there was no window. "Aston?" He didn't answer me, instead, he rushed towards me out of nowhere and wrapped his arms tightly around my neck. I embraced him and noticed his body shaking with sobs and he was hyperventilating in the juncture between my neck and sore shoulder.

"It's okay, it's okay." I said, rubbing his back. "Let's get you some fresh air." I guided him out of the small, claustrophobic room and opened the emergency exit. I sat him down on the concrete steps, kneeling in front of him. His bangs covered his face, tears fell out of nowhere and landed in his dusty lap. "Just breathe." I tried to reassure him. "You're okay." I had to calm myself down as well, my body was converting the adrenaline into pure rage. I ran my hands through his hair, brushing out some of the dust.

Aston slowly started to breathe normally and his hands stopped shaking.

When I felt he was ready to speak, I asked, albeit somewhat redundantly: "Who locked you in there?"

"Danny," he blurted, taking in another shaky breath, "and Eduardo... and Parker."
The troublesome threesome, I noted with discontent, Parker must be the bald guy. "How long have you been in there?"

"All day!" He cried, without looking up at me. "They were waiting for me at the bike shelter when I arrived at school early."

Feeling increasingly protective and angry, I continued: "Did they do something else? Did they hurt you?"

"They broke my phone..." He mumbled.

"They didn't hurt you?"

Aston finally looked up at me and the sight of his face startled me. His lips were smeared red, I realized it was poorly applied lipstick, blush tinted his cheeks a bright pink, but bruises shown through and he had dark purple and pink circles of eye shadow around his eyes. Forcefully applied mascara had gotten into his eyes making them red and irritated. With a sickening feeling in my stomach I noticed trails of blood on either side of his neck. I followed the trail up to his reddened ears and saw that they were pierced crudely and torn.

"They did it with big nails that they found lying around." He said as he caught me studying his earlobes in horror.

I balled my hands into tight, white-knuckled fists. My whole body started shaking with anger. "Come on." I rose to my feet and helped him get up from the steps.

"Where are we going?"

I wrapped one of his arms around my neck and supported him with one of my arms around his waist. He was weakened after a day of not eating and drinking, whilst banging on the door and screaming his lungs out to no avail. "I'm taking you to the library. Everyone else has already left." I said, guiding him through the shadowy hallways.

"Won't you stay with me? Please stay with me?" He pleaded pitifully.

"I'm sorry Aston, I can't," I apologized, "there's something I have to do." I explained darkly. "I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Don't worry about it." I pushed through the swinging doors to the library and for the first time to my knowledge, the stern and warning look melted away from the librarian's face and she approached us with explicit concern that suited her elderly features. She rolled her desk chair towards us, to meet us halfway and I sat Aston down in it.

"What in the name of God happened?" She asked as she started to mother over Aston as I had hoped.

"Will you please call his parents and help him rinse his eyes out?"

"Sure, of course." She snapped her head back up to me when I started to leave. "Where are you going?"

"I have to take care of something." I said and I did not respond to her objections nor Aston's concerned stare. His sad, red eyes only fuelled the fire of my rage more and made me even more determined. What came over me was an old sense of who I was. A character that believed head-on
confrontation could solve any problem and that vengeance was justified no matter what the situation or context. With that war mentality I stormed through the school into the yard. I felt like a tank, unstoppable, the flagstones cracking under my weight. I don't think I passed through the doors with intentions more severe than intimidating them, but as soon as I spotted them and they spotted me, I knew blood would be shed but I did not stop myself.

"What's with the face, Duo?" Danny challenged as I approached them.

Within seconds I was face to face with him. I could feel his breath on my complexion. It made me feel sick. His gaze was confident, cocky. I knew he would regret it.

At heart I was still a teenager, no matter how intensely the attempt had been to suppress that, so the first thing I did was push him, hard. To keep his balance he had to take several steps back, but he only chuckled arrogantly, lulled into a false sense of security by a "safety in numbers" mentality that -unbeknownst to him - did not apply in this situation.

"What the fuck man? Do you have a problem with me?" He jested, casting sideway glances at his back up.

"You retarded ass-fucks." I seethed.

"Oh, you would like that, wouldn't you?" He spat.

"Ignorant little bitches like you aren't my type." I stared at him and made a point to briefly make eye-contact with his friends as well. Baldie was already starting to crack.

Danny snorted. "Then what would you call that little boy toy of yours that you brought to Aiden's party?"

I pushed him again, even harder this time, Eduardo had to reach out for him and prevent him from falling backwards. "You have no idea what kind of buttons you are pressing." I warned him.

This time the asshole laughed, rolling his head back in the process. "Oh please! What do you want? Do you really think we are afraid of you... faggot?" Fingering the detonation switch.

I didn't respond, because my next countermove would have been fists rather than words.

"We had to make sure that little fairy friend of yours and his butt-buddy didn't embarrass us like that again. None of you people should embarrass us again."

I rolled my eyes. "Us people? You have no fucking clue what you're saying! There is no "us people", there is only the smartest guy in school, the best high school shooting guard in the state and the guy who is going to kick your scrawny ass."

Danny pointed a vibrating finger at me. "You'd better stop thinking about my ass, Maxwell."

I smirked at having found a blistering sore spot for him. "Well, that puts me in a difficult position, because all I think of you, is an inbred little asshole who's stuck in evolution a few stages behind the rest of us. Us people."

That is when the first blow landed. Danny had balled his fist and swung it at my cheek. I could have easily ducked, he had a clear tell and not the most swift right hook, but I was gentlemen so I let him have the first punch. Mere milliseconds after he had the pleasure of hitting me, before he could even enjoy it, I swung my arm round and hit him in the face hard enough to make him groan and fall to the groan. I heard something crack, his nose, his eye socket, maybe both.
The bald guy came behind me and wrapped his arms around my neck in a halfhearted choke-hold as Eduardo took advantage of the moment to throw a few punches at my gut. Holding onto my strangler's arms I kicked up one leg and hit Eduardo square in the chest with my boot, which had him gasping for air long enough to take care of Parker. I firmed my grip on one of his arms, pulling it away from my neck and twisting it around, immediately subduing him. He winced and whimpered, it was very painful to have your wrist contorted like that. I knew because it was a position I had been in with Heero, in the sparring ring at our gym. As Heero had done with me, I forcefully maneuvered him around and threw him over my shoulder. He took the crash to the concrete well, quickly getting back to his feet, but only to flee cowardly.

"Look at the straight man running like a girl!" I pointed out to Danny who had risen to face me once more.

"Fuck you!" He used his sleeve to wipe away the blood pouring from his nostrils. He attacked me again but I thwarted his attempt easily, hitting him in the face again and pushing him back. He landed on his ass again.

When Eduardo got up and thundered towards me I used his own momentum against him and threw him on top of Danny. Frustrated at how long it took for them to get up again, I hoisted Eduardo up by his jacket and kneed him in the gut before pushing him away again, watching him stumble and fall to the ground. I grabbed a handful of Danny's hair and pulled him into a sitting position, kneeling over him.

"You got lucky..." He mumbled. "I could have easily beaten you."

I sighed my head. "No. You got lucky... I could have easily killed you."

I sighed, staring into his frightened eyes did not give me the satisfaction and sense of justice that I had anticipated. Instead, I felt like I had lost control over myself and from who I wanted to be, slipped back into who I used to be. The twisted person I desired to be no more. And I worried, I worried that the God of Death within me was as out of bounds and uncontrollable as Heero's Perfect Soldier and that I could be overridden by him. I knew in that moment, holding Danny up by his hair, that I had two choices, one of them would empower Death, the other one would silence him. It seemed so straightforward to gravitate to the latter, but this was not the case.

I could kill him. I mean, not just physically, but I could kill him. I could kill him without so much as a blip on my morality radar. Danny is scum, ignorant, self centered scum. I've killed lesser scum. Men have died at my hands for lesser faults - some could even only be blamed for blind obedience. I could watch Death do whatever he feels needs to be done.

But I realized that if I let him, I'd be as much of a loser as Danny, to let some ugly side of me become me. And what good would that do for Heero?

I let Danny go. Not because he squirmed and screamed, but because I realized Heero was at home, waiting for me. He needed me and I needed him.

The boy groaned as he fell back to the ground and then he curled up, expecting me to kick him. Instead I stepped over his shrunken frame and walked away.

I started a light jog, not necessarily running away from something, as much as running towards something. Getting short of breath I slowed my pace just as I rounded the final corner. The school and everything that had happened there was removed from me in space and time, but the possible consequences loomed. I couldn't outrun those.
I saw a black sedan parked at the curb near the front door of our building, with Preventer license plates. I spent the last of my breath to race to the door, swiping my card through the reader to get it open. Stepping into the small, brown stone lobby I felt a sense of relief when I saw Heero, standing in front of the elevator doors. His eyes found me in the reflection of the stainless steel and he turned to face me.

I was overwhelmed with a sudden urge to kiss him and I gladly gave into it. "Hey." I breathed after parting our lips.

His analytical eyes stared into me. "What's wrong?"

I blinked. "What do you mean? Nothing is wrong."

He cocked his head to the side slightly and narrowed his eyes. He studied my face briefly and then concluded: "Well, you should have been home over an hour ago, you are perspiring profusely and you got red when I asked you what's wrong. My interpersonal communication skills are not of the highest quality but even I manage to see something is definitely wrong."

My eyebrows drew up. Through my perplexity I managed to quip: "Are you always this talkative, or only when you catch me in a lie?"

"This I believe to be an attempt to change the subject." He noted and he seemed proud of himself, which was endearing.

"Not." I bantered childishly, becoming distracted by the glint in his eyes that seemed to light up his whole face.

We were interrupted by the ding of the elevator as it reached the ground floor. Upon the doors opening, we stepped inside and pushed the appropriate button. By the time we passed the first floor, Heero warned:

"Duo."

The way he said my name crumbled my secrecy. Though I never had the intention of keeping this from him, I dreaded telling him. I was ashamed of myself. "Okay, okay... I... I did something bad. I mean, it was the right thing to do, I think, but it was bad."

Heero is a genius, yet I managed to confuse him; his brows furrowed. "I don't understand."

I chuckled. "That's okay. I wasn't making much sense anyway."

"But I was doing so well." He pouted. He actually pouted, however slight.

To reward him for how well attuned he was to conversational markers earlier, I told him what I dreaded him to know, because Heero is another mirror, a distorted mirror but yet in it's distortions I saw the truth most clearly: the God of Death. I wasn't afraid that he would judge me. I was afraid that he wouldn't. That he wouldn't see that what I did was wrong and violent. "You remember Aston, right? From that party?"

Heero nodded.

We walked to the front door of our apartment whilst I kept talking. "Three stupid jocks at school harassed him and locked him in a closet all day. When I found him... I got so angry. I felt like I couldn't control myself."
"What did you do?" Heero asked, surprisingly inquisitive. I sat down on the couch and Heero made a brief detour to the kitchen to get a spoon and the jar of peanut butter, his favored post-therapy comfort food, which I allowed him. When he joined me on the couch, I continued.

"I kicked the shit out of them. I mean, I didn't really exert myself, but these are just stupid kids, they had no idea how to defend themselves. I thought I would feel better afterwards, vindicated, but seeing them, weak and defeated, just made me angry with myself... I should have handled it differently, but that didn't even occur to me, I just stormed toward them and started provoking them, making him throw the first punch so I could throw the last." I sighed. "I guess I thought that by now, I'd be different, I'd think twice before going to that place. But seeing Aston made something click and I didn't remember any of my good intentions, to stop being like that, all I remembered was my training, how to overpower guys bigger and taller than me." I stopped and looked at Heero, after studying the carpet. His face was blank, but in his eyes there was a struggle. I had unwittingly put him in an uncomfortable position, subconsciously asking for advice or kind and reassuring words, neither of which he was capable of giving as of yet.

There was a silence between us for a long time and I was about to regret sharing the fight and my feelings with him so candidly, when his pleasantly deep voice suddenly resounded. "Sounds like you had a bad day."

I chuckled bitterly. "Yeah."

Heero didn't say anything, he probably didn't know what to say. He dipped the spoon in the peanut butter, but instead of bringing it to his own mouth, he held it out to me. No words necessary.

I smiled. "Thanks buddy." I let him hold the spoon as I licked the side facing me clean. When I was done I winked at him, causing him some embarrassment, but also provoking a tiny curl of the lips.

Supposedly to distract us both from the sexual connotation of my gesture, he asked: "Will you be expelled?"

"I don't know. Probably." I let the words sink in.

Heero was silent for a little while and later wondered with that slight frown of his if I would mind. I stared at him. Perplexed both at the fact that he asked and the fact that I didn't know the answer. I figured I should know, I figured I should have had an adamant "yes" prepared, but I didn't and I admitted that truth to him, my voice somewhat wistful. "I don't know."

"But probably?" He countered, it seemed he, too, was expecting a different response to come forth from me.

I frowned, deeply. "No." I ran a hand through my hair, unnerved by my own lack of understanding. "Maybe even the contrary... I... I honestly don't know... but I guess that in itself is an answer. I mean, if it would bother me, I would know, wouldn't I?"

Heero shrugged, he had no expertise, thus no insightful comment, on the matter and wisely kept his mouth shut to prevent himself embarrassment. Yet he seemed to search. His eyes darting left to right even though the search was focused inwards. He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but he second guessed himself and in the end no words passed his lips, his frown only increased.

"What?" I asked curiously, readjusting my positioning on the couch to properly face him, watching
the struggle for words in his expression, noting every slight shift of muscles as he bit his lip, narrowed his eyes and even wrinkled his nose. Had I grown so accustomed to reading his minute facial expressions that they appeared more exaggerated to me than they were, without me realizing it, or had Heero become more expressive over the course of time, without either of us realizing it?

"I know what you mean." This admission seemed to startle him even more so than me.

"Yeah?" I gently ventured.

He nodded, but seemed reluctant to elaborate. I allowed him as much time as he needed to find words and form sentences with them. My patience paid off, as did his effort. "When you asked me when Nettle would clear me for work..." his sentence trailed off, discouraging me, but he found the confidence to continue. "I started thinking. I don't think I want to be an active agent any more."

I've heard many euphemisms in my life - "it's just going to sting a little, boy", "it's only a shallow cut", "we're just slightly outnumbered" - but I experienced a true textbook example when Heero's words left me stunned into silence. Stunned was not the word. Silence was not the word. English language had yet to invent words that approximated the state I found myself in.

He ripped me back into reality with his next words. "But I feel I should be."

I sighed. He was correct. He did know what I meant. I experienced the same thing he was. I didn't think I'd even want to return to school after what had transpired, I couldn't imagine myself being around people like that, people with such insignificant thoughts completely blown out of proportion by the collective illusion that each individual student was the center of the universe. Yet I felt like I should be in school, simply because people my age are and I'm smart enough to graduate. Just like Heero felt he should be an agent, just because he was once a soldier and he was the best. A sense of obligation to yourself and strangely, to others as well.

I smiled. It wasn't a happy smile, but I don't think it was sad either, just a confused appreciation. "We are not so different, you and I." I mused aloud. My smile turned honest as Heero unconsciously brought the spoon to his mouth, one side still lathered with peanut butter. "So does the peanut butter mean you had a bad day too?"

He shrugged, slowly licking the rest of the spoon clean. What that did to me was unspeakable. "Are you still hung over?" I didn't mean to say that with a smirk, but I suddenly found myself amused.

"No." Simple as that.

"How was therapy?"

"Fine." He said "fine", but it sounded too much like "annoying" to be anything but and to be anything but intentional, so I chuckled.

"Do you want to talk?" It had become routine to share stories after his therapy sessions, but from the tired look in his eyes I knew even before I posed the question, that I would be shot down.

"Didn't we just do that?"

"I guess."

We let silence come between us again. To ignore the volume of my own unwelcome thoughts I focused on the sounds of raindrops hitting the large bay window, as the forecasted rainstorm
passed over, darkening the skies. The rain grew louder and louder, the water was beating against
the windowpane and the walls. But even as the storm reached it's peak and even flashed a few
sparks of thunder, I could still hear myself asking in my head: "What does this all mean? Where is
this taking us?" Heero just admitted he didn't really want to be an agent, I just realized I didn't
really want to be a student, yet I had the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach that these facts
wouldn't change anything. Heero preached of acting on emotions, but all his life he has seemed to
be the mere messenger, in the end he'd do as his training dictates. And when have I ever taken
total control of my life with positive outcome?

It made me wonder grimly if anything we ever said or did had any meaning; moving in together;
starting a relationship; confessing our love. Could words, actions and feelings ever truly coexists,
or was that connection permanently severed in us? The scientists still holding the knives, even in
death.

I snapped my head back at Heero when I heard him get off the couch, audible even above the beat
of the rain. With a slight limp he returned the peanut butter and the spoon to the kitchen. I watched
him as he stood at the sink, he wasn't washing the spoon, even with the rain I would have heard the
water run, but for some reason he was just standing there. I noticed that his shoulders were slumped
and I realized I had never seen him like this before.

The word "hopeless" came to mind.

With his back still facing me, he announced: "I'm going to lie down for a while. Maybe I am still
hung over." And with that he promptly limped to the bedroom and he shut the door behind him.

I sat and the ouch and counted to ten, and then again, and then again, till I felt an appropriate
amount of time had passed and then I followed him. I opened the door to the bedroom to find it
completely dark. It took a few seconds, after closing the door behind me, for my eyes to adjust to
the extremely low lighting, of sunlight which had had to struggle it's way through thick clouds and
thick curtains. I saw the vague shape of our beds joined together and Heero lying on his side of it,
on his stomach for a change, on top of his sheets, still wearing his jeans and button-up shirt. He
wasn't sleeping. His body tensed up the moment the light had streamed in through the opened door.

I crawled over the footboard and settled on my bed, lying on my side, facing him, even though he
faced away from me. I tore my lustful eyes away from the curve of his ass. "Please don't do this," I
whispered.

"Don't do what?" His muffled voice sounded.

"This, pulling away from me."

"I'm just tired." He was quick to retort.

"Okay." I inched closer towards him, my body lying on the very edge of my mattress. "Then I'm
just going to lie here with you for a little while."

Heero didn't say anything.

I boldly moved my hand to rest it on the small of his back. A long time passed and I realized
neither one of us was going to fall asleep. I felt a tension between us, not necessarily a bad one,
rather a tension of desire. I waited a little while longer, gauging his response, when I decided it
wasn't negative - that he wasn't distancing himself from me - I finally crossed the line between my
mattress and his and fully encircled his waist with my arm. My nose was buried in the dark
pandemonium of his hair. He smelled so great, I thought, even though I knew it was just
pheromones between us running wild after so many cold showers, on my part at least. My embrace wasn't meant to be about sex, but with our bodies pressed up against each other, sharing heat, it inevitably took that turn.

I kissed the back of his neck and let my hand wander up and down his spine and massage the muscles in his side. The tension suddenly flooded from his body, being replaced with a relaxed state, accompanied with a deep sigh. Taking it as an encouragement, I kept kissing his neck, sometimes playfully licking or nipping and with my hand I moved over his ass, lightly at first, then stronger, firmly caressing. When I grew curious for more, I turned him onto his side, his back flush against my chest. This allowed my lips to relocate it's ministrations to his ear but confronted with the burnt skin I focused my attention on the side of his neck and his jaw as my hand roamed over his torso.

Somewhere in the linear space of time I started to unbutton his shirt. The final button was undone and feeling his skin, with the ripple of muscle underneath, under my fingertips, caused me to shiver. My erection was obvious, he must have noticed with him pressed so tightly against me, but it didn't seem to bother him and I was curious if we shared this state, but I didn't want to go there after the last time, the memory of which I forcefully tried to erase from my mind.

I used my fingers to tease and stimulate his chest, eventually paying extra attention to his nipples, to which he responded sensitively. Feeling that it was all becoming a little bit too much for him, I slowed down.

I lightly dragged my fingers down his abdomen, lower and lower, with every intention to stop at the hem of his jeans before simply moving them back up again, but Heero wasn't aware of this and I felt him tense up and heard him make the smallest sound as the tips of my fingers were a mere inch away from the button of his jeans. "I'm sorry," I breathed heavily in his ear, dragging my hand back up to his chest, "I wasn't going to-"

"No." He gritted through his teeth. "I meant... I want..." He pushed his face into his pillow, deeply embarrassed.

He didn't need to explain, I understood what he meant. I didn't comment, I just brought my hand back down and cupped him through the rough material of his jeans. The reaction was instant, he arched his back, arcing into me and his mouth opened in a - sadly - silent moan. Him shifting against me drove me insane. The friction was so good, something like that shouldn't be allowed to feel that good, but it did.

Curious fingers popped open the button to no objections from Heero, so they proceeded to gently lower the zipper. As I pushed my hand inside, I raised my head to look at Heero's closed eyes. I wondered if he was thinking of him again. I was. But I didn't let it stop me, I felt like it was something we had to push through. Strangely it seemed to bother me more than him, but then again, I wasn't distracted by a dexterous hand down the front of my pants, though him just writhing against me did an admirable job.

He made another tiny sound, but immediately buried his face in his pillow again. I was about to ask him if something was wrong, the rhythm of my hand faltering, when he strongly clamped his fingers around my wrist in an attempt to keep me going, rather than stopping me. I obliged happily. I expected him to come swiftly after that, but it seemed he was holding back, effortlessly preventing himself. Realizing he was probably uncomfortable orgasming in someone else's presence, as it was obviously a first time for him, I tried to offer words of reassurance.

"It's okay." I whispered.
He groaned, not a groan of pleasure, but one of frustration.

I didn't want to end it like that, leaving him embarrassed and even more uncomfortable with future physical contact. I awkwardly maneuvered my other hand underneath his neck to turn his head to face me and I passionately kissed his lips. I pushed my hips against him, selfishly seeking some sort of release for myself, but thoughts kept me from achieving that. I was more focused on him and more determined on his completion.

Heero suddenly pulled away from my kiss, turning his head away, his mouth agape as he panted.

I could feel he was close, so as a final effort, I seductively whispered into his ear as best I could: "Please come."

And he did.

He buried his face in the pillow again and may have even bitten whatever mouthful of fabric he could get. However he did it, he didn't make a sound, not even the slightest gasp or quietest moan. I kept stroking him till I was certain he was done and then removed my hand, wiping it on the back of my jeans before wrapping my arm around him again.

His chest heaved heavily as he tried to regain his composure as quickly as he could and I waited patiently for him, my hand drawing feather light, random patterns on his chest and stomach. I breathed deeply through my nose, against the back of his neck, trying to calm myself. My body showed the obvious signs of arousal, but I wasn't in any mindset to do anything about it. Many minutes went by without either of us saying anything and when I noticed the room had gone completely dark, not even the slightest sunlight filtering through, I wondered if those minutes had been hours.

The first thing he said, wasn't what I expected.

"I made a mess." He sounded sincerely concerned and deeply apologetic.

I sighed, my breath running past his skin, creating goose bumps. "Don't worry about it. We'll change the sheets later."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it, it's fine." I held onto him a little tighter liking how when I hold him close like that, I could feel his heartbeat vibrating through me and the heat of his body driving away even the most distant memory of cold. But my mouth went dry right before I couldn't stop myself from asking: "Did you think of him?"

He took a few moments to gather his thoughts. "No."

It was indescribably relieving to hear that. "Good." Another understatement.

"You did."

I noted how it wasn't a question, it was a statement. Maybe I should have denied it, maybe if I could have been convincing enough, it would have been better. But if even Heero could pick up on it, in the throws of physical pleasure, it had to have been pretty blatant and denying it would only add an even more obvious lie to my repertoire. "Yes."

"Why?"
"I worried about how you were feeling, if you were thinking about him." I whispered in the burnt shell of his left ear.

He took a deep breath, preparing to say something, but then released it in a long sigh. He seemed to think it through a little while longer, hesitating a few times more, aborting at the last second. I didn't pry, I had the feeling that it was only a matter of time, for him to find the words, to tell me whatever he wanted to say. And I was right. His voice was a little more monotonous and analytical than I would have preferred, but his words were like a warm caress.

"I wasn't thinking about him... Because that time and this time were completely different. That time, all I could think was that I wanted him to stop. Now, all I could think was that I wanted you to continue."

I took hold of his chin and tilted his head back for a deep and grateful kiss.

We parted too quickly for my liking, Heero turned his head away from me again. I tried to relax, with him warmly in my arms, but the tension transferred from his body to my own and it became difficult to focus on peaceful thoughts. Every breath he took felt panicked and constricted, it felt like in my arms he was gasping for breath. It didn't take long for him to start shifting self-consciously in my embrace and not long after that for him to abruptly pull himself free and rise to his feet. He stood at the bedside, his back turned towards me. With my eyes adjusted to the scarcity of light, I could see his sharp elbows move as his fingers zipped and buttoned up his jeans.

"What's wrong?" I asked and I reached out and hooked one finger into the belt loop at the small of his back.

"Nothing." Heero lied and he easily stepped away from my limp hold on him. A little further away from me he buttoned up his shirt.

"Heero..."

"Please." He begged with firm voice, finally looking at me even though much of his eyes were shadowed under frowning brows. He leaned forward and gripped his sheets tightly.

Unsure, I rolled back onto my own bed and watched him rip the sheets away and bundle them up in his arms. I followed him to the little laundry room at the end of the hallway, the bright light nearly burning my eyes. "Heero." I called him, but he stormed ahead of me. I watched him stuff the sheets into the laundry bin like he was trying to magically expel them from our world. Like the opening of the hamper was a gateway to a completely separate universe which we could conveniently use to get rid of our filthy sheets and confusing feelings. There was a desperation in his movements that frightened me. I took hold of his arm just as he slammed the lid closed. "Heero," I said firmly and a startled cobalt blue gaze settled on my serious face. "You don't have to be embarrassed." I added with a wink.

He didn't say anything, his eyes just glazed over with a stubborn resilience.

"Will you please just tell me what's wrong?"

"I said nothing is wrong." For some reason he clearly became frustrated with me. Perhaps I was prying, but I felt like I deserved, as much as needed, to know.

"Oh, so you're just storming through the house and glaring at me for nothing?"

"It just isn't normal, is it?" He suddenly wondered with raised voice, his eyes penetrating mine.
"Heero, masturbating and coming and all that stuff is perfectly normal..."

"That's not what I mean." He shot back and he sounded even more irritated.

I lost my patience with him, something that doesn't often occur, but how was I supposed to know what he means when his face is blank and his eyes are just angry and otherwise unreadable? I may not be as dyslexic at reading him as many others are, but I'm far from graduating on an academic level. Sometimes the literature on his face was just too subtle for me to deduce the sub context; the layers within layers; the meaning between the words. It is as frustrating not to be understood as it is not to be able to understand, he should know this! So in my frustration I practically yelled at him: "Then tell me what you do mean!"

"These things I'm feeling are not normal! And every time I forget... like... like when... just now... I hope that they are gone forever but then they just keep coming back!"

"What things?"

"Things that make me wish I was dead inside, like I used to be!" His voice had a higher pitch than normal, he sounded so vulnerable. He looked up at me, fully clothed, but suddenly naked. His eyes searched for answers I didn't have.

I was shocked. I was hurt. I struggled for words for a long time. I had to regain my composure first, because if I opened my mouth too soon, I knew I wouldn't be able to speak, I would just cry. "First of all," I finally started, "you were never dead on the inside. Never. Second of all, I know that it must hurt, it must be confronting, talking with Nettle and with me and it might feel like there are only bad consequences to letting yourself feel. But I promise you, it'll get better and soon the good will be in balance with the bad and after that, the good will outweigh the bad."

"How do you know?" He challenged, the long silence that it had taken me rightfully left him with a fair amount of disbelief.

"I've been through it."

He seemed momentarily taken aback. "When did the good start outweighing the bad?"

I smiled sadly. "The moment I met you." That sounded so naive, so overly romantic, so sappy and cliché, but it was the truth.

He looked down, I had clearly made him feel guilty that meeting me hadn't accomplished the same change in him.

I lifted his head up by his chin. "You'll get there too. I'm not offended that it takes you a little while. I'm honored that you are trying so hard for me."

Heero didn't say anything, he cast his gaze down to his bare feet. But I could tell that he had little faith in his own capabilities.

I didn't know what else to do. The only other thing I could do, was hug him. So I did. I slid my hands from his shoulders around his waist and pulled him tightly against me. His body appeared still and in control, the flashes of the face I saw, was an impassive one, but with our chest pressed together I could feel his heart beating wildly, lively. I whispered "I love you" in his uncharred ear.

"I love you too." Heero muttered against my shoulder. And then later an unconvinced, but heart warming: "Thank you."
"You're welcome buddy. And until you get there, I am more than happy to help you forget."

And there we stood, in the tiny space of our laundry room, with big feelings between us.

I disengaged our hug and excitedly announced that I was up for some Thai food. Heero dryly reminded me, with a quick dart of his eyes to his wrist watch, that it was past midnight and I glibly reminded him of the wonderful world of twenty-four/seven service. Trying to lighten the mood - in fact, I felt quite light in my heart, in spite of everything - I practically skipped around the apartment, towards the phone in the kitchen to order food and while I waited for the dial tone, I told Heero to "slip into something more comfortable." He just quirked his eyebrow at me, not getting the reference and left to change. There were four missed calls, all from the same number - school - but I ignored them.

For that night, we left our feelings with the laundry. For that night, the hamper did serve as a gateway to an alternative universe that allowed us to forget. For that night we were travelers without extra baggage and we enjoyed in-flight movies the likes of Casablanca, My fair lady and Breakfast at Tiffany's. Movies that would normally make me laugh, or feel uncomfortable, but those feelings were in my other suitcase.

Time went by swiftly, without either of us noticing. I popped in DVD after DVD and each time I sat back down on the couch, I sat down a little closer to Heero, so at the start we were sitting at opposite ends but by the third we were hip to hip and I had managed to subtly wrap my arm around his shoulder and somewhere halfway through Heero had leaned his head against me.

The first few movies seemed to have caught his attention like case studies, but when he realized these movies weren't reliable sources for the real world, he seemed to relax more.

Neither of us said anything, though I doubt either of us was as absorbed into the films as we might have appeared to be, till Heero raised his head off my shoulder a little and he wondered with a soft voice: "Is it getting light outside?"

My initial reaction had been: "Don't be silly" but then I realized that the credits which had just started to scroll were from the fourth movie and after a quick peer through the bay window, I had to agree with Heero. "I think you're right."

"You have to be at school in little over three hours." He noted, glancing down at his watch.

I shrugged. "I don't think so."

"No?"

"No." I turned to face him and smiled. "Let's go sleep."

Heero nodded, his eyes looked very tired. Even though as Gundam Pilots, we had gotten used to odd days and late hours, it's a rhythm you quickly lose track of. In peace time, you become attached to your eight hours of sleep every night and your warm shower every day and your hot dinner every evening.

I switched off the TV and the few lights - soon they wouldn't be necessary anyway - and shuffled after Heero to the bedroom. The rain that had lasted through the night had cooled the atmosphere and the chill it created was delicious, especially the feeling of crawling into your warm bed, leaving the cold behind. I didn't think much about it, but then I noticed Heero bending over in front of the closet, abouht to get out a new set of sheets. I smirked and for a moment, relinquished the warmth of my bed to crawl over to the footboard and hook four fingers into the elastic waistband of
his sweatpants and pull him away from the closet. Sitting back on my calves on the edge of his side of the bed, I turned him around and placed my hands strongly only his hips. "Don't be silly." I told him, looking up at him. I kissed his stomach through the thin material of his T-shirt and then tugged him along - ignoring any half hearted objections he might have had - across his bed, into mine. With him close next to me under the sheets, the warmth was even more cozy and comfortable.

Sunlight fought to break through the thick fabric of our curtains, the room grew a little lighter, but my eyelids were drooping and behind them was a peaceful darkness I welcomed. I waited for Heero to close his eyes, till he couldn't keep them open any longer. Then I closed my eyes as well. With the sense of sight eliminated, I focused on the feel and scent, liking how the dipping of the mattress under our weight only seemed to bring us closer together, liking how the sheets seemed to purposefully caress my body with every slight move Heero made, loving how my pillowcase started to smell like him.

God he smelled so great...

Even with my eyes closed, I was reluctant to let myself succumb to sleep, even though both my mind and my body craved it. I knew that once we would wake up, our baggage would have caught up with us again, all of the memories best forgotten and feelings of pain and despair, that tainted us, scarred us and deformed us and held a mirror to our faces to show us our old eyes, scarred bodies and calloused hands; outward symptoms of inside damage.

I dreaded the return to reality once my twisted sub-consciousness would be done entertaining me, but I could not fight it off much longer. For a moment my body felt so heavy, like weighted down with stones and then I was slipping away, drowning and I couldn't swim back to the surface. And then I was completely weightless, like my body didn't even exist anymore.

After a moving day like that, a dream was inevitable. In this one, I was aware that I was dreaming and I found it to be very annoying that I was. I was lying in my bed, Heero's bed wasn't anywhere, it was only mine. When I planted my feet down on the carpet next to the bed, I stepped into water, about three inches deep. Heero's bed wasn't the only thing absent from the room; there was no closet and no door to the bathroom. So I walked through the layer of dark water, my footfalls creating ripples that ruined my crisp reflection in the surface of the water, towards the door to the living room. I opened it and instead of it leading out to the living room as it should, I found a vast expanse of space, there was nothing in sight except for a blurred horizon where the black water met grey skies. Standing several yards away from me was Heero, staring down at the ground, or rather: at his own reflection in the shallow water.

"Heero?" My voice was so loud in the emptiness, but it seemed like Heero didn't hear me, he didn't respond at least. "Heero." I tried again. When my call went unanswered a third time, I walked up to him, even though I knew he wasn't real, just a projection of my sub-consciousness. However, when I started closing in on him, he frantically gestured for me to stop, to stay were I was. He never looked up at me, he kept staring at his mirror image.


His reaction was even more desperate, along with the hand gesture, he begged me: "Stop! Please! Don't come any closer!"

I stopped and looked down at my own feet. Only then did I realize that my steps were creating ripples that traveled across the entire surface of the water and as they reached him, they distorted his image. What I had yet to grasp was why this was so bad. I took another step and got the same, panicked reaction. His voice sounded like he was near tears and I wondered how my sub-
consciousness could possibly know what Heero would sound like when he was about to cry. It appeared I had been endowed with more creativity than I formerly realized, for obviously I had never seen or heard Heero any where near tears. "What's the matter?" I asked this unrealistic version of my boyfriend.

"Just please don't come any closer! Please stay away!" He never tore his eyes away from the water. His voice, though fake and farfetched, was heartbreaking.

"Heero..." I walked up to him anyway, the ripples running across his reflection. His face was one of anguish and despair, he obviously didn't like what he was seeing. Even though I knew it wasn't real, seeing him like that still made my heart clench. Yet I was too curious about the reflective image that had him so upset, to stay away. When I had been at the door and the water was still, his reflection looked like a perfect mirror image of him, nothing remarkable. I wondered what the ripples did, what they made him see that had him react like that.

Walking up to him, I kept my eyes trained on his face, studying the way his features moved in such an unfamiliar way, contorting between disgust, severe sadness and paralyzing fear. When I finally stood beside him, the water moving at our feet, I looked down. The image that I saw was nothing other than to be expected. I recognized the both of us, even though the image was misshapen. But as soon as I looked at him in the water, I felt sick, sick through my entire body, which started shivering violently. I felt pain on my skin, like knives slashing me and leather straps whipping me. I felt hands stroking my body that I want to push away, but can't. My hair was being pulled painfully and someone was shouting the most horrible words in my ear. It was J.

Next to me, the dream-Heero is screaming: "Look what you're doing to me!"

And then I woke up. I was back in the bedroom, this time including all the appropriate furniture and - most importantly - Heero at my side. It hadn't been that the climax of my dream had startled me awake, Heero had his eyes open as well. We had been awoken by the ringing of the phone coming from the kitchen. I sighed. "I'm sorry. It's probably school, or Sookie. Both probably want to kick my ass by now." And with that, reality started again, but I got out of bed realizing that the dream-Heero didn't nearly differ as much from the real Heero as I had initially thought. Both were afraid of what would happen to them if I got too close. The closer I got, the more painful truths the mirror reflected.

Against my wishes, I did the mature thing and I decided to answer the phone. After I said my name, I wondered how long the phone had been ringing, because there was a long silence coming from the other side of the line, like the person hadn't expected me to pick up and was waiting for the voicemail. Finally I recognized the voice from the lady at the administration desk as she introduced herself.

"I have principle Murphy on the line for you." She added.

I swallowed a lump. "Okay."

"Here she comes." She said, like she was referring to a natural disaster of choice in some nameless apocalyptic blockbuster.

Hurricane Murphy's voice resounded strongly through the telephone. "Duo Maxwell, I presume you know why I am calling?"

"Yes." I looked at Heero, making us breakfast at lunch time.

"I need you to meet me today. We obviously have something important to discuss. I've got many
upset phone calls from three sets of parents."

I defensively retorted: "They started it!" Maybe not so mature as I had intended.

"I know. There will be consequences for all of you. How does two forty-five suit you?"

I looked at the clock on an opposite wall. It was 13:20 already, but I could make it, so I consented.

"Good. I'll see you then. Goodbye."

"Bye." I accepted the sandwich Heero immediately offered me.

"And?"

"She wants to see me."

Heero, never having gotten himself in trouble at any of the schools we enrolled ourselves in as a cover, didn't know what that could mean. He was always the perfect student, I sometimes secretly blamed him if our cover was blown, no student is that perfect. Funny thing is, Heero used to blame me - albeit not as secretly.

"She's probably going to expel me. But, if I'm lucky, those other guys will get expelled too." I worked my way through breakfast quickly, keeping an eye on the clock. "What are you gonna do?"

Heero shrugged. "Maybe walk a little."

"Don't push yourself!" I warned him, even pointing that finger at him that I used to hate when it was pointed at me.

He didn't make any promises.

I showered the last of the tiredness off my body with the beat of cold water coming from the shower head. It was hard to relax, not because the temperature was freezing, but because Heero was in the bathroom as well, standing at the sink, just brushing his teeth. Oh hell, Heero could pick his nose and still turn me on.

I watched him through the frosted curtain and could see him more clearly than he could see me, thanks to the lighting. He was staring at his own reflection, even though the brushing he obviously did routinely and needed no visual feedback for. I, personally, was the type to drift away from the sink and walk around the room, fidgeting with things, trying to occupy myself till the two required minutes were up. Heero made a study of himself, those four minutes a day. I don't think there is a single pore on his face he hasn't scrutinized nor scolded.

I knew what I saw, when I looked at him. The most beautiful face I've ever seen. Sometimes it amazes me, just how perfectly handsome he is. But I didn't know what he saw when he looked at himself. Sometimes, when I caught a disdainful shift of his expression, I could swear he must not be seeing the same thing I did.

Once I was done, I boldly pulled the curtain back and stepped out onto the tiled floor in my birthday suit. I didn't even get the tiniest sideway glance.

I tendered my ego with a big fluffy towel, wrapping it around myself. Heero just finished, spitting the excess toothpaste into the sink and rinsing out his mouth. When he came back up, I had come to stand behind him and had joined him in the reflection. He looked at me with those brilliant eyes, his face was forlorn. With one arm I reached around him and readjusted a heavy lock of his bangs,
brushing it out of his eyes. "You are so stunning," I told him. This seemed to surprise him. He looked back at himself, as if to see what the heck I was talking about. I came to stand closer to him and kissed his ear and neck, never breaking our gazes in the mirror. "You are so crazy beautiful." I had to say it, it was a truth burning on my tongue, even though it clearly made him self-conscious and uncomfortable.

There was a brief silence and then a dry: "You are late."

It was so out of context, I didn't even realize what he was referring to. "What?"

"You need to be at school in twenty minutes." He explained flatly.

"Oh shit! Not again!" I dropped the towel to the floor and darted back to the bedroom. That shower must have taken me a lot longer than I realized even though I had purposefully neglected to wash my hair! I jumped into a pair of boxers and jeans and slowed down shortly to pick a presentably shirt, going for a neutral brown shirt because I always felt brown said something along the likes of: boring but responsible. My braid looked a little bit more disheveled than I would have preferred, but there was no time, I could not be late.

"Good luck."

I looked up at Heero as I was stepping into my shoes without socks. It left me with mixed feelings. Would I need it? Would it help? Did I even want it? But instead of sharing that bundle of confusion with him, I just said: "Thanks." I gave him a hasty kiss and then reminded him not to overexert himself. And then I was gone.

My instinct was to sprint, but I figured dark sweat stains on my back and under my armpits didn't really reinforce the message of the brown shirt and I calculated that I would make it on time with just a steady jog. When I arrived at school, classes were in session, the yard and the hallways were completely abandoned. I walked through the gate, right across the "crime scene". There had been blood on the flagstones yesterday, but the rain had washed everything away except for my guilt. I apprehensively made my way towards the principal's office. The lady at the reception desk gave me a meaningful, disapproving look. The door to the office was open, but I didn't step inside, I knocked on the doorframe politely.

Murphy looked up and when she saw me, she heaved a deep sigh. "Duo..." She looked at her watch. "Right on time."

If only she knew, I thought to myself.

She got up out of her chair and walked up to me, her expression was a strange mix of anger and sympathy. "Come on, the others are waiting."

"Others?" My heart dropped into my untied shoes, overwhelmed with sudden feelings of nervousness. I knew exactly what she meant with "others". I followed her down the hall, to where I knew the conference room was where they held the teacher meetings. Danny had managed to successfully stink bomb the place just this year.

She opened the door and gestured for me to step inside.

The foul odor that had been there to our amusement, was long gone, a foul atmosphere remained.

All seated at one side of the long conference table, were Danny, Eduardo and Parker, looking pretty shaken at the sight of me, but with a smug sense of justice on their lips regardless. They were all accompanied by a parent of their choice. Eduardo and Parker had brought their fathers,
sitting next to Danny was a sophisticated woman in a Chanel suit, she had the lawyer vibe to her, but all I could think was: Danny brought his mommy. It was clear, he looked like her.

The parents sent angry glares my way. I've never seen people look at me like that, not even when I was a filthy street rat.

"Sit down, Duo." The principal ordered. She sat down at the head of the table and I sat down across from the three boys and their parents. I realized I was sitting there all by myself, unlike them, I had no accomplices or parents to fall back on, I had only myself to make my defense. Being used to this, the sting in my heart was dull, mostly I just realized that I didn't need accomplices or meddling parents. It once more underlined how different I was from them and even though I was outnumbered, I felt stronger on my own, than they looked as a front of six people.

"Duo, this is Daniel's mother, Eduardo's father and Parker's father."

I nodded.

"I know tensions may be running high, but I want this meeting to proceed in a civilized manner." Murphy stressed, making eye contact with each individual. "Obviously this situation is complicated, what Duo did was wrong, but what your sons did was also wrong."

"Still, there was no reason for that kid to harass my son like that!" Parker's father barked. He was an overweight man and his tight black tank top barely covered his hairy chest. Even from across the table, I could smell the alcohol the moment he opened his mouth and Parker seemed to cringe as he spoke. I found myself feeling sorry for the boy.

"No, there is no justification, I know that. And right now we are not here to talk about what happened between your sons and Aston, that has already been dealt with. Now we need to focus-"

"Wait, dealt with?" I interrupted her, rendering my "boring but responsible" shirt moot. "How has it been "dealt with"?"

Murphy stared disapprovingly at me for a little while, before she answered: "Daniel, Eduardo and Parker have been suspended for a week-"

"Suspended?" I exclaimed in apparent shock.

Murphy ignored me and continued. "They will be in detention every school day for a month, during which time they will also serve lunch duty."

I scoffed. "This is ridiculous! They harassed him! Aston is probably never gonna come back here, he was completely traumatized!"

"Don't exaggerate, they hardly laid a finger on him." Danny's mother spat defensively.

"Hardly laid a finger on him? They pierced his ears with rusty, old nails! He had bruises on his face! His eyes were red and swollen from that make-up shit!" I nearly stood up out of my seat. I don't know why, but the God of Death reminded me that I could kill every single one of them and at that moment the suggestion was tempting. "At the very least they should be expelled!" I told Murphy.

"Duo, that is not for you to decide. This issue has already been settled, Aston's father was fine with it."

"That's because Aston's dad is as much of a homophobe as they are!"
"Duo, you will lower your voice right now!"

I bit back an insult for my own sake, but I was enraged. I glared at the three boys across from me. They got a mere slap on the wrist because they had the luck that even after so much time, many people still share the same ignorant hatred as them.

"Now, considering the circumstances and the fact that you were standing up for a friend, however wrong your methods were, they have already agreed that you do not need to be expelled either. But, considering that you did a lot of physical damage, such as cracked ribs and broken eye sockets, I do think you should be punished quite strictly. Because that kind of rage is not befitting for a young man. I know that having been more involved in the war than many kids on earth have been, might have changed things a little for you, but this behavior is inexcusable. So I was thinking two months of detention and mandatory participation in our weekly anger management class, headed by miss Colt, till graduation, because as she says in her psychology class, you can never stop working on anger issues."

"You're letting him off too easy." Eduardo's father mumble under his breath.

I looked at Murphy, she was waiting for me to agree with her, it almost seemed like she expected me to be grateful. "No." I said.

"No?"

"It's not fair."

"Not fair?" She repeated flabbergasted. "Most students get expelled in these kinds of situations!"

"Then why didn't I? Why didn't we? Anger management? What kind of bullshit is that? And what about them? Does Colt organize "homophobia management" classes as well? They just fold paper planes for an hour every day and serve lukewarm pasta and they're done! They are the real problem, a problem you should address! How can any other gay kid feel safe when you let assholes like them get away with harassing us?"

"You're a faggot too?" Parker's father asked, then he turned to his son. "You got beat up by a queer?"

"Yes, sir." I answered, looking at him sternly and dangerously across the table. "He sure did."

"Duo, if you continue this attitude I'm going to expel you after all." Principal Murphy warned.

"Not necessary." I got out of my seat. "I'm dropping out. Give me five minutes to clear out my locker and I'm out of here. I don't need to be around this... this poison." With that prompt decision, I left the conference room.

Murphy called after me, shocked, but I didn't respond and she didn't chase me. I understood, she had been forced into an awkward position, what I didn't understand was how she could live with the decision she had made to let those bullies get away with it. Though I, for one, felt completely at ease with my decision.

I reached my locker and ripped it open. I hadn't brought a bag, but there wasn't much to take anyway. Aside from the three textbooks which I would have to return to the school later, along with the others at home, I threw everything into a nearby garbage bin, even papers and projects that I had been working hard on, deceiving myself with the illusion that those assignments actually had some importance in the grand scheme of the world, or even just in my life. As I headed out, the bell rang, initiating the ten minute break students used to exchange books, go to the bathroom and
smoke. Crowds poured into the hallway and onto the yard. I practically had to elbow my way through them, holding the books to my chest with one hand and using the other to make my way through the masses.

A few yards away from the gate, I cleared the bustling crowd and in the open space I stopped dead in my tracks. The books almost dropped to the ground. Right where I had subdued Danny, Eduardo and Parker, just the other day, I found myself subdued, stunned frozen.

Waiting at the open gate, not even aware of my presence yet, was Heero, casually leaning against the brick wall, his gaze far away, his hands tucked into the front pockets of his deliciously tight jeans.

The inevitable smile on my face freed me and I walked up to him. As I closed the distance, he noticed me and looked up at me. "Heero." I breathed in awe and my smile only widened.

"Were you expelled?" He nodded at the books in my arms.

I shook my head. "No, actually, I quit."

His eyebrows drew up minutely. "Yeah? You can do that? Just like that?"

I shrugged. "I'm eighteen. As far as they know at least."

"No, I mean... you can do that, so suddenly? It doesn't bother you?"

"Yeah. All this shit... I just had an epiphany. I don't belong here." I looked back at the crowd full of young and naive faces. "I thought I still could be and part of me wish it was so, but... I'm not a kid anymore. For what it's worth, the war matured me and made me older and wiser than these kids will be for a long time to come. I can't be around them, it frustrates me." I looked back at Heero. "I want to be around you. I'm happy you came."

He shrugged like it didn't mean anything. "I wanted to take a walk anyway."

"Sure you did." I smirked.

Heero leaned in closer and whispered: "Some people are looking at us."

I didn't check, I'm sure there were. "Good." I closed the distance between us and kissed his lips lengthily. I vaguely registered some distant catcalls. I ended the kiss and with a smile suggested we head home.

Heero agreed.

I used my free hand to take hold of his, briefly catching him by surprise, but he didn't pull away and we comfortably held hands the whole way home. I wondered if my actions would reflect on Heero, if he too would have an epiphany and solve his situation according to his feelings, rather than his morality and would quit the Preventers as an active agent. But inspiring him was not why I did it - I wasn't that good - the further I was removed from school, the more normal I felt, because I wasn't trying to be something I was supposed to be, I was just me.
Part XXX - Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails

Warheads

Part XXX - Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails

The small space of the office had an unfamiliar feel to it. I had been avoiding the room for fear of drawing Heero into it as well, back to his laptop which currently collected dust on his desk by itself. Looking at the machine was almost painful, because I knew his heart was gathering dust as well. More and more I reconciled with the fact that Heero needed a purpose in his life that could not be met by the grind of household living. Sometimes I even felt guilty, even though it wasn't my fault he wasn't an active agent at the time. But I was the one who had to face the consequences, who had to face the reality. The one to watch him wither away on the couch, watching nature specials with clear disinterest. A lady of leisure he was not.

And neither am I, I thought with a quiet sigh and turned back in my desk chair to face the bookcase. I grabbed handfuls of textbooks by their spines and pulled them from the shelf. Neatly stacking them up on the surface of my own desk. History, English, Colonial Literature and Algebra, amongst others, weighed down on the furniture. What the fuck am I supposed to do? I asked myself inwardly as I pulled the last of the books from their designated spots. With the books gone, the bookcase was left completely empty. With every surface bare and Heero's black laptop becoming grey with layers of dust, the room looked abandoned. Looking around myself, I morosely wondered if it bore any resemblance to the interior of Heero's heart; sheltered and abandoned and only memories too painful to hang on the walls or display on the shelves.

I mindlessly fingered the feathering cardboard cover of "Engineering Basics", my elective class, one hour a week where I could use the skills I had long mastered and excelled in like no one else. One hour a week. Wasted potential. I realized there was a lot of wasted potential sharing this apartment, but I was too afraid to comment on it. My head incessantly reminded my heart that the world, with all it's violence and depravities, needed someone like Heero - and there was no one else like him, to replace him. But my heart stubbornly argued that Heero has given enough, he deserves a life that is his own, rather than a function that served the life of others. Both made a good point, but neither reflected the subtext: that I was too scared to let him go; too scared that if I will, he will not return to me - not in any other form than the way Levelt was returned to his family.

I cursed under my breath. When I promptly decided to quit school, I had no idea it would leave me in such an emotional predicament, struggling with this turmoil of contradicting thoughts and feelings. I guess when I was in school, it was easier to avoid the issue. There was nothing to consider, I was in school, that's what I did, no use contemplating what I should be doing and when my mind would stray to Heero, it was a matter of telling myself to pay attention to the information in the textbooks. Now it wasn't so easy. The textbooks were closed, they would be forever, I hadn't even the slightest intention of going back, but with my eyes and my mind free to roam I was confronted with matters I'd rather just ignore.

Through the thick fog of my own musings, I vaguely registered the sound of the bell ringing via the intercom. Knowing that Heero was in the kitchen and closer to the intercom, I remained seated, lost in thought, waiting for him to answer. But I couldn't dive back into my sea of thoughts, the ringing continued, at it's annoying pitch and kept resurfacing me. I frowned and focused my hearing. I could clearly hear Heero in the kitchen, putting away the dishes we had just washed. I was about to either rise to my feet and answer it myself, or call Heero's name - I hadn't yet decided - when he appeared in the doorway of the office, his expression halfway between blank an
uncomfortable, edging more and more towards uncomfortable with each ring of the intercom.

Finally, after refraining himself from biting his lip, he announced dryly: "Someone's at the front door."

I assumed my expression to be somewhere between blank and dumbfounded. "Yeah, so I gathered."

"Aren't you going to answer it?" He asked and I swore he fidgeted.

"Aren't you?"

He vehemently shook his head, looking embarrassed and apologetic.

I offered him a small smile, realizing he didn't want to answer, probably because he wouldn't know what to say and how to interact with whomever was ringing so persistently. "Okay. I'll answer it buddy." I tried not to make a big deal out of it, even though to me it was and to him it should be, getting up from my seat and walking past him. Heero remained where he was, but his eyes were focused intently on me, I could feel his gaze burning holes in my shirt and heating the skin underneath. It seemed he was observing me for future reference, even though I doubted he would ever be willing to face a stranger by himself, even with the safety of the intercom.

As Heero watched, I answered the ringing of the intercom. Before I could even muster a coherent greeting, my whole train of thought was derailed by a loud voice coming through the low quality speaker. The voice said just my name, my full name, in an accusing and dangerous voice and even though it was a tone I wasn't familiar with, I recognized the voice and the accent anywhere and unwittingly greeted with a chipper note: "Hey Sooks."

"I'm here with Aston, buzz us in." She continued in that ominous tone.

"Uh, okay." I briefly glanced over at Heero, who was completely impassive. I pressed another button and through the intercom I could hear the front door of the building buzz and unlock. The line was disconnected and I knew they would be at the door in a matter of seconds, so my gaze swept across the room to ensure it was presentable and landed on Heero. "You don't mind, buddy?"

"I'll just wait in the bedroom." He said monotonously.

"What? No!" I whined childishly and chased after him before he could flee the living space. "Please stay. They're my friends, they're harmless. For the most part." I jested, wrapping my arms around his waist and looking into his eyes.

"They are your friends." He emphasized and he looked away, something sad and pitiful flashing in his blue orbs.

"Please?" I softly begged, holding him to me a little closer. I was about to lean in for a gentle kiss when a determined knock on the door sounded. He gave me the slightest nod, so slight he could later deny ever consenting, should the situation require so. I reluctantly moved away from him - Heero stood nailed to the floorboards - towards the door to open it. Before turning the knob I looked back at him over my shoulders, standing there resembling a pillar of strength, but I knew him to be hollow for the most part, his strength limited to an outer facade that successfully created the illusion of inner strength. But even the slightest crack would expose a dark void inside.

"Hey guys, how are you?" I tried to inquire lightheartedly as my eyes immediately fell on Aston's defeated frame, my gaze lingering on his purple and yellow bruise across his cheek and the clumpy bandages on his earlobes.
Sookie pushed past me and once she had claimed her space in the living room, she started: "Will ya tell me why the hell I just had to hear from Danny's smug lips that ya quit school?"

"Oh." I sputtered, unprepared for her demanding question. I stalled by guiding the more withdrawn character of the two inside and with the four of us just standing in our chosen spots, each with their own thoughts and expressions to match, I realized I still didn't quite know what to say, so I politely offered everyone a drink.

However, before anyone could accept my generosity, Sookie waved her hand at me. "Hellooo? I asked ya a question."

Based on her demeanor, I knew what I should start with. I apologized to her, not for quitting school, but for not telling her. This sincere apology seemed to deflate her anger significantly and even made her shoulders slump. She stared at me for a long time, biting the inside of her cheek, before she finally spoke: "Water would be nice."

I smiled and hurried to get her and Aston a glass of cool, fresh water - Heero wordlessly refused. From the kitchen I could hear Sookie greeting Heero, a sentiment echoed quietly by Aston. I didn't hear Heero.

"Please, sit down." I said, returning to the living room to find everyone where I left them. Aston still by the door, Sookie in the middle of the open space and Heero close to our bedroom. I guided them to the sofa and the big lounge chair. Heero inched closer, but didn't sit down with us. "I really am sorry I didn't tell you Sooks, yesterday was so surreal..." I commented.

"It sure did piss me off hearin' it from Danny. Why did ya quit? I mean, I know what happened, but why did ya quit?"

Aston bowed his head, his hands cupping the cold glass of water.

"It made me realize that I don't really fit there anymore." I couldn't say much more on the matter, Aston didn't know the truth and he never would, but I shared a meaningful look with Sookie that seemed to dawn understanding to her eyes. "And what they did to Aston was cruel. To have them get off with a slap on the wrist changed things for me. Made the entire environment unacceptable. I really couldn't stand it, not even a second longer. What was Danny even doing at school, I thought he had at least been suspended for a week."

Sookie shrugged. "Don't know. He didn't attend classes. Probably just came to gloat. Ya quitin' doesn't bring any justice. Those douchebags think they've won, that they ran ya out."

I chuckled. "No they didn't. They know exactly what happened. But I'm fine with whatever they want to make people believe. They know the truth and it'll gnaw at them."

"What exactly did ya do?" Sookie asked with a mischievous wink.

"Kicked their asses, that's what I did. They asked for it. They had to be put in their place."

"It doesn't stop 'em from still being the biggest assholes in school." Sookie briefly looked at Aston, who seemed to withdraw himself from the conversation. "They may have not run ya off, but they did chase away Hunter. He is gonna transfer to another school because they wouldn't let him play on the basketball team anymore. The coach has nothing against homosexuality, but all riled up by Danny, the entire team petitioned Hunter to leave and when the coach tried to bring him back, those damn kids got their parents involved."

"Oh Jesus. I'm sorry Aston."
The young boy shrugged.

"Are you feeling better?" My eyes were drawn to his bandaged ears.

"I'm fine."

"Are they giving you guys any shit?" I asked protectively.

Aston looked away, his fingers fidgeting with loose threads from his worn jeans. "I haven't been back yet."

"Just the same old." Sookie responded, as the silence in the living room grew to be especially tense and uncomfortable.

I sighed, looking over at Heero who was still idly standing by, pretending not to be listening, his face a disinterested, stone mask. "I wish things would just change. Every time you think it has, things just go back to the way they were."

"Maybe ya could come back sometime and kick their asses in front of everyone. Show those ignorant douches that gay guys are still real men, even by their non-imaginative, straight perception of what a real man should be like." Sookie suggested jokingly. She turned in her seat and said to Heero: "Ya should come too, maybe make out a lil'?"

Heero's lips grew stiff with discomfort and his eyes shifted towards me. The untrained eye would not have seen the blush on his cheeks, but my eyes were experts when it came to the minimalist expressions of Heero's face. I gave him a warm look, hoping it would reassure him.

Suddenly, Sookie admitted with an uncharacteristically soft-spoken voice: "I'll miss ya." And she looked away as if ashamed.

We would still be friends, whether or not we attended classes together or not. She knew that, I did not need to remind her, or assure her. But things would be different, our lives would be different and therefore our friendship might have to shift and evolve as well. So I responded: "I'll miss you as well." We shared a look and even though we didn't waste any more words on the matter, I knew that our eyes made promises to each other, a promise that I intended to keep: to fight for our friendship, no matter what.

I turned to Aston, who seemed to be cowering and shrinking in his seat. With a mild tone I assured him that he need not blame himself for the way things had transpired. Danny, Eduardo and Parker deserved the punishment they received at my hand and I willingly acted out their sentence. Nothing he could have said, would have changed anything and I finished with a smile that I hoped would convince him and ease him of his self-inflicted mental punishment. Furthermore I made both of them promise me to inform me if the threesome started giving them serious trouble, so I could help in, in the most primitive, yet effective manner I knew.

"What are you going to do now?" The blonde boy wondered.

I didn't have the answer to that yet. "I don't know."

"Will you go to another school?"

I chuckled bitterly. "Definitely not. I didn't leave because of them, Aston. I left because of me. I'm getting too old for this shit." I joked with a grin.

"How will you find a good job without a diploma?" Aston's inquiry continued, he sounded
genuinely concerned for my well-being, still burdened by the illusion that he was the cause of my current situation.

I shared a brief look with Heero whose steadfast gaze affirmed my notion that achieving a diploma wasn't much more complicated than locating the right database - hacking it posed an ever lesser challenge. I answered carefree: "I'm sure I'll land on my feet. I have certain, unrivaled skills."

Sookie bowed her head and hid a smirk behind her tall glass of water.

Aston just went "oh" and although being the genius that he was, never thought much of it. Looking at his sullen face I pitied him, even though pity never did anyone any good. As a soldier, my instinct is to fight and defend, but the enemy facing him and threatening him was not one I could challenge to a fist-fight. It was that bit of ignorance and selfishness that was once in all of us at one point, only those who dared to open their eyes were ever enlightened. Danny and the others had kept their eyes tightly shut and I didn't know if I - if anyone - could ever open them far enough to see the truth. To see that only thanks to Hunter did they enjoy a long-lasting winning streak on the court, until last Friday. To see that Aston would probably later come to invent or theorize something that they soon could not imagine their life without. To see that Sookie's warmth and care is the most resilient and she will make every person in her life most happy, like only few people truly can.

Not to mention that four of the five young men largely responsible for protecting justice and their very lives, are gay and amongst them. But of course they must never see that.

All I could do was hope, hope that one day things would change. Just like I used to hope that the war would come to a positive end.

Again I looked at Heero and I smiled at him. It would be good to see him bursting free from the restrictive shell of the soldier, but I should never forget what he once risked his life for to achieve. I was one of the few to know, one of the few to be awed. Heero surely never asked for acknowledgement, nor gratitude, he was a true, selfless hero, content with anonymity, but I presumed there would be no harm in reminding him once a while how amazing he was then. And how amazing he is now, for completely different reasons. He wouldn't take the compliment well, no doubt, but like me, he should never forget either.

He quirked an eyebrow at me as my stare had unwittingly grew inappropriately lengthy. I just brightened my smile and adored the confused perplexity across his features.

"I guess we'd better go." Sookie announced, finishing her water. "I promised my grandparents I'd be back to make dinner. Ya both should join us sometime." She suggested, looking at Heero and me.

I didn't think Sookie or Aston could feel it, but I immediately sensed the air became dense, solidifying, becoming rigid as did Heero's entire form, it was a little harder for me to breathe, but I managed. "Maybe someday. We'll see when we are ready." And the air became breathable again.

"Okay." Sookie hugged me and kissed me on my right cheek. "Don't be a stranger, okay? Yer not gonna get rid of me this easy."

"You call quitting school easy?" I challenged playfully.

"Honey, I've had people send me across state borders to get rid of me. Yer lazy ass attempt isn't gonna cut it."
I cast my gaze down. With "people" she meant her parents, not quite the doting type. With that constant twinkle in her eyes and that smile on her full lips, one would never guess she's seen hardship too. I admired her for that. At the same time, something inside me just hurt. How much heartache can a person suffer till that possibility of a smile vanishes forever, like the memory of a skill you no longer posses.

I sighed, my heart was exhausted from aching.

Sookie brushed off her comment and hugged me again before stepping out through the front door.

Aston paused in front of me before he followed her across the threshold. He hesitated momentarily and then looked up at me to say: "Thank you."

"Don't sweat it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. But I hope I'll never have to."

He nodded and then he, too, left.

I locked the door behind them. Part of me felt the burden of guilt, for leaving them in a hostile environment. It was like leaving a man behind in the gun-powdered fog of a battlefield. "Fuck." I muttered to the closed door, leaning my forehead against the wooden surface. I turned around and faced Heero, looking at me curiously. "If something happens to them..." I tried to explain.

"Something already did. And you saved him and avenged him." Heero calmly spoke. "If something happens again, you will be there for them again."

I smiled gratefully, even though it only eased my heavy feelings slightly. "Just like old times." I commented, briefly being a willing victim to nostalgia. Heero never left a man behind. The memory of his face lighting up white in the beam of light from the freight train was clear and vivid. I walked up to him and slung an arm around his shoulders. I kissed him on his cheek, enjoying the surprise in his eyes and the vague blush on his cheekbones. "Come on." I said and I guided him towards the office I had been emptying out, "let's go get me a diploma." I sat him down in his desk chair and booted up his laptop. As it hummed to life I had a strange feeling, like more was being booted up than a machine, but I shrugged it off as silly, which it was, which most of my concerns were, though persistent.

It was a simple enough hacking job, I could have done it myself, but I wanted Heero to do it, hoping that it would boost his confidence, after being confronted with so many things he was uncertain about and unfamiliar with.

Heero's fingers quickly found their rhythm ghosting across the keys, his intense eyes fixed on the blue screen with white lettering scrolling by fast. "We have to input some grades." He commented.

I leaned in and smugly said: "Why not make them all A's?"

Heero shot a look at me. "It would be suspicious."

I frowned. "What, like no one ever graduates with just A's."

"You wouldn't." Heero muttered under his breath and he ignored my request, but flattered me by not giving me a grade south of B minus.

Once he finished the list and inputting all of my personal information, I looked the form over. There it was, my high school diploma, attained in less than ten minutes, only an "ENTER" away. If only all of life's goals could be accomplished that easily. I had a knot in my stomach, guilt again, but it was negligible. My eyes traced the information one last time, not because I had no faith in
Heero, but because I needed that extra moment. I had never done things the easy way, cheating my way through life taking shortcuts and unjust advantages. But how easy had it honestly been to get here? How much blood have I shed? How many tears? I took in a deep breath. "Okay. Let's do it."

Heero’s finger tapped the "ENTER". The computer processed briefly and then the screen went entirely blue, except for a single line of text in the top left corner.

INPUT COMPLETE.

And that was that.

I darkly joked: "Aren't you going to congratulate me on my academic success?"

"Congratulations." He replied dryly. "Regrets?" He added as an after-thought.

"Not about this. Just about the things that led me here."

"The fight you mean?"

"No." I smiled sadly. "Getting in a dark limousine one midnight on L2." I leaned in and pressed my cheek against his. I closed my eyes for a moment, enjoying the feel of his skin against mine. I draped one arm over his shoulder, across his chest, feeling his torso move as he breathed. "Luckily good came out of that too. A lot of good." I tilted my head and kissed him. I chuckled. "How do you think we would have been if we hadn't..."

"I don't believe there is much use in considering the "what if's"." He stated stubbornly.

In spite of his comment, I asked him: "Do you think we would have met if we hadn't become Gundam Pilots?"

"No." He replied adamantly. "We we're living on different colonies. The odds of meeting would have been unfavorable, to say the least."

"Then I take it back. Then I have no regrets, about any of it." I kissed his cheek, then the corner of his mouth, then his full lips. Resisting the urge to deepen the kiss, I teased his lips with mine with just a feather light touch of skin against skin. My hand was at the back of his neck, but I slid it up to bury my long fingers in the softness of chocolate colored hair. I twisted my fingers into the strands and pulled his head back to give me more freedom to claim his mouth. He welcomed my tongue with ever-hesitant, exploring touches of his own. My left hand had been dangling down the side of my body passively, but by then it had taken a strong grip on my loose fitting jeans to prevent myself from guiding that hand down his abdomen for a remake of last night's erotic episode. Even though every fiber of my body yearned to touch him more, truly yearned, wanting it so much that not having it hurt.

Maybe he yearned for my touch as well. He had a hard time sitting still in the chair. His sweaty palms were rubbing back and forth on the armrests and he kept slightly shifting in the seat. But it didn't matter if he, too, experienced yearning. The only thing it would mean was that we would both be denied and we both suffer pain, because a reigning part of me was adamant not to take it further than I had by evolving our lip-lock into a passionate French kiss. My body felt that the most important things in the world right now is sex, but those are hormones whispering false nothings in my ear, I knew. Nothing should be rushed. Nothing should ever make him feel like he had no choice, like I forced him, like he didn't want it himself. Nothing should ever remind him of-

I broke the kiss, suddenly startled by my own thoughts and accompanying image.
"What?" He innocently asked with ill-feigned concern.

"Nothing." I managed. I lifted one corner of my mouth in a quasi smile. I stroked my hand through his hair and placed a final, light kiss on his lips.

The cruel and unusual workings of the world. It seemed I was more bothered by Heero's molestation than he himself was. I blinked a few times to clear away the image of a bulky, horny teen towering over a young and frail, barely recognizable version of Heero. A version that kept returning to my eyes each time I laid them on Heero, his frailty became increasingly apparent to me, to the point that I started to become afraid to touch him, afraid of what would or could be broken. And just when I thought I was looking upon the real him, he would freeze over with something cold and impenetrable and my heart clenches.

I looked in his eyes and saw a defiance that soothed me, even though maybe this defiance best be gone, for him and for me. It was this defiance that kept us immobilized in both the physical space and the space of time. It was comforting to see he was still the same, still himself - it meant he was still strong - but at the same time it placed a heavy burden on my heart making every beat one in duress - it meant he would never be happy with himself.

What a conflict to find yourself in Duo, I told myself later that day, watching what appeared to be an empty shell lying stretched out on the couch with glazed eyes aimed at the television screen. I barely struggled through my own issues of adjusting and changing, how much of a helping hand could I possibly be to him? For a moment it felt like my heart didn't have the strength to beat anymore, with the weight crushing down on it. Love is a burden like wings. It can make you fly, but it's a heavy weight on your back. Someone once whispered that in my young ears. I didn't know what it meant back then.

Now I know all too well.

"Something wrong?"

I blinked at Heero, making contact with his cool eyes underneath his curious frown. I lowered my hand, it had been covering my heart. It started beating again, relieving some of the aching I felt. "Fine." I lied. I just didn't know how to tell him the truth. The truth that being with him was hard on my mind - which already felt impossibly old - and hard on my body - which was young, vital and did not share any of my heart's concerns.

When we went to bed, the closeness of our bodies I only interpreted as a snide remark to the distance between our spirits. Heero succumbed to sleep quickly, the ease with which his consciousness could depart his body always made me jealous as I spent nights tossing and turning, fighting with myself. Certain he was asleep as the alarm clock just read 02:00, one of my arms snaked towards him, slipping under his sheets. As always he was turned away from me and my hand found his back, covered with the thin grey fabric of my borrowed TAMPA high shirt. I wouldn't be needing it anymore, but I'd be damned to give it back, I enjoyed it far too much to see him wearing clothing of mine.

I splayed my hand against his back, the tips of my fingers slightly moving, feeling the soft cotton and absorbing the warmth underneath. My hand trailed down, down to the hem of the shirt, I was touching his ass, lightly and had to refrain myself. I brought my hand back up, but close to his body, so on it's way up it would slip under his shirt and run across smooth skin and the slight bumps of his spine. I kept my hand to his body, not moving it, just enjoying the feel of his torso as his ribcage moved with each sustaining breath. I could even feel the beat of his heart underneath my palm. It lulled me to sleep, but not before I allowed myself to fantasize.
In this fantasy we shared a double bed, a real double bed, we were spooning against each other and we were both naked, presumably because we just had satisfying sex. I was breathing in the scent of his hair as my hand lazily caressed his chest, sometimes brushing a nipple, but with no intent. The fantasy wasn’t about sex, it was about feeling comfortable with each other, about closeness. About lying together and touching intimately and just have it be an extension of your state of minds. Unison in body and in soul, trust in an unwavering stability, void of unbearable memories and inexperienced social behavior.

When I woke up, my hand was laying on a cold and empty mattress, hardly the closeness I craved. A quick glance at the clock revealed that it was long past the hour I usually parted with my bed, but I realized I had no interest, much less motivation, to get up and leave the warmth and comfort of the sheets and my perfectly fluffed pillow. With no school to rush off to, I gave in to the fact that I felt so very tired, my eyelids drooping. I briefly struggled to keep them open, but I was overpowered. They slid closed. When I forced them open again it had seemed like only a second had passed, like I had only blinked, but the alarm clock told a different story. It was almost noon. I argued with myself that I deserved a day to rest and surprisingly I was able to find sleep yet again, shortly after that.

I woke up a third time that day to Heero's face, very close to my own. He seemed a little surprised and embarrassed when I suddenly opened my eyes and stared into his. After a few moments of just looking at me with his mouth agape, he asked: "Are you ill?"

"Just tired." And I enforced my point with a particularly tired smile.

"Shouldn't you eat?"

"I'm not hungry. Just tired."

"You'll disturb your natural rhythm." He pointed out dryly, masking his concern in a way that may have fooled anyone other than me.

I grinned. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

He frowned his adorable frown, admittedly I wasn't making much sense. He left me alone and soon I slept again. I don't think the tiredness was sudden, I think it has been lurking in my subconscious for a long time, maybe since the war ended, maybe since the war started, maybe since I got into that black sedan or maybe since I watched the orphanage burn down, the flames reflected in my welled up eyes. I cashed in on sick days I had never gotten, trying to regroup myself. Hoping dreams would bring answers to my questions, but they were all surreal and incoherent. The most memorable of which was not even an event, experience, or a sight, just a feeling that I was impossibly small, dwarfed by something impossibly big.

Heero surprised me pleasantly. He took care of me. He came with offerings of food and water. He wouldn't wake me up, he'd just sit on his own side of the bed, cross-legged and sometimes I woke up to him watching me and he'd promptly offer me a piece of fruit, a sip of coffee, or tea and sometimes placed a cool washcloth over my forehead, opening up the possibility to me that I might have a fever, but I didn't register it. He was confused by my behavior, I could see the questions in his eyes. It was painful looking at them, it left me with a guilty feeling, a feeling of letting him down, of disappointing him. But the best thing I could do about that at that time was close my eyes to his aching gaze. I wasn't ready to wake up yet. There were things I hadn't decided yet, things I preferred to know before I'd venture back into life.

Like, what the fuck was I going to do with my life? Who was Duo when he wasn't a soldier and wasn't a student? My mind trailed back to the purposeless life I led on the streets when I was an
unrecognizable young child, my braid a mere ponytail reaching no farther down than that bump of
my spine low on my neck. I didn't want to return to an aimless existence like that, I had promised
someone important that I wouldn't.

I just couldn't see myself grinding away life behind a desk, performing some mediocre job that was
in the realms of possibility for any mortal soul. My ego valued me higher than that. But what else
was out there for an "eighteen year old" with a "high school diploma", with an "uneventful youth
on L2", who is supposed to have no more extraordinary skills than the next post-high school kid?
Who is supposed to have no more combat experience than level 23 of "DEF CON 2" and no more
strategic insight than a ten-win-streak on "IN COMMAND: strategic warfare". All my skills and
life experiences rendered moot because I wasn't supposed to have them beyond the two-
dimensional world of a computer screen.

I sighed and opened my eyes. I didn't even know what day it was, but I knew the rest of my life was
waiting for me and getting impatient with my second guessing. Whoever would have expected me
to be such a cry baby about it? "Shut up and do it, boy." G barked at me on the precipice of
completion of my very first mission, the ear piece crackling as his loud voice came through. "We
didn't spend all that money on you to have you chicken out!" That voice said in my ear and even
though he was miles away and I could have disappeared forever and he would have never found
me, that night a fifteen year old boy, stricken with tears, shot a man - a father, a brother, a son, who
knew? - between the eyes.

And here I fooled myself into thinking I was so much different from Heero. The greatest deceit.
The part of us that is repulsed by what we are, is equaled by the part that knows it's who we are
supposed to be.

I turned over on my back and spread out my arms. The room was hot and humid, outside the sun
was shining brightly and even the thick curtains were defenseless. The door was closed so the
bedroom could not benefit from the air-conditioning in the living room. My thin white tank top
stuck to my chest and my back and my braid, a disheveled mess, felt heavy and hot across my
bicep. My ears perked when I heard the front door open and someone entered the apartment. I was
tense only briefly. However strange it may sound, Heero's footsteps were instantly familiar to me,
even when he doesn't limp. He has this confidant, strong walk, I always liked to compare it to an
advancing tank, formidable and unstoppable. Even in these times that were so strange and alien to
him, he had never lost that gait. I think it's a "wounded gazelle" kind of thing, an animal of prey,
like a gazelle, tries to hide any evidence of it being wounded or sick as good as it can, or otherwise
it would make itself vulnerable to attack from a predator, which are always lurking.

Less than a week out of school, almost all of it spent unconscious in bed, and I already had seen too
many nature specials.

The bedroom door open, fresh air drafted in.

He definitely looked wounded. His forehead was scarred with a deep, tired and confused frown, his
eyes were dark and heavy lidded, unreadable pools of cobalt blue. His shoulders looked weak and
slumped but his fist was gripping the doorknob like he was strangling any possibility of life out of
the inanimate object. Suddenly he became aware of my eyes on him and the animal of prey hid his
weakness behind a stone facade that expressed with mild surprise: "You're awake."

"Barely." I frowned, concerned what may have happed while I was out. "Do you want me to get
up?" I asked, and I hope that he understood that I meant: "Do you need my help with anything?"

"No." He shook his head, but his bangs didn't move, they were plastered to his forehead, it must be
really hot and humid outside. "In fact, I want to lay down."
"Join me." I invited and removed my spread out arm from his bed, knowing that he might feel uncomfortable otherwise.

Heero sat down on the edge and toed off his shoes. He relaxed his shoulders and rolled his neck before laying down, it helped with cramping of the muscles around his previously dislocated shoulder, that would start to bother him if he lay on it too much. He settled on his back, kicking the sheets away. Luckily he had kept the door open, so some cool and dry air seeped in and offered some relief from the near tropical climate in the bedroom.

"Did it help?" He asked, his voice soft and breathy.

I looked over, his eyes were closed, his mouth was slightly open. His skin was covered with a sheen of sweat that enhanced the golden tone of his complexion. "Did what help?" I asked in return, my overly concerned mind battled the carefree desires of my body.

"Sleeping for three days straight."

"Oh... No. I don't think so."

"Damn." He muttered. "Does anything help?"

"With what?"

"With... life."

"Nope... Only one thing you can do and that is live it and hope for the best." I replied, trying to sound lighthearted.

"Than why have you been hiding out in here?" He shot back and sounded accusing.

I shrugged. "I'm not perfect Heero. I don't have all the answers, you know that. Sometimes I hit a brick wall, just like you and I'm stuck and can't figure out what to do." I looked at him and caught him staring contemplatively at the ceiling.

"Who do you go to to help you figure it out?" He asked in a tone that implied he already knew the answer.

No one, I had no one to turn to, not really. That's messed up, I realized. The blind leading the blind. I was leading Heero, but who was leading me?

"So what can't you figure out?" He asked after a long silence.

I smiled at his endearing, possibly unintentional attempt to help. "What I'm going to do with my life..."

His frown intensified. "I thought you were happy with your decision."

"I am. I just hadn't completely thought out my plan."

He snorted, but it was amused. "That seems to be a recurring problem with you."

I rolled over onto my side to face him with a stupid grin. "Heero Yuy. Did you just now crack a joke?" I teased and poked him in the side. Ah yes, I remember now, we are teenagers somewhere inside.

"No." He said stubbornly.
"I'm quite certain that you did."

"I didn't." He said but he struggled with a chuckle that made it past his lips halfway.

I laughed, but it died out as I saw the merit vacating Heero's eyes.

"Nettle wants me to visit Levelt's grave." Heero suddenly said and he seemed to deflate.

I was momentarily stunned, the change of subject and mood had caught me completely off guard and my tongue struggled mutely for an embarrassing expanse of time. When I found my composure I managed: "You went to see Nettle today?"

"Yes. It's Friday."

Oh, right. I propped my head up on my arm to look at his face. He looked like he too could use a day or three of sleep. But he didn't just look tired, he looked tired of something, of himself I think, of these emotions that he just couldn't seem to master and maybe never would, not nearly as much as he desired. "Why does she want you to visit his grave?"

"I don't know." He replied in an agitated tone. "I don't get anything she does or wants me to do."

"Do you want to visit his grave?"

"No." The answer was quick an adamant.

"Maybe that's why. Because you feel so strongly about not going." I offered carefully.

"I see no use in visiting a grave. What good does it do Levelt to have me visit his body?" He questioned with an arch of his eyebrow as he stubbornly folded his arms across his chest.

"Well..." I started, delaying to map out my words, "if there is one thing that I learned when I was a young kid at the orphanage adjacent to the graveyard is that people don't visit the dead for the sake of the dead. They do it for themselves. You are right, it's not going to matter to Levelt, but it could matter to you. And obviously Nettle wants you to go for you, not for Levelt."

"That is selfish." He argued.

"Maybe. But maybe you deserve to be a little bit selfish. I think with saving the world twice and all it won't bring your Karma out of balance."

"You want me to go." He stated, narrowing his eyes at me.

I did, I was curious how it would affect him, I hoped positively. But I didn't admit to that. "I want you to do what you want to do." That was not a lie.

"I'll think about it."

And that was that.

I wanted to close the distance between us and kiss him, for no good reason other than the fact that I loved him more than I imagined possible, but I suddenly became acutely aware of the fact that I had not showered nor brushed my teeth in three days, so close proximity was probably not particularly desirable for the progress of intimacy in our relationship.

I finally got out of bed. Life continued and I was determined to stink less as it did.
The cold water from the showerhead washed my body clean but not my mind. I indulged in dirty thoughts that no matter how low I turned the temperature, could not be subdued. Lust was driving me insane, sometimes I was afraid the lust would grow so powerful that it would even overshadow the love and it might let me do something that love would never let me do. I pushed away any sense of guilt to the best of my abilities and at the same time focused my efforts on keeping quiet as I masturbated under the cold spray of water. I leaned my arm and forehead against the tiled wall as I neared climax. I bit my lip as I brought completion to my sin. Yes, my sin, that's what it felt like. That's what it feels like when you fantasize about having sex with your boyfriend when he has been violated and abused.

Was our life always this fucked up and did I only just come to realize it?

I gave my body a final wash and aimed the showerhead at the wall to clean off the mess I had made.

Over dinner I must have been sulking, because Heero kept staring at me. Our meal was - as is often the case - brought to us in cardboard boxes, but for once we decided not to consume it in front of the television, but rather at our diner table, supposedly to create some normalcy. I struggled with the chopsticks more than I usually did, it was difficult to focus and control my fingers with Heero's gaze assaulting me, it was like a laser trained on my forehead, trying to gain entry to my brain and spill all it's thoughts out over the table for him to dissect and understand.

I looked down at my mu shu pork and suddenly lost my appetite. It seemed my mind could not only provide detailed visuals to my more erotic fantasies, but to the more gruesome ones as well. I stuck my chopsticks in the food like a flag post and pushed the box away from me.

Heero, still studying me, raised an eyebrow. As time had progressed he had learned to read me increasingly well and though it was cause for hope, I also grew to realize the disadvantages of this newly acquired understanding of my behavior, mannerisms and facial expressions. So he noted with a scrutinizing gaze: "You haven't had a decent meal in three days, yet you're already done with it?"

"Didn't burn much energy, so I don't need to replenish much." He didn't fall for that, of course, we had spent too much time together of the course of several years that seemed long one moment and short the other. He knew I never passed up on the opportunity of food. So before he could shoot his next, skeptical question, or bomb me with a dry remark, I confessed: "I just have a lot on my mind."

"Like what?"

"Like..." I sighed. "It's not important."

He looked down at his own meal and picked at it with his chopsticks without any clear intent to eat any particular piece of stir fried vegetable. "Important enough to thrash around in bed for three days." He mumbled to his chap choi.

"It's just complicated." I rubbed my eyes with my palms, I didn't want to talk about it because I didn't want to think about it. I told him that, hoping he would understand and drop the subject.

He snapped his head up to look at me. His eyes were openly bewildered and then narrowed to glare my way in anger.

Without him even saying anything, I realized my own hypocrisy. After all, the past few months both I and Nettle have been forcing Heero to talk about the things he didn't even want to remember,
arguing that it could possibly do him good, which I still believed. I was being unfair and unreasonable. Didn't I just say to myself how much more alike Heero and I are than I previously thought? Why should different rules apply to him as opposed to me? What was good for him, surely would be good for me. The same logic applied. "I'm sorry." I said. "You're right, it's not fair of me to deal with this in secrecy. We're going to share things."

His eyes softened slightly at my genuine apology.

"It just hit me..." I tried to explain, my hands making meaningless gestures above the surface of the table. "I don't know where to go from here."

"You could join the Preventers."

I blinked at him. I knew him better than to dare to think he was making a joke - two in one day would be especially unlikely - but I naively hoped he wasn't being serious.

Heero caught my stare and interpreted it as intended. "You don't have to become a field agent."

"You don't have to become a field agent." He explained. "The Preventer agency offers lots of positions. I don't presume you'd have any trouble applying for a function within the agency." He looked up at me pointedly. "You have excellent credentials."

I sighed. Though I dreaded molding myself into a uniform that, no matter which way you put it, was associated with violence - however necessary for the maintenance of peace - Heero's point was indisputable. Only when applying at the Preventer agency could I list "co-savior of the world" on my résumé. But did I really want that? Wasn't this new life about leaving the old one behind, shedding it like an old skin that had lost its purpose? I scoffed inwardly, my options were limited in the most pessimistic sense of the word. What kind of job offers are available with a young man my - fake - age with just a - fake - high school diploma and no official experience in any field?

Still, the thought of being lured back... scared me.

"No." I said and I shook my head determinedly, even though I wasn't nearly as certain as I tried to portray. "But I take it this means you've been looking into alternative options?"

"I talked with Une briefly. She expressed willingness to place me in any position I desired."

I chuckled.

"What?" He asked innocently.

"You make it sound like she made some sort of perverse sexual offer." I explained sniffling.

"You know what I mean." He retorted, annoyed.

"Yes, I'm sorry." I picked up a single chopstick and stirred my dinner but my appetite could not be salvaged. I couldn't swallow any food with that lump stuck in my throat. "So... is there a position you have your eye on?"

"I'm not sure yet." He chewed the inside of his cheek and cast his gaze to the side, away from my face. "Wouldn't it be selfish to do anything other than what I do best?"

"There are more things you are the best at, Heero." I said softly, reaching out for his hand but he pulled it out of my reach. "You are also the best hacker... The best mechanic..."
He looked at me sharply and something lit up in his eyes. "Really?" He asked and he seemed to be hiding a self-satisfied smirk.

I chuckled. "Yeah."

"I never would have expected you to say that." He admittedly candidly and shyly looked away, almost bashful? No, I must be imagining things.

"Well, I've never known any other guys to repair a completely fucked up mobile suit in a single night, all by himself. I could argue the morality of your methods..." I trailed off and grinned at him. "Not the best pilot though." I continued to tease. "You lucked out with Wing's stiff controls, you would have crashed Deathscythe with those lead feet and jerky moves of yours." For a moment I feared he would take it the wrong way, take it as unnecessary criticism, that he might be upset and feel offended. That moment passed quickly.

He smiled. It was playful and mischievous and brightened as he retorted: "And how many times did my lead feet and jerky moves save you from catastrophically failing your mission?"

"More than I care to remember." I stuck my tongue out at him.

He molded his face back into something more serious and restrained, but his eyes were still beaming.

All of a sudden I imagined myself laying down in one of the many horrible bunk beds we had shared. Top bunk of course, because Heero never put up much of a fight for it. And staring at the ceiling, chest still heaving, body still pumped full of adrenaline, I'd talk to him. Blabber more like it. Vividly describing explosions and evasive maneuvers, even though he had been there himself and had witnessed everything with his own eyes. I guess sometimes it just seem like he didn't see it, because it never appeared to affect his calm facade much. I didn't know any better back then.

Usually the conversation was one-sided, I talked and he listened, or not. Only when my story strayed from truth into the awesomely spectacular and unrealistic, would he prove to me I actually had his undivided attention, with a cynical snort. And sometimes I would argue with him - however fully aware of my own lie, or rather "tweaking of the truth": "What? I totally did that!" "You can't take credit for that. You stumbled. It was mere luck you stumbled right when that soldier was going to shoot you from behind." And I would tease something along the lines of: "Was it?"

Strange how, in hindsight, things appear so much more idyllic than they were. We did horrible things but I was... happy. Not about what we did per se, but simply the fact that we were making a difference and the means were justified by the end. That feeling that you had a purpose, one that no one else could fulfill, even though no one ever told you so; you were irreplaceable. That was a shamefully great feeling. I imagine Heero tried to hold on to that feeling by volunteering for an active position in the field as a special agent. I wondered what I would do to try to recapture that feeling.

Later that night we crawled into bed and I shut off the light. Neither one of us had spoken much beyond the necessary since dinner, we were both caught up in our own musings. I couldn't sleep. Not surprising, I had been sleeping for three days after all. My mind had rested so much, it started doing overtime and seemed to try to cramp three days of thoughts into one night. Strings of thoughts mingling, becoming one, no end to one, no start to another. Just endless chatter of voice I didn't recognize, despite the fact they were echoes of my own. It was so overwhelming they started screaming at other and the volume kept building. I managed to decipher them.

"You're a soldier it's in your blood!"
"It's what you did not who you are!"

"What if something happens that you could have prevented?"

"You don't want to dive into that pit of snakes again!"

"You helped start this peace, now you must help maintain it!"

"You've done enough, this peace is yours to enjoy!"

"What else can you possibly do with your life?"

"Think about Heero, you have to protect him from this!"

Everything went quiet abruptly when Heero softly called out my name.

I reveled the silence momentarily and then responded: "Yeah?"

"I want to go to Levelt's grave." He said hesitantly, like he already started to regret his decision.

I wondered what the voices in his head had been screaming at him. All I could say was: "Okay."

"You'll go with me?" His voice sounded so vulnerable and alone in the dark.

"Of course." I breathed, still reeling from all the activity in my head that had been cut short.

"Thank you." And with that the awkward exchange came to an end.

It was silent for a little while longer and then murmurs became audible.

"This is a good sign..."

"He's not ready..."

"Maybe he'll finally show some real emotions..."

"He's going to disappoint you..."

"He could pleasantly surprise you..."

"He won't be able to show you what you need to see..."

"Maybe he'll finally be able to let everything go and open up enough to cry..."

"He can't cry, you're wasting your time..."

I stared up at the ceiling and kept staring through the entire night, finally witnessing the sunrise through the curtains. I got out of bed as soon as the room turned light and savored a cup of dark, black coffee sitting in the windowsill of the bay window in the living room. When I felt I had regained some energy that had been drained out of me during the restless night, I got dressed in plain jeans and a faded T-shirt to go on my routine bagel run. The bakery lady responded to my quiet in kind, only offering slight smiles in hopes of cheering me up, but I wasn't really present, just going through the motions. My mind was several hours ahead of me, trying to imagine myself and Heero on the grass field of the Preventer graveyard. Trying to imagine him standing in front of the headstone. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't see his face in any of my fantasies.

Upon returning to the apartment I could clearly hear the shower running and the water occasionally
hitting the tiled wall as Heero moved under the spray. I prepared our breakfast leisurely, still preoccupied with my own thoughts. I had certain expectations of that visit to Leevl's grave that I knew I'd better shed, to save myself from disappointment. I didn't know how to express it sympathetically and in a way that might make sense in some way, but I wanted him to cry. I needed to see it. I needed to know he was capable of it. I needed to know that I wasn't fighting for something that Heero was fighting against.

His words from another night still echoed through my head: "I wish I was just dead inside, like I used to be!"

I was startled by Heero's presence which was suddenly very close to me, it was like he had just magically appeared by my side. I jumped and I would have dropped the knife with peanut butter to the floor if Heero's lighting reflexes hadn't enabled him to catch it in freefall. His eyes were apologetic as I looked at them.

"I didn't hear you coming." I explained sheepishly and somewhat out of breath. I looked him up and down. "You look nice." I noted. He was wearing his black Preventer slacks, paired with a fitting black button-up shirt. Although the occasion for the attire was grim I couldn't help but admire the way he looked, dressed in all black. It accentuated the elegance and slim, lean build of his body. His legs were so long and his waist so narrow. I might have envied his physique to shameful extent had he not been my boyfriend, which just made me proud and giddy, like I suppose one should feel regarding their boyfriend. Life would be so awesome if we were regular teens, I mused and I could just touch that body whenever I felt like it and show him off to others.

Heero cocked his head to the side. I had been staring inappropriately long.

"Really nice." I added and smiled at him.

"Black seemed most appropriate." He said, looking down at himself, already starting to second guess himself.

"You're right." I tried to assure him. "It's respectful." I looked down at my worn jeans and shirt that had once been red but not so much anymore. "I wasn't planning on wearing this. I just threw this on..." I tried to explain, making nervous gestures with my hands.

He nodded and accepted his breakfast from me. The bagel with the extra generous amount of peanut butter.

I wolfed mine down, realizing he might have planned to go early and I would be delaying him. "I'll go change." I said with my mouth full with the last bite. I rushed into the bedroom and ripped the closet doors open. I had no shortage of black clothes, yet most of it wasn't suitable for a trip to a graveyard. Most of my black pants were dyed jeans, some even with rips in decidedly inappropriate places, but I managed to find a decent pair of slacks. When I put them on I discovered the legs were a tad too short, considering how much I had grown lately, but nothing that couldn't be temporarily solved with black socks. I picked out a black button up shirt much like the one Heero was wearing, so to prevent us looking like outfit-coordinated twins, I paired it with a neat black jacket, which the heat of the sun would later make me regret.

Properly groomed I stepped out of the bedroom and suggested we'd go. Heero just nodded.

Outside the rays of the sun were beating down on us and all the heat got trapped in the black fabric of our clothes, but neither one of us complained. We took our time heading towards the train station, I adopted an extremely low pace, pretending it was for my own benefit, arguing that physical strain would cause embarrassing sweat stains, of course in reality it was all a thinly veiled
attempt to have Heero and his busted up knee take it slow.

Once we arrived at the station I made a slight detour from our projected path to the familiar platform. I stopped at a little flower shop inside the underground station and - still shamefully using Heero's Preventer money - purchased a bouquet of white flowers, mostly lilies and roses. I gave it to Heero whose confused look intensified by tenfold.

"It's for Levelt." I told him and guided him towards the platform with a gentle touch to his shoulder.

"He's dead." Heero dryly stated.

"Well, yeah, I got that. It's tradition to bring the deceased flowers when you visit their graves. It's to show them and other visitors that they were loved."

"I didn't love him." Heero snorted as we sat down on a bench to wait for the train.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Okay, cared for then."

With that he didn't argue, so I guess that meant something. He looked at the flowers that lay delicate in his lap. Sometimes the plastic wrapping rustled from the strong draft traveling through the tunnels. I watched his fingers touch one of the petals of the lily softly, he seemed pensive and withdrawn.

"Having seconds thoughts about going?"

"Yes." He said bluntly, but he remained seated and didn't get up until an electronic voice announced the nearing arrival of the train.

We waited at the edge of the platform where the pavement stones were painted green, the doors lined up with the green stones as the train came to a half at the platform and we boarded quickly, picking forward facing seats near the door to make for an equally speedy exit.

Heero surprised me when halfway into the journey he asked as he kept his eyes firmly on the scenery outside: "Have you done this often?"

I think I knew what he was asking me, but because we could both be dense from time to time, I verified: "Visiting a graveyard?"

He nodded, frugal with words.

"Yeah. I used to live next to one." I chuckled, it was a nervous chuckle, out of place, but I couldn't stop it. "I had hundreds of neighbors and they were all dead." I bit my lip. Stupid, insensitive joke, I berated myself. "But... I only visited the grave of one person I actually knew in life. We buried him in a vacant lot on L2... we didn't... you know... have money for anything else... I visited him a lot. Till the lot was sold and they built a huge apartment complex. They found his body during construction and brought it to the local cemetery for cremation. Then he became one of the John Doe's, the cemetery had a special corner for those. Lot's of John Doe's on L2 those days."

"Why didn't you identify him?"

I sported a wry smile. "Local police handled identification after the fact. And uh... I was quite sought after by the local police... couldn't just walk in there to tell them his name. Besides, they don't really care, we had carved his name into a brick and had placed it over his grave in the lot. They just ignored that and registered him as a John Doe."
"I'm sorry." He said sincerely and made heartfelt eye contact.

I smiled. "Thank you."

The train halted and we got off. We took our time strolling down the winding path towards the stretching graveyard. Heero, uniquely, made no objections, I presume he was stalling.

At the entry of the field we stopped and just let our eyes trail the slopes dotted with identical headstones. The occasional large oak stood guard, leaves frolicking in the wind. "It's a nice place to rest." I commented.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I took his hand in mine and gave it a firm squeeze. "Come on, let's go, I know where he is." It took a gentle tug to get him to step out onto the grass with me. He followed me as I guided us to the right headstone by memory, trying to ignore the graves we passed. As we neared it I already recognized it without being able to read the script. Being a fresher grave the grass had not fully grown over it and of all the graves in that particular section of headstones, it had by far the most flowers, all fresh, unlike some other graves, where the flowers were as dead as the recipients.

"There he is." I said, stopping a few yards short of it and I pointed at it to clarify. With a final, reassuring squeeze I let go of his hand, it was sweaty.

He took a step forward, then stopped and looked back at me. "You're not coming with me?"

"I'll be right here."

He looked hesitant, fearful almost, but regardless he carried on without me, stepping up to the colorfully decorated grave.

SPECIAL AGENT A. LEVELT, I could read at a distance, including the subtext: "It is a blessing to die for a cause, because you can so easily die for nothing." A quote from a pre-colonial author, I knew, but his name had been lost on me even though I'm sure it had been included in the curriculum. What a farce, I chastised cynically, what a patriotic farce. During every battle I ever fought, be it from within the cockpit of my Gundam, be it with my own bare fists, there was only one thing I remember thinking, saying it to myself over and over: I want to die old and peaceful in my bed. Certainly Levelt too would have preferred that anonymous faith to a bullet through his frontal lobe. I pushed away my own thoughts and focused on Heero. I felt a little guilty for approaching this situation like some sort of social experiment, but I was curious, I guess some things a guy just needs to know.

Heero quietly looked at the grave at his feet, the bouquet of flowers cradled in his arms. He looked back at me over his shoulder. "According to you logic, he was well loved." He observed.

I looked past him at all the flowers, many of them were bright arrangements, cheerful, almost too cheerful. A recurring flower was the sunflower, I doubted a man like Levelt had a favorite flower, it was more likely his mother's preference. Every single bouquet was placed delicately, like the collection of bouquets was as carefully arranged as each individual. "Yes." I retorted. "He was. Give him the flowers." I encouraged.

Heero looked back at the colorful assembly and then at the bouquet in his arms. "They will look out of place."

"It doesn't matter. They are your gift to him."
He sighed, annoyed. "I still don't understand what good it can do. He can't see them."

"His mother can. When she comes to visit him, she will see them and she will be happy that someone else has come to honor her son."

He frowned and looked back at the grave again. I had expected him to make more objections, but he didn't. For a few moments nothing happened, he just stood there, letting the wind play with his hair and pull his clothes taut against his body. I thought maybe nothing was going to happen, when he shattered the frozen moment by kneeling at the grave and - with what seemed to be careful thought - placed the bouquet of white flowers amidst the others. He lingered, almost so briefly one could not tell he lingered at all, then he got up. Heero stared at the headstone a little while longer, perhaps studying the inscription, perhaps criticizing it, like I had, perhaps longingly agreeing with it. I could hardly read his face on good days, let alone the back of his head.

He flicked his gaze over his shoulder at me, peering at me through the corners of his eyes. "Should I say something?"

"You could, but you don't have to. Whatever you want."

"Want" is a word that still confused and frightened him, something he had such a weak grasp on he might as well claim to have caught the wind in his bare hands. "Want" is a fleeting, shifting concept to him, that is never truly definable. "Want" is something he has had to deny, disregarding how much he longed, craved, yearned. "Want" has been blacked out and between the other blacked out lines someone has scribbled "You want to fight in this war" and now he faced the impossible matter of trying to read through the layers of dark ink to try to make sense of the original writing.

So I was not surprised when he retorted moments later: "What should I say?"

At the very least I presumed we could establish that he had somehow decided he wanted to say something, as opposed to not saying anything. "Anything."

He looked back at me again. "Should I discuss the mission with him?"

I smiled sadly and faintly shook my head. "Maybe not anything." I spoke softly, unabrasively. I couldn't well have him point out Levelt's faults which had caused the mission to go awry in some sort of strange debriefing. He was dead, I knew he wouldn't hear, I knew he wouldn't find out, I knew he wouldn't take offense, but exactly because he was dead I felt uncomfortable with it. You can't accuse someone who can't defend himself.

"What then?" He urged.

I was a bit taken aback. I tried to blame it all on lack of confidence and lack of expertise, but the mechanical way with which he approached this situation disconcerted me. Had I really expected him to cry? Had I really expected to see something honest and heartfelt? Looking at him now, it seemed so silly and naive to have ever hold such hopes or expectations. He was looking back at me impatiently, annoyed with my lack of helpful guidance.

Unbeknownst to him, I needed help too. I needed help to save my hope from drowning.

He turned away from me, realizing I had nothing to offer him. I think he managed to find words on his own, I think he said something, but I couldn't make out what. The wind carried only incoherent mumbles my way. Whatever he said, it wasn't much, he was done quickly and walked back to me. He frowned and said: "I don't feel any different."

I sighed, not knowing what to say. I guess we had both hoped he would.
"I don't understand why Nettle would send me here, if it wasn't going to make a difference."

"I don't know either." I touched my hand to his shoulder slightly to guide him back. I felt so tired again all of a sudden, like I could sleep for three more days.

We found our way back to the cobble stone path and followed it to the train station. Neither of us said a word.

Waiting on a bench on the platform I cocked my head to look up at the looming glass tower of the Preventer agency. A building so tall and proud, a city in and of itself, but a city filled with dark secrets and even darker sacrifices. I caught Heero looking at me. I had expected him to pretend he wasn't, to look away, but he kept his intense eyes fixed on my face, scrutinizing it, trying to draw clues from my features. With a frown he wondered: "Are you thinking about joining?"

I looked back at the building. "The Preventers?" I verified.

He nodded.

"Actually, I was thinking about all the reasons why I shouldn't join."

"But you are considering it?"

"No." I blurted, without even really thinking about it. "I mean... I don't know. I feel like somehow it's my only option, but that's another thing I don't like about it..."

He didn't understand but he didn't ask.

"I know that I will be good at it," I started, seeing as we had ten more minutes to kill till the arrival of the train, "and I know I would be able to do some good. Like, in the world, you know?" I looked at him but he didn't respond, so I just continued: "But I don't know if it will be good for me. I like the idea of saving lives, I'm a sucker for the hero-complex too, but... I also like the idea of saving my own life. And yours." I looked at him intently.

"Are the two mutually exclusive?"

I wasn't prepared for that question, I definitely wasn't prepared for him to ask it. I thought I knew the answer, but as soon as he questioned it, so did I. I guess I still had a lot to figure out. I told him so.

He nodded.

I dwelled in the loaded silence between us. Asking myself questions that I couldn't possibly form any answers to. But in a grim way I appreciated the irony. I thought that once I was just out of school, with a diploma to move me along, things would just fall into place, answers and possibilities would just come to me and I would be propelled into the life I was always meant to lead. After all, when you work so hard to get to that point, you expect to be rewarded for your efforts. But it didn't work like that. Even after all the hard work that I had already delivered, the hardest part was still to come. Stuck in this dilemma, I was more a high school student than I ever was, going through what everybody goes through. How could I expect things to go any more easy for me? If anything, my life has always been harder.

I looked at the Preventer head quarters again. For some reason I felt like I would be proving him right. That being the God of Death was all I was ever going be good for.
Heero was quiet and contemplative at my side, staring into the distance. Occasionally there was the all-consuming rumble and whine of jet engines powering tons of steel and carbon fiber into the skies and beyond. A noise so loud that it vibrated in our chests, as if my own restless heart wasn't causing enough disturbance in my body. I wondered where they were headed, what trouble they are to prevent and what they would sacrifice in the process. How many would return stricken and how many would return cold and blue? How many headstones would be erected in their honor?

I couldn't live that life again. I had lived it, not a lifetime, but it sure felt like it and I had barely survived. Someday I suspect myself of not having survived at all, just deceiving myself into feeling a heartbeat. But the scary part of risking my life, was not the prospect of dying. It was the prospect of being forgotten. Who would place flowers on my grave when I'm gone, who will pay tribute to my life on the anniversary of my death? It just didn't seem like something Heero would do. It's a scary thing, I realized, loving someone who has yet to learn to love to the full extent of it, trusting someone who may never trust you, thinking constantly about someone who may not think of you when you're gone.

Overcome with sudden curiosity, probably as a way to take my mind off other things, I broke the silence between us with a softly, hesitantly posed question.

"What did you say at the grave, before we left?"

He didn't look at me, he kept staring at the ground. For a moment it appeared he had not even heard me but then he took a deep breath. He sported a slight, pained frown when he faced me. His mouth was open but it was way ahead on his words, it took him a little while longer to answer, his eyes shifting in the meantime, finding it hard to look straight into mine. "I apologized to him." Was the first thing he managed to produce with his tongue and lips.

He cast his gaze far away, his expression frozen in what was an admirable carved image of pain and pensiveness on the most exquisite features. His eyes narrowed, his brow slightly furrowed, his lips barely parted, wisps of hair falling across his face just perfectly. I could look at him for hours, admire every angle of his face, but I was curious about the elaboration and realized I had to force it, so I spoke up.

"What for?"

His eyes darted back to me, they were unsure, but challenging and stubborn. I couldn't quite read him. He finally continued: "I apologized for him being right."

I frowned, it was a strange thing to say.

Heero explained: "That he was right that I could, indeed, kill him. That J had prepared me for it. I said I was sorry about that, because if I hadn't..." He trailed off, but the words that were implied struck like a bomb as much as the words that were actually spoken.

"Heero," I reached for his hand, it was cold, "he would have died anyway, you couldn't have moved him in time, before the building collapsed. You only made it quicker and painless."

"Is it?" He wondered.

"What?"

"Is it painless?" His eyes held a desperation to them.

Obviously I could never answer his question knowing for certain, having blessedly been spared the experience of a bullet passing through my brainpan. The only answer I could give him was the
answer that helped me sleep at night, one I firmly believed, perhaps only because I chose to. "It's too quick for him to have felt anything."

Heero was visibly relieved.

The screeching of the train coming to a halt at the platform startled us both. Our bodies tensed up and instinctively I held Heero's hand a little tighter, but Heero instinctively drew his hand away. I chuckled nervously, sheepishly and rose to my feet. "Let's go home." Shoulder to shoulder we walked through the train doors and found seat that suited us both.

On the short way home across the rails, I analyzed our previous conversation, processing it with a clearer state of mind to make sure there wasn't anything important that I had missed. As we passed the second to last stop I realized, shamefully, that I had neglected something, potentially important. I jerked my head to the side, to look at Heero. Heero was staring at the back of the seat in front of us, his hands in his lap. To the inexperienced eye he was relaxed, daydreaming whatever normal kids our age daydream about - something along the lines of sex I presumed, but I may be biased - however I could clearly tell that he was tense and nervous, perhaps regretting that he had confided in me, perhaps realizing that I had become aware of a hint of a secret in our conversation that he may not have intentionally spilt.

"Heero?" I called, to draw him out of his own thoughts.

The only affirmation that he was listening was a slight shift of his eyes and even tenser and straighter shoulders.

"What did you mean when you said J had prepared you for it?"

Heero cringed, as much as the Perfect Soldier ever would. His jaw was clenched shut. He struggled with himself for a long time. The train was reaching our destination and soon we would lose the relative privacy of our little booth. "I'd prefer not to tell you." He admitted, sounding very formal while he was obviously being troubled by emotions.

"I'd prefer to know." I hoped he understood that with that I meant I had to know, he had to tell me. There is nothing worse than being aware of the existence of a horrible secret, but not knowing the details. The mind is allowed to create substitutes of the truth by itself and with my track record I was pretty sure my mind would create unbearable things. I guess I always will remain true to my youth in the way that I never failed to hope that the truth might actually not be that bad. How naive, especially considering how many times I have been proven wrong over the course of my life.

Together we disembarked the train, avoiding the stream of people desperate to get onto the train before the doors closed and it took off. To the backdrop of shuffling feet, whizzing trains and a can of coke falling to the bottom of a vending machine, Heero leaned in closer. "I'll tell you." He said reluctantly. "But not here."

I nodded and followed him off the platform to the large main hall that let to the outside world. I was a little more eager to get home now, but I didn't rush it. I figured it wasn't good for him physically as well as mentally. So we trotted home as gingerly as we left, both apprehensive of what was about to come. Normally Heero always walked like he was in a terrible hurry, now, if anything, it appeared he was dragging his feet when we rounded the last corner and the entry to our building came in sight.

The heat was relentlessly blistering. I could blame the heat for my profuse sweating, but I knew that wasn't the entire truth. I was nervous, maybe even scared. I was about to learn about another of J's horror techniques, I knew and they only seem to be getting worse. And so far Heero seems more
upset about revealing this one, than any of the previous. That small part of me that was still a teenager, hoped things wouldn't be as bad as I imagined, the other part, well, I suppose it just knew better. Eagerness turned to dreading, because I was afraid of the time when a certain secret would be unveiled that would tear into all hope. Something insurmountable. Each time I feared: This is it.

Heero wanted to take the stairs. I suppose as a manner of stalling, more than stubborn determination, but I held him in the lobby by a handful of his shirt and had him wait for the elevator.

The elevator was suffocating, not just because the common areas - including but not limited to the elevator - had no air-conditioning, but because what we ourselves radiated; an insufferable atmosphere that built painfully in the small space. The little box seemed smaller than it had ever seemed. I was grateful when the doors opened, I was starting to feel a little claustrophobic.

Sliding the keycard through the lock made an obnoxiously loud sound of plastic grinding against metal in the quiet of the hallway. Inside the apartment I practically lunged for the remote of the air-conditioning and turned it up to the fullest. Cold air blasted into the living space, making the sweat on my back feel cold as I stripped myself from my formal jacket. "Do you want some water?" I asked Heero, noting the sweat on his brow.

He didn't say anything, I just got him an extra bottle from the refrigerator and handed it to him. We exhibited an example of a way in which we are polar opposites. When I am nervous, I have difficulty swallowing, so I just took a tiny sip of water, I felt like my body couldn't handle any more than that. My lacking water consumption during missions never failed to draw monotonous warnings from him. Contrary to myself, Heero put the bottle to his lips, tilted it back and in a rapid succession of swallowing, emptied the whole bottle. He screwed the cap onto the empty bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes were big and full of discontent when he looked up at me.

I put my water away on the counter, it was hopeless anyway. As an alternative method to cool my body down, I undid the top few buttons of my shirt. I started: "Do uh... do you want to sit down? Or something?" I scolded at myself, I sounded like a teenager in one of the many romantic comedies I have seen where the guy stumbles and fumbles his way into his first time.

"No, I'll stand. It's cooler here anyway." He said and he nodded back at the AC above the front door, blowing fresh and cool air our way. Until the machine had managed to cool down the entire apartment, which could take quite a while, it was still unbearably hot anywhere other than in the direct stream of cold air.

"Okay." I wasn't very eloquent during moments like these, if I ever was.

"It never gets any easier telling these things, does it?"

I could have fed him a lie, maybe I should have, but I didn't. "I don't know." I responded honestly. I swallowed audibly. It never gets any easier hearing them either, I thought, but I kept that to myself.

"I went on my first mission when I was fourteen." He started mechanically. "It went wrong, very wrong. A mobile suit fell over due to the blast of the explosion and fell into a neighboring civilian building. I never told me how many people died, but I know I took at least two lives and even that is too much. I was shaken... I was basically useless for a couple of weeks, no matter how much he whirled me, he could not get me to obey."

A shiver ran down my spine and I didn't think the air-conditioning was to blame.
"He changed my training schedule to include another aspect, ridding me of emotions, or at least to the point that his every order overruled them. I didn't know that yet. I just knew that after three weeks of getting beaten, but not being able to move, my cell door opened one day, they turned on the lights for the first time since the mission and instead of coming to get me for more punishment, J brought a puppy into my cell. He didn't say anything, he just left it there with me. It was very young. I don't know what breed it was, maybe a golden retriever, like the one we saw in the park... I don't know... I grew attached to it. It was comforting to have... a friend..." He looked me in the eyes briefly, pained, but holding it all back, "J left me alone with the puppy for a few weeks, there was no training, no mission, I could just stay in my cell and play with it, share my food with it and have it sleep next to me in my cot. I remember being..." He paused, his eyes shifting, narrowing as he searched for a befitting word. He bit his lip then said: "happy." The word sounded foreign coming from him.

My heart was beating so wildly, it was like listening to a horror story, it wasn't bad yet, but you knew it was going to be and you're just waiting for it to go wrong, waiting for fear and distress to overcome you.

"Then J came to my cell again and he took me and the puppy to the training area, some concrete space underground. He took the puppy out of my arms and placed it on a table and then he handed me my gun."

My heart skipped a bit and I started to get a sick, ominous feeling in my stomach.

"He told me to shoot it, to end it's life quickly and painlessly. If I wouldn't kill it, he would..." Heero slowly shook his head, lost somewhere in his memory, I could almost see grey concrete reflected in his dull and distant eyes. "I couldn't. J started yelling at me, taking hold of my gun and making me aim it at the puppy. I was crying." His voice had an odd tone to it, like he couldn't imagine himself with tears across his cheeks. "He was screaming at me to kill it, but I couldn't, I wanted to take it back with me to my cell. I wanted to keep it forever... When J walked over to one of the guards standing by and got his gun out of his holster, I thought he was going to shoot me, he was so angry with me. I wish he had, but instead, he shot the puppy..." His lower lips quivered slightly, but he caught it with his white teeth to hold it still till he had composed himself, till he had scurried back behind the stone mask and then continued on, "He didn't shoot it in the head. He shot it in it's hips and it was yelping... J told me again to shoot it, but still I couldn't. I wanted to help it, to heal it. J shot it in the stomach. It was in so much pain. He told me killing it would relieve it of it's pain, but I wouldn't, I just stood there and cried. J took my gun from me and grabbed my shoulders tightly and he made me watch till it died of it's wounds."

I let out a shaky breath. My eyes were welling up with tears, I was less successful than Heero at holding them back. I wanted to bawl and hug him and tell him everything was okay even though I knew it wasn't, but I was frozen and the horror story wasn't done yet.

"He brought me back to my cell and the next day... I got a new puppy, the same kind of dog, they all were. They had probably snatched a litter from an animal shelter or something. This one I wanted to protect, I held it in my arms each time someone came by to give me food and I fought when a few weeks later J came for us again. And everything repeated itself. I couldn't execute it, so I had to watch J kill it slowly and painfully... I tried to keep my distance from the third puppy, but being locked up together for so long... I couldn't help but become attached and then it happened again... I think it was the fourth puppy, considerably older than the first by the time I got it, that I finally managed to kill after J had already shot it twice. And the fifth puppy..." He took a deep, trembling breath through his nose and finished: "I killed it before it ever got that far... I snapped it's neck the day after I got it." The way he looked at me when he said that was chilling. "There were no more pets after that."
I didn't think I was going to cry till I felt a warm tear roll down my left cheek and trail towards my mouth. I licked my lips and tasted the salt. With a faltering voice that barely sounded like my own, I tried to convey how sorry I was that he had to go through that, but "sorry" sounded so damn stupid and insignificant that I stopped mid-sentence and found myself at a loss of meaningful and reassuring words. Did there even exist a breed of words that could absolve a pain like the one he must have suffered?

His eyes darted to my face and he seemed slightly surprised. "You're crying." He pointed out, even though it was a statement, his voice sounded questioning and confused.

"Yeah..." I said coarsely. I read worry in the way his brows furrowed.

"Should I?"

I didn't give him the answer that I thought was true, I played dumb. "I don't know."

We just stood there for a while, both sporting thoughtful expressions, mine adorned with the occasional tear, but the last of which were not prompted by the sad story, but by the lacking effect it had on Heero. He was obviously sad and upset, but surely he felt more than he was showing. I had to believe that, because if there wasn't more... than that's an even worse truth that that he is just holding everything back.

"Did you give them names? The puppies?"

"No... I wanted to, with the first one, but I couldn't think of any."

"So... this is why you got so upset in the park?"

He shrugged. "It's not the first time a dog has reminded me of it. It quite a common breed, but recently... I have been... feeling more." He looked at me, hoping he was making some sense. "It used to leave me unaffected, I would remember, but I wouldn't feel. But when I saw that dog I was suddenly overwhelmed with bad feelings. I suppose it has to do with talking to Nettle and talking to you. Opening myself up to that sort of thing... I don't like it much... those feelings..."

Maybe I shouldn't have asked my next question, it might have been harsh, but a part of me wanted to provoke him, see what more emotions could come out of him. Assure myself that J's technique had not succeeded, that the soldier could not overrule the emotions. "How did you feel when you shot Levelt?"

He looked at me sharply, feeling the intended sting of the question, but he looked more distrusting than distraught. "Angry." Was his answer. "Angry that he made me call on that part of my training and reminded me of it." He almost sneered.

I didn't say anything, I just wiped my tears away, hoping that with them gone I would feel less exposed, vulnerable and, frankly, less silly. I announced that I was going to rid myself of my sweat soaked outfit and barged off to the bedroom. Normally I'd leave myself more exposed when changing clothes, hoping to catch him peeking, but now I really wasn't interested in any of it. I shut the door behind me, wincing at the snap of the wood of the door meeting the wood of the doorpost.

"Stupid, stubborn boy." I mumbled, peeling the fabric off my back. I could be referring to either Heero or me, even I didn't know. Before getting dressed I stepped into the shower briefly, washing my body with one hand as the other pinned the length of my braid against my back. Drying off was a much easier and quicker job without a soaked curtain of hair against your back and I was done in
no time, jumping into a favorite pair of jeans and a simple shirt. I toyed with the idea of hiding out in the bedroom, to have some privacy with my own thoughts, but I couldn't stand the small space of it, after having just spent so many days cooped up in it. It wouldn't be healthy to return to bed, my brain numbed at the mere thought of it.

I ripped the bedroom door open and jumped when I was suddenly face to face with Heero, who apparently had been waiting right outside the door. "Wha-?"

"I was going to change. But I didn't want to disturb you." He explained, his voice on the meek side.

"Oh." I stepped past him and cleared the way into the bedroom.

Without saying anything else he stepped inside. Curiously, he left the door open, but I refrained myself from treating myself to a show and shuffled over to the kitchen for an early lunch - reheated take-out from last night.

Heero came out of the bedroom too soon to have showered. But he hadn't been sweating nearly as much as me, since he hadn't been wearing a jacket. He had changed into one of my preferred outfits on him and I wondered if that had been intentional. I leered at him - yes, leered, I could not help myself, hormones never excused themselves - as he crossed the room in his dark blue jeans that fit him in all the right places, combined with a grey T-shirt of the thinnest, most supple fabric that fell off his shoulders excellently. I just sort of cowered in a distant corner in the kitchen, earning myself a single, curious glance from him. "Hungry?" I asked to dilute some of the awkwardness.

"No." he sat down on the couch in his usual stiff and controlled manner and reached for the remote. The apartment filled with indiscriminate noises pouring from the television set. I watched him flip through channels like a champion, he had learned from the best - me - by way of observation. Being used to being the "flipper", I never really realized how annoying it was to watch someone else go through all those channels at that pace.

I moved around so I was standing behind the couch, in view of the television but focusing on the back of his head, eyes lingering on the hair at the nape of his neck, still a little darker due to sweat. I couldn't believe myself! I shook my head. I was angry at him and disappointed with him and felt sorry for him - for reasons he did not seem to be able to help - and still I managed to lust after him! It was so overpowering it was insane. It was like the lust was becoming me and lust doesn't have the capacity for anger, disappointment or pity. It was crazy what these teenage hormones did to me. They had me becoming addicted to him, to the smell, touch, taste and sight of his golden skin, chocolate brown hair and rosy lips.

Crazy and scary.

I redirected my attention to the television screen as Heero still mindlessly changed channels, paying attention to each individual one only shortly before he'd judge whether or not it was worth more than two seconds of his time.

"- Oh John, I love you more than life itself, the way you touch my body, it-

"- welcome my second guest of today's show, he's written three bestsellers -

"- worry. I will help you find your friends Timothy Tigger, I promise -

" - not just asparagus, the wider setting also makes short work of cucumbers, -

After the kitchen appliance infomercial came the news station and the sight of it immediately had Heero lowering the remote, ending his incessant flipping through channels.
The female news anchor, sitting in front of a blue background, was more striking to look at than to listen to, but I doubt her abnormally symmetrical physique had captured Heero's attention, rather I suspect the smaller screen in the top left corner. A picture of a haughty, smug looking man to the backdrop of the Ethiopian flag. The subtext was even more disconcerting: PRESIDENT NGASI

"- following the mysterious and unexpected death of the Ethiopian president, former senator NgGasi wasted no time taking his place. Against all democratic procedures, the senator has announced himself the new president of Ethiopia, much to the dismay of the people. Many civilians have poured onto the streets where protests quickly turned into riots. NgGasi is not very popular with the majority of the public due to his controversial suggestions regarding dams and taxes. The riots didn't last long however, the military, fully supportive of their new leader, dealt with the crowd violently and mercilessly. Eyewitnesses have reported that the soldiers fired live rounds and that the oppression of the riot cost several protesters and bystanders their lives, but NgGasi has denied these reports, claiming only "righteous arrests" had been made. Our correspondent Nasira Ruqayah is standing by in Addis Ababa. Nasira, can you-

Before the image could switch to the correspondent and damaged homes and bloodied streets, I stepped forward and snatched the remote out of Heero's limp hands, I pressed a random button and we found ourselves back at the kitchen appliance infomercial where they demonstrated how their invention peeled and diced a zucchini.

"You shouldn't watch that." I said.

Heero didn't respond, he just sat on the couch with his arms folded across his chest, a stern look on his face.

"Don't even think about it." I told him vainly. I felt a knot in my stomach, even I couldn't stop thinking about it. It had always been a possibility, but I had just hoped that somehow we'd be spared this news - either by it not happening, or us just not hearing it. I knew how we felt, it's one of the few feelings we both had good understanding of.

It's a feeling that never stops gnawing, never stops hurting and the questions never stopped: Should I have done something different? Would someone have done it better? Is it my fault? Could I have stopped it? Do they blame me?

I remember my own, most recent, failure. I remember it like yesterday, it sure still hurt like it happened yesterday. I was supposed to destroy an OZ base in South America, they were recruiting young boys off the streets and using them as foot soldiers in run down, malfunctioning mobile suits, basically they were bait, to be sacrificed in the first wave of battle. I thought I could handle the mission by myself, so I left Heero sleeping in his bunk bed at one of those dorms we shared, he was still healing from a nasty head wound. By myself, however, I couldn't break through the base's line of defense and when Deathscythe's right arm got busted, I had to retreat to avoid capture. The next day troops were sent out from that base to battle remaining factions of the Alliance and every last one of those kids lost their lives. The day after that, Heero and I trashed that base. He was following orders, I was acting out revenge.

I knew that revenge is a concept Heero would deny, but the turn of events had made it all the more likely that Heero would have himself reinstated as an active field agent, to correct his mistake; to undo his failure, because failure isn't something the Perfect soldier can live with. It made me feel sick, sick with fear.

"Heero?" I leaned over the back of the couch and touched his shoulder.

He winced and then lied: "I'm fine."
"Heero, it's okay to be upset..."

"I'm not upset." He argued stubbornly. "Give me back the remote, I want to see the rest of the report."

"Heero..."

"Give it back, I want to see." His voice sounded dangerous.

"Fine." I threw the remote onto the cushions and walked away, towards the bedroom. I didn't need to see the news and I didn't need to see his stone cold face.

"- I talked to a woman whose husband was shot in the streets. She said he could have survived if he had received medical attention in time, but ambulances never came. Several hours after the fact, military vehicles came to clear the bodies off the streets and scare people into their homes and into silence. President NgGasi still denies every report of unnecessary violence -"

I shut the door.
I think it was a wayward ray of early morning sunshine that cast light into my dark dreams and guided me to the surface. One moment I was living the dream like it was a horrible reality, the next moment I was staring up at a white ceiling and it seemed like I had lived as lifetime, only to start anew. The crack in the curtains betrayed our private and secluded bedroom to the brightness of sunlight and the world beyond the walls of our apartment. I wished shutting the curtains would shut out all of that, the sunlight, the dark, the world and all it's people, all of the rules and rituals and conventions that man has fabricated for themselves. But everything just rushed in and joined the existing chaos in my head.

I stretched my arms out, moaning softly as the joints popped and gave me an invigorated sensation of sorts, the closest I could come to it. My body slowly started waking up, my mind had never really come to sleep, never found it's rest, it's peace. It's annoying and exhausting but it's a reality I preferred to the one my unconsciousness had just envisioned. I dropped my arms down, my right arm fell down onto the mattress next to my own. My hand found not a sleeping body next to me, but an empty expanse of cold sheets. Even though my heart stopped, my body managed to shoot upright. My eyes darted towards the single bed next to mine and my sight confirmed that it was as abandoned as my touch had previously discovered. Not only that, but the sheets were drawn tight across the mattress and the pillow was fluffed and smoothed. The bed was surreal in it's perfection. Military perfection.

I sat completely still, closing my eyes as I tried to focus on any sounds, but the apartment was completely quiet. "Heero?" I called out with a worried tone to my voice. There was no answer. "Heero?" I called again. I knew it to be in vain, as silent as Heero managed to tread, he was not stealthy enough to go unheard by me when I'm paying this much attention to it. My legs kicked the sheets away from me and I jumped out of bed. I did a quick search around the apartment that looked like it always did; endearingly disheveled, but the most important thing about it was missing and I could feel it in my heart and in my bones. An aching hurt in his absence. Heero.

According to the clock it was still early in the morning, so an appointment with Nettle was out of the question. Considering that recently his therapy sessions were his only motive to leave the house, I was understandably concerned. But my completely understandable concern, quickly turned into unwitting overreacting as I did a second search of every room in what could only be described as a state of panic.

Where could he be? Where could he be? I kept asking myself, because I didn't want to pose the question that seemed truly, frighteningly relevant: Why is he gone?

I sprinted back to the bedroom and dropped down to the floor; the narrow space between his bed and the wall. With a deep breath I turned my head to look under his bed and I let out a shaky sigh of relief when I spotted his emergency duffel bag, to the backdrop of my own. All his clothes were still in the closet, I noted after checking, just too be sure.

"What the fuck are you doing, Maxwell?" I asked myself in front of our closet. I had no idea, I just knew that I wouldn't be myself again until Heero would be back. I took a few deep breaths that should have calmed me but didn't and then made an attempt at my usual morning routine, making myself coffee and having it in front of the large bay window. But instead of relaxing on the
windowsill, I found my eyes searching the street, my body becoming tense each time there was movement and then the disappointment when it was just a car or an unfamiliar pedestrian. When I had the same "hope-disappointment" reaction to the movement of a pigeon in the corner of my eye, I decided to step away from the window.

I dumped the remainder of my coffee in the sink because the caffeine was only adding to my anxiety, making me more high strung. I knew what I was afraid of, but I couldn't say it, couldn't even think it and I tried my hardest to keep my mind occupied. I searched the cushions of the couch for the remote and flicked on the TV. The screen lit up with a pre-set channel, it always starts up on the last channel you watched before you turned it off. Lately this standard channel was the news channel and aside from the increasingly mundane high speed car chases and the infrequent, though always heartbreaking appeal of a mother whose child has tragically disappeared, the channel is mostly preoccupied with the situation in Ethiopia, broadcasting every move the new president - already accused to be a dictator - makes.

It's sad to see. What is an ever sadder sight is Heero sitting in front of the television, soaking it all up, taking it to heart. He dies a little bit with each newsreel. Yet he keeps watching it. It seems almost suicidal.

I change the channel to a cooking show, but it's just incoherent background chatter to my own thoughts.

And there is was, all of a sudden, like lighting that is unannounced and speeds ahead of the thunder: the thought. The thought that I'd prefer to abolish, to lock inside a strong little box and tuck away someplace dark forever and never look at, or listen to again.

But there it was.

He has left.

"No." I stood upright, ran my hands through my hair. I stalked back to the bedroom and gazed at the perfectly made bed, so perfectly made it seemed like no one had ever slept in it at all. Even the memory of a sleep rumpled sheet was erased. "No." I said again and I shook my head. I had a nervous, grim smile to my lips. "No, if he had left, he would have taken his bag with him." I knelt down on the floor again, just to make sure my eyes hadn't been deceiving me earlier. This time I touched it, just to be sure. I had not been betrayed, it was still there.

Then why is my heart clenching with worry?

I knew why. I did not need to ask myself. Heero never gets breakfast at the bakery, Heero never goes to grocery store, Heero never goes out by himself. There is no logical explanation for his absence to calm me down.

Sitting on the carpet of our bedroom, I was reduced to a shadow of myself, one I could easily despise. A weak and needy and desperate shadow. It is what my love for him has reduced me to, I realized. There was fear in my heart, because I understood now, more than ever, that I could only be complete with him by my side, without him I was incomplete, broken, and I would wander around as blind and helpless as I would if my very own eyes and hands had been taken.

Love does frightening things to people, you never hope to come to discover those things, but you always run that risk. True happiness can only be achieved through vulnerability, cruelly, the same goes for true heartache.

"He'll be back." I told my wildly beating heart. "I'm just being stupid. He'll be back."
I don't think I believed my own words till only seconds later when physical shock jolted through my body, like when you sink through the ice, as the softest click of the front door registered in my head, fighting it's way to the point of recognition through the knotted mess of strings of thought. I jumped up and headed for the living room. I stillled when I saw him and my shoulders slowly slumped. Relief could be a powerful thing and so heavy it could cripple you. It took all the strength that I had to keep my knees from buckling, even though, with him standing there at the front door looking so matter-of-fact, it seemed silly how worried I had been and I berated myself for it. Though of course I couldn't ignore the fact that something had to be wrong between us, for me to be so terribly worried when he leaves the apartment unannounced.

Heero tilted his head in question. His bangs were immobilized, sweat not only plastered the dark strands to his forehead, but made the entirety of his exposed skin glisten. He was wearing his spandex shorts and a simple black T-shirt that had dark stains on his chest and under his arms. Sweat trickled down his temple and when he pulled up the hem of his shirt to wipe his forehead, revealing a taut stomach and chiseled chest, heaving with pants, dirty thoughts nearly made me forget the tiny early morning trauma that I had just suffered with him inexplicably gone.

He lowered the shirt back down and smoothed it over his abdomen, my eyes following the movement of his hand. "What?" He asked, his annoyed and impatient tone was a thankful mood-killer.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious." He snapped. He walked over to the kitchen for a cold bottle of water. He didn't limp, but with each step I noticed the cringe.

"You've been working out?" I continued my inquiry.

He didn't answer, it was, after all, obvious.

"Well... Are..." I stammered. "Are you ready for that?"

Blue eyes glared at me underneath sweaty brows. "I'm fine." He retorted curtly.

His unsympathetic ways irritated me, his cold stare only added to the increase of my own foul mood that soon matched his and I just glared back at him. "You couldn't have told me you were going out?"

He quirked an eyebrow at me and started towards the bedroom, walking by me. With his back turned towards me he bit back: "I don't need your permission to leave the apartment."

"Of course you don't, that's not the point." He didn't pause for our little discussion so I followed him into the bedroom and froze on the threshold as I walked in on him bare-chested, wearing nothing but that excuse of shorts that left barely anything to be revealed. I looked away, so I wouldn't get sidetracked, so my lust wouldn't overrule the abundance of other emotions I was experiencing, emotions that I felt should be expressed. "I was worried." I started with a softer tone, hoping to make him understand. "If you had just told me-"

"I'm not a child, Duo." He interrupted me.

"I didn't say you were!"

"Then why do I need to tell you when I'm leaving? And why are you worried when I'm gone?"

I dared to look back at him. Focusing my gaze on his serious and dangerous face. "Seriously? Why
"I worry when you're gone?" I snorted. "Of course I worry when I wake up and you are nowhere to be found!" I yelled at him, but only because I was so desperate to have him understand. "Would it have been such a bother to leave a note or something?"

"I would have if I knew you were going to be like this." He practically seethed.

I chuckled darkly. "Oh, no, nono. You shouldn't leave a note because of how I am now, you should leave a note because of how I was five minutes ago. Do you have any idea what kind of things were going through my head?"

"How could I? I'm a social retard, remember?"

His comment stabbed me in the heart like a well-aimed dagger and momentarily my anger bled out through the open wound. "Heero, you're not a retard of any kind."

"Don't." He warned.

"Don't what?" I tried to get closer to him, wanting to comfort him, recognizing pain behind the anger in his eyes. But with each step that I came closer, he took a step back.

"Don't lie to me!"

"Heero-"

All of a sudden his long arms extended out towards me and contacted my chest. With a force that pushed the air out of my lungs he pushed me back, keeping me as far away from me as the small space of our bedroom would allow.

"I can't do this! I can't do this normal world stuff! I do everything wrong! And now it turns out I can't even do a mission right! How is that not retarded?" His voice was hoarse, but his face didn't seem near tears at all, he just looked angry, very angry. The sad thing was, he wasn't angry with me, he was angry with himself. So very angry.

"Heero..." I breathed. I didn't try to approach him, I knew that would evoke the same defensive reaction out of him. I kept a distance, watching him pant from across the room. My heart clenched and bled. I wanted nothing more than to hold him close, but that was not what he wanted. That hurt too. To know that there was nothing I could do for him, to help him, not even the thing that is supposed to help in situations like this. I wonder if Nettle had ever seen him distraught like this and I wondered if she had found a welcome way to react to it and to support him, in a way that he allowed and in a way that could actually make a difference.

I could definitely use the advice, even coming from her, I would accept it, I would try it. Ever since the news of NgGasi's coup d'état, Heero has been especially withdrawn, sitting on the couch with a scowl on his face - disapproval directed inwards. I could tell the issue was bothering him, obviously and the constant news reports didn't help, he flinched with each increase of the alleged death toll. He was deliberately hurting himself, self-administering punishment he was certain he deserved for his failure. He would whip himself if he could and if he had even the slightest inkling that it would hurt him more than the footage.

"Why were you exercising?" I asked slowly when I noticed he started to calm down.

He looked at me sharply. His mouth opened but rather than saying something, he looked away again.

"Heero?"
"I just need to do something!" He blurted.

I knew he didn't just mean anything, to keep himself occupied, he had something specific in mind that he felt uncomfortable sharing with me, even though I could probably guess what he was hinting at.

"I need to be ready." He elaborated, surprising me.

"Ready?"

"Surely Nettle will reinstate me soon. When that happens, I need to be ready to fix my mistake."

Being naively in denial I focused on the lesser important sentence of the two. "What do you mean Nettle with reinstate you soon? Has she said anything? Is she happy with your progress?"

"She can't keep me locked up in her office forever. The Preventers need me."

I swallowed, I wiped my hands on my sweatpants, they were suddenly sweaty. "Do they? I thought... I thought you weren't sure about whether or not you'd be an active agent again."

"Well that decision has been made for me." He responded adamantly.

"That is not a decision anyone can make for you. Only you can decide." I tried, ignoring the part of me that knew arguing the matter would prove to be hopeless.

Heero snorted, he didn't respond, he didn't have to. I guess we both knew what he had to say about it, the only difference being I thought it was wrong and he was convinced it was right. I didn't think he was wrong in his assumption that, to some extent, he was needed as a Preventer with skills and bravery - I prefer the term "suicidal stupidity" - unrivaled by any man they can train for their cause. However, I didn't like to believe that they needed him for everything, especially this mission, which is obviously becoming a personal sore spot for him, for reasons with which I could empathize. I felt like they should learn to make due without him, without all us Gundam pilots, even though that may make me cruel and selfish, but how else will they ever learn to deal with the extreme threats to peace if we keep jumping in and saving the day?

Besides, dire as the situation in Ethiopia may be, it is straightforward in the sense that they only need to cut off the head; the evil, obnoxious head. Surely this the mighty Preventers could do by themselves without the Perfect Soldier holding their hand? I was being bitter and cynical, but I was right, the Preventers may need Heero's - or all of our - help one day, but this was not the day. Heero just liked to pretend it was, so he could be free to act out his revenge, something I knew from personal experience, not to be very helpful nor healthy.

"Heero, I'm not saying there is a Preventer Agent that can replace you and do everything that you can do, because that is not the truth. But I doubt the agency doesn't have agents capable enough to perform this mission."

"They will just screw it up, like Levelt did." Heero gritted through his teeth. "If NgGasi survives another assassination and again discovers a link to the Preventers, the RUSA will have a war on their hands."

"Maybe they won't screw it up."

"They will!" He yelled at me, his eyes black and dangerous.

"Well, in case you've forgotten, Levelt isn't the only one to blame, there were two of you when that
mission got totally fucked up!" I shouted back viciously. I guess there is no more offending thing you can say, shout rather, to the Perfect Soldier, but I wasn't really thinking, or maybe I was and I did it on purpose, purposefully trying to crush his confidence, so he would leave the mission to be completed by others. Was my unconscious that wily? Honestly, nothing dark coming out of my own mouth surprises me after being the God of Death for so long.

My remark had startled Heero, his eyes were open wide, but his mouth was sealed shut tightly. Slowly, his eyes narrowed, not to adopt an angry look, but a shameful and pained one. The corners of his mouth turned down. He didn't defend himself, he didn't contradict me. He agreed with me, he felt like an utter failure and I had just shouted the confirmation at him.

Great work, Maxwell, I scolded myself inwardly, looking at my torn boyfriend. I sighed and rubbed my fingers in my eyes, how am I supposed to fix this? "I'm sorry Heero... I didn't mean... You didn't fuck up, you did what you could."

But of course he didn't believe me. He wouldn't have before and after what I said, he especially wouldn't believe me.

"I have to make this right. I have to undo my failure!"

I was taken aback by his outburst, I scrambled for words of consolidation, but it was useless. I fell back into my carefree-Duo routine, not really knowing what else to do. I offered him a smile and started with hesitant optimism: "Come on, Buddy-"

"Forget it." He snapped. "I'm going to shower." He stormed off into the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind him, the sound of the lock falling into place was deafening to my ears.

What was I supposed to do? What was I supposed to say? A part of me wanted to support him in his quest to avenge his failed mission, but that is the vindictive, violent part of me that, at the climax of the war, I intended to neglect. The other part of me wanted to discourage any behavior of this sort, wanted to keep him with me, close to me, where I knew he would be safe and where I could protect him. Heero has contradicting parts to him as well, a part suited for battle and a part that is meek and careful and wanting something else, some other life. The strange thing was, the two parts that I consisted of, both could only see the part of Heero akin to their own. There was no logical way to figure this out, to rationalize which part of Heero I should focus on, I was too divided.

I guess you could say my head understood and was willing to support him, but my heart could not accept this, too afraid to get broken.

Instead of standing around, adding a feeling of uselessness to my already torn and confused state of mind, I got dressed in casual wear and went out for my bagel run, chasing some normalcy that I will never be able to achieve, like the horizon that is always there to see, but never within reach.

In the bakery I got my cheeks pinched and my shirt straightened before she shooed me back home with our free breakfast.

I had been gone no more than fifteen minutes, but in that span of time Heero had showered and hastily dried himself and had secured his position on the couch in direct view of the television. He was leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He stared at the screen intently and seemed oblivious to my arrival back home, although of course nothing goes unnoticed by the perfect soldier, except perhaps my heartache.

I held up the paper bag. The scent of the freshly baked bagels wafted through the air and was
spread through the apartment by the draft of the air-conditioning. "Got breakfast."

Heero didn't even look up.

With a sigh I retreated to the kitchen to prepare our breakfast. In the background there was indistinct talking, coming from the television set, voices that were sometimes interrupted by the rush of large vehicles passing them. I carried our two plates into the living room and briefly paused mid way, curiosity got the better of me and forced myself to look at the screen. The reporter holding the microphone was familiar, she had been covering all the onsite news in Ethiopia. She was standing by a dirt road and her straight black hair whipped around her face as a large truck passed by her.

"- wasted no time. As you can see behind me, construction vehicles are already underway, president NgGasi wants the dam to be completed by AC201. Once the dam is built, the other 900 kilometers of the Awash river and the interconnected lakes that rely on the in stream of water from the river, will go dry, causing desperation in the many villages downstream depending on the flow of fresh water. NgGasi wants the water to be rerouted through canals towards the larger cities. He announced this plan as part of his vision of making the cities of Ethiopia both tourist and corporate hotspots, but disgruntled civilians are accusing him of eradication. The poor villagers who have been living a traditional life dating back to PC times, cannot afford to move into the cities, let alone face the radical cultural change. They are basically left to die upon the completion of the dam."

"Here." I pushed the plate towards him. He accepted it without even looking at me, but he didn't eat, he put the plate on the coffee table in front of him and kept his undivided attention on the news report. I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, trying to find some place to put my frustration, so it wouldn't burst out of me in unintentionally nasty ways. Poking a finger at my bagel, I quickly realized I wasn't hungry at all and the information presented on the TV didn't help in the least. A computer generated image of a region of Ethiopia, showing where the river once was and where it would be going. Dozens of dots along the black line indicated settlements that relied on the river they were established next to, but would be drastically affected by the projected change. No water meant no crop, no crop meant no food, no food meant no life.

Will there ever truly be a just peace? I asked myself. Or will it always be this grand scale chess match played by opposing bullies? So what if the Preventers would kill this asshole and appoint a decent guy? Wouldn't it be true that at some point, in some place, some other douche with misplaced sense of righteousness will make the same mistakes? And then the board is just reset and the game begins anew.

Peace took so much work, it was discouraging. Things seemed so easy during the war. You had an enemy and he was standing right across from you and you could either defeat him, or be defeated and you do this time after time, till the war comes to an end and you don't ask any questions, like "What happens when the war ends?" We had been working towards it like a destination, but, it turns out, it was only the starting point for a different kind of battle.

Relena had it all wrong. She loved a peace that never existed and never will.

"I can't believe you're watching this shit." I commented.

Heero didn't respond, he kept his eyes trained on the screen. He would for the entire day.

Another morning, another empty, cold bed beside mine. It didn't worry me anymore, yet my heart kept skipping a beat, I don't think I'll ever get used to waking up next to an empty spot. It was very early, earlier than I would normally get out of bed. But once I'd become aware of his absence, I
couldn't sleep anymore. I jumped into jeans and a T-shirt, I knew the lady would be at the bakery, even at this hour. I had to wait a little while for our bagels, looking around the shop as behind the partition I heard her muttering to an employee in an incomprehensible language and sometimes he chuckled in response.

The employee came out to meet me, holding my bagels for ransom till I would give him a handshake. He was slight but handsome and had a friendly, freckled face with an honest smile. The bakery lady was still mumbling in foreign tongue.

"What is she saying?"

The young man shrugged and spoke matter-of-factly: "I have no idea, I don't speak Greek."

At that I raised an eyebrow. "You just pretend you understand her? Why don't you just tell her you don't understand a word of what she's saying?"

His smile brightened. "If talking in her native tongue is what she wants, why would I dump on that? I don't necessarily have to understand something to let it be."

Wow, he might as well have hit me on the nose with that bag he was holding. Before he could perform more Jedi mind tricks on me I bid him goodbye and thanked him for breakfast. The lady called from the back: "Bye!"

"Bye." I excused myself.

The whole way home I spent denouncing his logic. Starting with the obvious argument that the two situations could no be compared, letting someone talk gibberish is a far cry from letting someone go behind enemy lines to execute a heavily protected dictator. Even though it felt like the universe was trying to convince me I should let him deal with this the way he saw fit, I could not accept it. It only made me angry, I felt like Heero was trying to make me out as the bad guy for not supporting him on this matter, making snide comments for the past two weeks and otherwise avoiding all communication except for the infrequent lingering and questioning stare.

When I came back I heard the shower was running and Heero's running shoes lay strewn by the door, like he had just kicked them off. I made breakfast, despite that fact that food didn't seem nearly as popular as of late. Heero seemed too occupied and reluctant to eat anything and my personal concerns at the sight of him caused such a big lump to form in my throat that I couldn't swallow anything. But to keep up pretences, I made prepared two plates and two generous mugs of hot coffee, finishing up just as he emerged.

"How was your run?" I inquired casually, not looking up at him because I hated how arousing he looked when he just got out of a hot shower, with his hair still damp, his skin glistening and his face flustered. Unbeknownst to Heero, I had called doctor Borland of the Preventer agency a few days ago. With Heero's avid exercise routine I was afraid he was running his knee to hell, but the doctor glibly informed me that Heero's knee was healing at an impressive rate. Go figure. It seemed Heero's body was as determined to proceed with this self-appointed mission as his stubborn mind was.

"Fine." He grunted. He sipped the scolding hot coffee.

I wish he would stop it, I wish he could turn this focus elsewhere, but I knew better than to wish for silly things. All I could do at this point, was try my best not to be excluded from his life and bide my time till he was ready to accept the logic that he did not need to do this, he did not need to push himself like this. He owed no one. So in an effort to maintain our precariously constructed
relationship, I offered to go with him on his run tomorrow. Maybe in part because I couldn't stand waking up to another empty bed.

He glared at me skeptically. "You aren't going to slow me down are you?"

I shook my head. "I promise."

"And you aren't going to try to talk me out of it."

I chuckled breathlessly. "Heero, you know that if I want to keep up with you, I have no breath to spare for talking."

All he said was: "Good."

"So I can come?" I asked to clarify.

"Sure. I leave at five am."

My eyes might have popped out of my eye sockets, but I managed to contain them and coolly remark in a flat tone: "No shit." I glanced at the clock quickly, it was almost seven thirty AM, deducting the short time Heero would have been home by the time I had gotten back from the bakery, it became apparent that he had been running for more than two hours. The early hour became the least of my concern. I hated running. Couldn't imagine lasting for two hours, physically as well as mentally. "Why so early?" I tried to keep the conversation alive, seeing as it was the first we had had in what felt like ages of solitude.

"Beating the heat." He explained curtly.

Okay, so that made sense. "Not just beating the heat, beating the sunrise."

"Do you want to come or not?"

Something dirty sparked through me. I did, I really did. "Yeah. I do. Really!" I insisted as he raised an eyebrow at me. Heero left me alone at the kitchen. When he switched on the TV a shiver went through my body. It was starting to become an obsession to him. I wondered if he had been honest to Nettle about this behavior. Surely she could distinguish a slippery slope from a minor speed bump?

Heero spent another day tending to his obsession, soaking up all the information. He was one step away from making notes, but of course he had photographic memory, so that step was redundant. I spent the day tending to my concern. To distract myself I cleaned the apartment around him and gingerly started work on the laundry again, though I hated doing the laundry. I ignored Heero because I knew it was futile investing attention. Sometimes I caught him looking at me, but only to satisfy his curiosity as to what I was doing. As soon as he noted I was merely dusting or doing the dishes, he would look away. god forbid he would offer help, that would call for interpersonal interaction and he had no interest in that lately.

I was right there on that slippery slope with him. I ran the risk of resenting him. It didn't matter that I recognized his feelings and empathized with him. I had different expectations of this life and before this mess, at least it seemed like we were both working towards that common goal. Now it seemed like we were turned in different directions and in our effort to pull the other along in the direction we wanted, we ended up shuffling down some path that neither one of us was keen on taking. I felt like even though this failed mission was hard to confront himself with, Heero was taking the easy way out by turning back to his work, because that is something that we both knew he could do. I felt like he was running from himself and giving up on us. And surely, in the
meantime, Heero felt like I was taking the easy way out, by ignoring this horrible news from the outside world and not forcing myself to face it and not to dare to do something about it.

There were a lot of misunderstandings between the two of us.

The day came to an end. The apartment was organized but my head was as much an interwoven mess as it was before. After spending the day living next to each other, rather than with each other, we met on opposite sides of our joined beds. I looked at him deeply, hoping he could see in my eyes that there were so many things I felt that I couldn't voice.

But Heero looked away and crawling into bed he suggested: "You might want to set your alarm."

I kneeled on the mattress and grabbed the alarm clock still balanced on the headboard in the absence of a nearby nightstand. I set it to a quarter to five, I didn't need much time. Seeing that "04" on the digital display had my stomach churning. I might as well drop down right now. Two hours of running before my body was even ready to accept the black muck that we call coffee, was going to be hell. But that's what you do when you are in love. You do stupid stuff, anything really, just to get closer.

I settled into bed and switched the light off.

Neither of us said anything, like we hadn't for a while now. Heero turned his back towards me and I assumed he promptly fell asleep, his breathing evened out. I didn't believe that because we didn't say "I love you" anymore, it meant that there was no more love between us, for each other. I did believe it was testimony of the troubles we were going through, individually and together. It hurt, but we would have to work through it.

I don't think I had caught a wink of sleep when all of a sudden, in the darkness of the bedroom, my alarm started blaring. I flung an arm up and it took several random hits to get the right button. Heero had gotten up a few minutes prior. There were slivers of light between the doorpost and the door to the bathroom where he was getting changed.

I got out of bed and ripped the curtains open. It was still dark outside. The sun wouldn't rise for at least another forty-five minutes or so. I picked a comfortable set from the closet and waited for Heero to come out of the bathroom. Normally I wouldn't mind, but right now it just didn't feel right to have him walk in on me butt naked as I was getting dressed.

"No spandex?" I noted when he passed me by. I shouldn't have been disappointed, it would have been distracting to run after him for two hours long in those skin tight shorts. The pants he was wearing fitted him nicely as well, but not sinfully so. Of course, he would even look good in a potato sack fashioned around his hips.

"They're in the laundry."

"Right." I left the door to the bathroom ajar as I changed, to let him know that I wasn't shutting him out. I got changed hastily, brushed my teeth and braided my hair tightly, so it wouldn't come undone during the run.

"They're in the laundry."

"Right." I left the door to the bathroom ajar as I changed, to let him know that I wasn't shutting him out. I got changed hastily, brushed my teeth and braided my hair tightly, so it wouldn't come undone during the run.

I said I wouldn't try to talk him out of anything, so I didn't. I silently followed him into the dark and let him lead the way through abandoned streets and peaceful park trails. As was ever the case with Heero, there was no warm-up, he started to sprint and I followed him, whatever pains I felt, I reminded myself that Heero's knee must be hurting like a bitch, but his stride betrayed no pain and so I figured I could bite back my own.
The night had been hot and humid and it had lingered on the ground. Even before the sunrise, it was warm and the sweat on my back was seventy-five percent effort, twenty-five percent heat, but those numbers were flexible.

The sun finally peeked over the horizon and the black sky turned to pastel shades of pink and vibrant shades of orange. The display of color was quickly muted by the overpowering blue of the sky as the sun rose higher and higher. With the sunrays on my face, the heat rose and not solely because of the direct warmth on my exposed skin and black clad torso. In the light of day Heero's figure running ahead of me was clear to my eyes, the sight lost the mystery that it held illuminated by the sporadic streetlights, it became... exciting and truly something worth chasing after. The percentages of effort dropped quickly and were replaced by sweat and heat caused by being aroused. Luckily not in the obvious, physical sense, that would make it considerably harder to run.

I focused on the way his hips moved as he ran, sometimes trailing my eyes down his long legs. My hormones were not sensitive to the fact that our relationship was going through a rough patch, they ran amuck in my body. It wasn't so difficult anymore to keep up with him. Reverence stole over me - however cliché that was - when the heat of the environment caused Heero to take his dark grey shirt off. Keeping his pace, he peeled it off his body and over his head and he tucked one end of it in the back pocket of his pants. The sway of the grey fabric only enhanced the rocking motion of his hips and his bare back of golden skin was exposed so the movement of the muscles in his back and in his shoulders could be admired.

"Holy shit." I muttered under my breath.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah." I managed.

Heero rounded a corner and I came to the grateful conclusion that we were heading back towards our apartment after almost two hours. I didn't know how much of this kind of torture I could stand before a situation in my pants would cause me embarrassment. I was in dire need of a long, hot shower. Unfortunately the last hundred yards may have well been a vast distance. I watched Heero jog in front of me in slow-motion, enthralled by the elegant way with which each part of him moved. I remembered how soft his skin was and how hard his muscles. Maybe there should have been, but there was no shame as I fantasized privately. How long had it been since the last kiss? Too long. Always too long but especially now. It just hadn't felt right getting close to him as he was so obviously rejecting closeness, feeling comfortable with the distance that had been created between us.

Of course my body paid no heed to that and I didn't know how much longer "long showers" could satisfy my desire. It was true torture living with the object of your affection and attraction, but feeling unwelcome in his personal space.

Heero slowed down as we neared the door and I caught up with him. When we entered the lobby he suggested we'd take the stairs, but I said something foul and breathless and pressed on the control panel of the elevator. "You know I can't keep this up if there isn't someone chasing me with a big gun."

"I could bring my gun next time if you want." I snapped my head back at him. Heero's face was impassive, but I was pretty sure he had just cracked a joke. Instead of trying to get him to own up to his dry humor, I used the opportunity to secure this new step back towards the closeness we had once shared, not so long ago: "You want me to come with you again?"
The doors opened and Heero stepped inside. "If you can keep up." He remarked.

I followed him into the elevator. Even though I dreaded making a routine out of these morning runs, I knew a little cardio would do me favors and, more importantly, it was one of few chances to be with Heero without the damned background chatter of the news channel. "Deal." I breathed. I rested my hands on my knees, leaning forward and tried to catch my breath. My face was red, but that was a different matter, that had more to do with Heero's reflection in the steel doors of the elevator.

Heero pulled his shirt out of his pocket and used a dry spot to wipe the sweat from the back of his neck.

I scraped my throat. "Mind if I call dibs on the shower?" I croaked.

His vibrant blue orbs sought eye-contact in the reflection. "No."

"Thanks."

Upon entry of our apartment I rushed into the bathroom, to hide my recent "embarrassing situation". As I had caught my breath in the elevator and my heart slowed down, I guess blood was free to be disbursed elsewhere. I hoped Heero hadn't seen, it might be natural, especially for guys our age, but I felt awful with guilt. I shouldn't be thinking these things and my body shouldn't be feelings these things, but it appeared I had no control over it, there wasn't anything I could do but discretely take care of it. My body was obviously not restricted in any way by the rules of engagement of this relationship, but I didn't want Heero to feel forced into anything. He didn't seem ready, he certainly hadn't been seeking contact as I had retreated over the past few days.

I stripped my clothes from my body and it felt like the purest of freedom. I blushed at the sight of myself in the mirror and was determined to deal with it quickly. My hand had not much appeal, it was more of a quick fix than leisurely enjoying something. I turned the shower to a soothing, warm temperature and adjusted the spray to it's maximum, so the beating of water on the porcelain surface of the bath tub would drown out any mutters that might escape me.

I was more embarrassed than turned on, it's not particularly arousing to be a slave to your body's needs, but they were needs regardless. As I touched myself, it felt better than I had remembered, it always does. I lost track of my surroundings, giving in to carnal pleasure. I couldn't even be distracted by my braid trailing down my back, getting soaked, which meant it would be a tangled mess by the time I was finished. I let out a soft moan and was startled by how loud it sounded echoing off the tiled walls. I bit my lips, but there was no stopping them as the pleasure built. When finally a moan sounded way too much like Heero's name to be a coincidence, I was embarrassed, but there was also a sense of relief. I said his name again and just his name spilling from my lips sent shivers down my spine and intensified the feeling centered in my crotch. "Nn... Heero..." I became familiar with uttering his name, something I hadn't dared much before. I pretended my hand was his and the visual that that idea supplied made me gasp and whisper his name once more.

I neared my climax quickly, a strike to my ego, but I was way beyond the point of no return. I was so focused on the little fantasy of Heero jerking me off, that I didn't hear the sound of a turning doorknob, of the door I had neglected to lock.

"Where you talking to me?" Heero stopped short in the doorway, the doorknob in his hand, his eyes were wide as luck would have it that the shower curtain didn't obstruct his line of sight. A blush touched his cheekbones.
I froze, my erection still in my hand. I was about to let it go but it all happened in a split second, before my distracted mind could even process the entire event.

Heero found his voice but not his words. "Uh..." Then he abruptly turned his head away and took a step back, pulling the door with him, shutting it with a snap of wood on wood.

After he had left, I could breathe again and I used that air to say: "Oh fuck..." Not only had he just caught me masturbating, he had also obviously heard me say his name, otherwise he wouldn't have opened the door. Getting walked in on solved my situation in a less satisfying manner than I had hoped for, but whatever did the trick. At least I didn't have to worry about it anymore. I closed the faucet and jumped out of the shower, nearly slipping on the wet floor - as I had forgotten to properly close the damn shower curtain - and nearly killing myself most unceremoniously in the process. I had no clue how I was going to fix this, but I knew I had to go talk to him, if only to let him know that I didn't stay in the shower to finish off what I had started. I wrapped a big towel around my hips, tightly so there was no risk of it slipping off. That would honestly be mortifying.

I opened the door and found the bedroom empty so I headed out for the living room. Heero was standing in the open space of the room, looking more shocked than I had ever seen him, but of course it was an understated expression as always. My mouth opened to say something that I hadn't really thought through as carefully as I should, but Heero beat me to it.

"I'm sorry." He spoke hastily, his widened eyes avoiding eye contact. "I heard you say my name, I just thought... I thought you were calling me."

"Heero, I'm sorry." I started, I hadn't really figured out the rest yet. "I... uhm..." I scratched the back of my head. My whole face felt hot with shame. With the worst timing ever, I realized he was still only wearing his pants, his sweaty upper-body exposed. The sight made it even harder to find the right words. I sheepishly opted for: "It doesn't have to mean anything."

Heero blinked and finally looked me in the eye, with a serious face he questioned: "But it does, doesn't it?"

I shook my head, denying it even though he was right. "No, it doesn't mean anything."

"So it doesn't mean you want to have sex with me?"

I was shocked at his bluntness and it made me stumble for words even worse. "Uh... Mmm..." Realizing that I could not fashion a decent lie, I answered honestly: "It means I want to make love with you."

"By your distinction I presume there is a difference?"

I chuckled nervously. "Yeah, there is."

"How is it different?" He continued with a serious face.

"Uhm..." I shrugged, not quite sure how to explain it, I didn't truly believe that lovemaking could be captured by words, but I knew he was going to make me try, so I might as well give it an effort. "The technicalities are all the same, but you can have sex with anybody, you can only make love with someone special, someone you care more about than anybody else. Those feelings that you have for that someone, elevate the whole experience, makes it intense and makes it about more than just the body. So, by definition, we would never have sex, it would always be making love, because you are that someone for me."

"So, you want to make love with me?" He verified with a softer, kinder voice. That slight, curious
frown returned to him and I realized I had missed it, it made me smile.

"Yes." My heart beat wildly with anticipation for his reaction.

"I thought that maybe you didn't want to anymore." He cast his gaze down, his face was flushed. "You haven't seemed very interested lately."

"I haven't seemed interested? What about you? You spend the entire day in front of the TV." I stopped myself, before this would turn in yet another argument.

He nodded, almost shameful. "I just don't... I just don't know how to initiate it."

"It?"

He looked at me poignantly. "Contact..."

"Oh." I grinned, "Well, it really isn't that hard. I usually just do it like this." Feeling bold, I closed the distance between us and placed my hand on the back of his neck, pulling him flush against me. I leaned down and worshipped his lips with a lengthy, open-mouthed kiss. "I'm not very subtle when it comes to stuff like this." I jested once we parted.

Heero's breath was hot and rushed against my face. "This doesn't change anything. I still want to go on that mission."

"And I still don't want you to." I replied sternly.

Before any ill feelings could rise to the surface again, Heero raised himself up on the tips of his toes, supporting himself with warm hands on my bare shoulders and kissed me deeply and passionately, with a sense of desperation and need. It had never occurred to me that in spite of everything going on in Heero's head and between us, Heero's body was dealing with the same raging hormones as mine was and it turned out even the soldier could not nullify those urges. And maybe it was fuelled by his need to know that I still wanted him, no matter what had happened to him in his past.

I couldn't even begin to explain to him how much I wanted him.

Heero wrapped his arms around my neck and I cupped his ass strongly, grinding our hips together. I grinned inwardly as I discovered we were both in that certain "situation". It took every bit of discipline I had not to lower my towel and Heero's pants down to our knees to make the body contact even more interesting. Heero loosened his arms around my neck and slid his hands down my chest, the light touch over sensitive skin was delicious and Heero's palms simultaneously grazing my nipples sent jolts through my body. His hands trailed to my sides, under my arms to settle on my back.

It was all becoming a little bit too much and I feared that the friction with the fabric of the towel, caused by the slight gyrating motions of our hips might push me over the edge. Reluctantly, I ended the kiss with a final, chaste peck to his full lips and held him back a little bit, so cold air could rush between our bodies and cool us down a little. "We should stop..."

"You don't want to do it now?"

I swallowed. "It?" I asked again.

Heero didn't answer and that, in itself, answered my question. "I didn't think that... I didn't think that what we just said meant..."
"You were thinking about him." Heero accused me and pulled back a little.

"No! No, I wasn't!" It was a breakthrough in itself that that was true. "But I... are you sure you're ready?"

"I want to do it." He stated. "I want to make love."

The way he said it, didn't feel right, but I couldn't place the feeling and I quickly became distracted by rampaging thoughts, leaving me utterly flabbergasted.

"We could do it tonight. There is something I want to do first."

"Uh..." How could I possibly respond to this madness? Were we really setting a time for this? And what is it that he wanted to do first? "Heero, isn't this a little crazy? We can't plan something like that."

"But I prefer to plan it." He said a little meekly and he looked at me like he really wanted me to agree to it.

I presume my hormones took over and make me say: "Well, okay... We'll do it tonight." My brain couldn't have possibly been involved in the agreement, it was still too bewildered to make any sort of sensible combination of words.

And just like that, we had scheduled our first time. I almost felt like I had to write it down in my day planner, or ask what exact time he had in mind and which location.

Once the awkwardness and forcefulness of the arrangement had come and gone from my mind, it dawned on me that maybe he was right to insist on planning it, even though I had some difficulty accepting that. It was so anti-romantic, so unnatural, but at the same time, it was logical and responsible, everything Heero is. Setting a date for it might be the only way for him to properly prepare for it, rather than waiting for it happen, wondering when it was going, wondering if he was interpreting my signs correctly, wondering what he should be doing. I suppose to someone with as limited social skills and barely apt at reading body language as Heero, it could be difficult to judge where a kiss or a touch was leading. If you don't know where you are headed, I imagined it could be challenging to react. If it's heading towards sex, you might respond to a sensual touch in kind, even up the ante a little, take it that much further. If it wasn't supposed to be a more than a fairly innocent make-out sessions, your touch be best reserved.

It was a very rational decision for him to make. Maybe that's what bothered me, that his cold rationality would even invade and control our love life, if we couldn't expel it from there, we couldn't expel it from anywhere. It would always be there, hovering over our heads, affecting everything, guiding everything through previously set structures of conduct.

That was my rational - though tinted with emotions - respond to all of this.

Of course I had an irrational response as well and that response was more positive; it was excitement. I couldn't deny that I had been waiting for and dreaming of us taking this step for a long time and the prospect of finally going there, across that line, was enticing to say the least. Enticing enough to make me bottle all personal concerns for the remainder of the day.

Heero and I took turns showering, with no more awkward run-ins. After a breakfast of fruit and yoghurt, because I was in no state of mind to go for a bagel run and be confronted with that doting grandmother kind of personality, Heero settled in front of the television, much to my dismay, but I chose to ignore all the bad signs and focused on other things. Even though Heero had taken the
romantic spontaneity out of what would be our first time together, didn't mean I couldn't try my hardest to inject some romance back into it. I wasn't sure if Heero would even appreciate my efforts, but I knew I would feel better. So I spent most of the day discretely fussing over our bedroom, which I presumed to be where it would happen. It would definitely be the most comfortable place and it would suit with Heero's archaic and unimaginative ways of tackling this. I don't think Heero had even considered the possibility that sex could be had anywhere other than in bed. That thought made me smile, even though it was a little sad.

I changed the sheets on both our beds so they would be crisp and fresh and we could properly get them dirty. I had cleaned the bedroom the day before, so that saved me some work. The next step was retrieving the supplies I had previously gotten in the anticipation of this event from the night stand that was currently far away from either sides of our beds. I got the lubricant and took a condom out of the box, walking them over to the beds. I had planned to hide them under my bed, just within reach, but sitting on down the mattress, I realized I wouldn't be able to get them if we ended up on Heero's bed. The only place I could put them where they would be readily accessible, was underneath my own pillow. I grimaced at that, but reluctantly realized it was my only option.

When I was done, it wasn't enough. Looking at our bedroom, without any decoration or warmth, it didn't feel right. I didn't know why I was so taken with making this as special as I could. Being with Heero was special in itself. I was probably just determined to make this as different as possible from his first sexual experience that almost went badly awry.

I made a grocery list as an excuse to get out of the apartment. At the store I got the basic supplies that I had jotted down, but made an unregistered detour to aisles of the large multi-purpose supermarket I had never visited before. Beyond the power tools, screw drivers and lawn mowers, was the home decoration section. Scanning the shelves, I was completely lost. All those trinkets that I absolutely saw no purpose for, a veritable zoo of stainless steel miniature animals, stained glass partitions and decorative - fake - books to fill empty shelves and "impress guests with your intellect!"

I tapped a young employee on her shoulder. "Excuse me, where can I find candles, or something?"

She smiled politely at me. "I'll show you, follow me sir." She guided me to the end of the aisle and then left, to a corner where shelves were stacked up to the ceiling. It was a six by three meter section of candles in every shape, size and color and with varying scents. Even fake candles I noted, just a plastic cylinder with a little, flame shaped light bulb at the top that started flickering at the press of a button. "Did you have something specific in mind?"

"Actually, I had hoped the search term "candle" would be specific enough." I deadpanned.

"Well, we have all kinds of sizes to fit every candle holder, but you can also combine different kinds and make a plate of candles. These are floating candles, you can buy basins of different depths over there. These melt cleanly, but these, as they melt, have their sides peeled away, it gives a very rustic look." She gestured rapidly from left to right and up and down as she spoke. "We also have a wide selection of colors to match your interior, or a certain mood you are trying to set, but cream candles are the most popular, they have a very classic look."

"I don't know what to say." I stared at the daunting task before me. "But I guess "Help" would be a good place to start."

The young woman, a little older than me, chuckled. "Well, what is the occasion?"

Couldn't well tell her I had a sex-date, so I answered: "A romantic evening." In a way it was the truth, or so I hoped.
"Aww. That is so sweet. Is it a dinner or...?" She grinned at me.

"Uh... just romantic..."

She winked at me 'Gotcha. Well, like I said, white candles are always a winner. I'd suggest these, they burn with a delicate scent of lilac. But you could try other scents-"

"No!" I proclaimed, not willing to start on that whole wall of different scents. "I'm sure lilac is fine. Just give me a bunch of those."

"Do you want different sizes?"

I stared at her blankly. "Should I?"

She nodded and she already started selecting a multitude of candles of various shapes and sizes, from thick and short to thin and tall and everything in between.

"That's quite enough." I said as the basket was starting to get heavy. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She beamed. "Have a wonderful evening."

I sure hope so. At the cash registry I was shocked by the prize of the candles, but was too embarrassed to put some away, also, can't be cheap when dressing up a night like the one I was hoping for. Feeling silly, but, in a way, successful, I left the store with two heavy plastic bags, one with the actual groceries, the other filled with candles. I didn't get anything else, I was probably overreacting as it was, add flowers or rose petals and I'd be starring in an extra cheesy movie.

When I came home, surprisingly, Heero had vacated his spot in front of the TV. As I put the groceries away, I heard him typing away on his laptop, my heart wrenched. He was likely doing more research on the conflict in Ethiopia, maybe even already mapping out his strategy. So that was the thing he had to do... I pushed all unwelcome thoughts away and snuck the second bag into the bedroom, which wasn't hard, Heero's focus on his laptop could not be deterred.

I placed the candles at random on the nightstand, on top of our closet and in an out of the way corner where there was no risk of knocking them over. I brought a lighter over from the kitchen and put it in my drawer of the nightstand.

As the evening drew closer, I started to experience a mixture of nervousness and excitement. I didn't allow myself to be bothered by my doubts, I tucked them away and let the anticipation build. I fooled myself into thinking that making love could elevate our relationship not just in the physical sense, but also offer Heero something that I could consciously never do with words. Part of me, naively, hoped that it would cure him to some extent, make him see the light, make him become more comfortable with himself, with me and with us. It was a remedy too easy to be true, but I wanted it to be so, so badly, that hope overpowered rationality and that which I should have known to be true.

It was childish to be putting so much weight on a sexual act, but I couldn't help it, especially in light of the fact that everything else appeared to have failed.

I looked my work over one last time, closing the door not just to hide it, but to drown out the sounds from the television as Heero had turned his attention back to the news channel, like an addict.

I looked at the beds and was overwhelmed by flashes of what this evening could turn out to be, I saw our naked bodies together on the bed, holding each other close, exchanging long and deep
kisses, hands wandering everywhere without boundaries. I could almost feel his lips to mine and his hands sliding over my skin. I nearly lost myself in the fantasy, but the front of my jeans growing tight and restricting around me resurfaced me. I looked down at myself, a little sheepishly. The anticipation and the excitement could quickly become too much, I recognized and then the night would be over before anything that I planned for and hoped to happen, could. I decided to eliminate some of the pressure and urgency I felt by feigning a second shower of the day. I turned the faucet open to full power, but I didn't check the temperature, I had no intention of getting in. This time I remembered to lock the door.

I sat down on the closed lid of the toilet and pushed my jeans and underwear down just enough to expose the important bit. Unceremoniously, I started touching myself, the pumping of my fist quickly becoming furious and desperate. Bringing myself to completion was no difficult task with the prospect of what was to come. I imagined Heero's lips against my own, his tongue battling with mine and his warm hand replacing the one currently in my lap, his long, slender fingers wrapped tightly around me, his thumb expertly teasing the tip of my erection.

With my free hand I covered my mouth, as I felt it becoming impossible to keep quiet. The rough fabric of my jeans was chaffing the skin at the base of my erection but even that slight pain could not make me last any longer. Deep, muffled moans made their way through my palm but were drowned out by the water falling from the showerhead. As I neared my release, I started pushing my hips off the seat, into my hand. It was instinctual, animalistic. The added dimension to the friction was all it took. I bit down on my forefinger and middle finger as I came, breathing deeply through my nose. I enjoyed the short but intense orgasm as long as I could, lazily stroking myself. I hadn't even noticed that I had closed my eyes, but when I opened them I discovered just how intense it had been as I looked down at myself. My softening member still clutched in my hand, that was trembling with the intensity, I noticed drops of come on my bare arm and stains on my T-shirt as high up as my collarbone.

"Wow." I appreciated breathlessly. I definitely succeeded in taking the edge off. I tucked myself back in my pants and got up. I turned off the shower and realized that without damp hair, it would seem questionable that I had actually showered, but I could pretend that I had my hair pinned up to keep it from getting wet. Stealthily I exited the bathroom and opened the closet for a clean T-shirt. The stains of my own passion really stood out on the black fabric. I took the dirty T-shirt to the laundry room, for once grateful that the laundry was my responsibility. I wasn't terribly embarrassed, I just wouldn't feel comfortable to have Heero clean my come stains off my clothes. Curiously, I had never come across an article of soiled clothing of his, but of course the perfect soldier didn't spill anything anywhere he didn't want it.

With the shirt securely stuffed in the hamper, hidden under Heero's jogging pants from that morning, I walked back into the living space, hoping my face only felt hot and wasn't actually as blazing red as it felt.

"Any preferences for dinner?"

"It's Wednesday." He commented.

"So?"

"You always order from that Italian place on Wednesday."

I smirked. "You noticed that huh?"

He glanced at me briefly with a look that implied: Duh, nothing gets by me.
I chuckled. "Okay. No objections?"

"Of course not, it's just another Wednesday."

My heart ached a little as he said that, but nothing a deep breath couldn't solve. "Right." I walked over to the phone and dialed the number I had memorized. Soon, dinner was on its way.

To diffuse some of the formality of the evening, I didn't set the dinner table, instead I laid out placemats on the coffee table. "We're not going to watch that shit during dinner." I said adamantly, nodding at the television.

Heero glared at me but he didn't argue.

I bent down and got the remote from the cushion next to him and switched the channel, in search of something light and optimistic. I settled on a random movie. Considering the time it was playing and the fact that I had never heard of it, it couldn't possibly be any good, but anything would be better than the damn news or infomercials. It was only supposed to be a distraction for the tension and awkwardness anyway.

Twenty minutes later I went downstairs to accept our meal from the delivery guy at the front door, tipping him generously and brought it back upstairs. When I sat down next to Heero, I noticed his nervousness, it radiated from his being. His movements were stiff and sometimes poorly coordinated, his mind appeared to be elsewhere and I wondered if it was in a good place. He clumsily knocked over his glass of water as he reached for it, mumbling several apologies as he hurried to dry the surface of the coffee table with the supplied tissues.

"It's okay." I tried to reassure him, grabbing a tissue myself to help clean up the mess. When it was all dried up, I took the soaked tissues to the kitchen to throw them out and brought back a new glass of water for Heero.

He took it from me and emptied the entire glass in a single effort.

I smiled compassionately, he was clearly anxious. I didn't know if it meant he was ready or not. It was normal to be nervous about your first time, but what was too nervous?

We cleared away the dishes after a quick and quiet meal and I sat back down on the couch.

Heero, however, had other plan, he stood by me and looked at me intensely, a stern gaze that poorly hid the uncertainty in his eyes.

"What?" I dumbly asked, looking up at him.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and took a deep breath that sounded shaky. "Shouldn't we go into the bedroom?" He suggested with a soft voice.

Instantly my heart started beating wildly. "... You want to do it right now?"

Heero appeared a bit taken aback. "I thought that if we waited too long, we might be too tired." He explained innocently. "Did you want to watch the rest of the movie?"

"What? No!" My hand blindly groped around the couch for the remote and I turned the television off. I remembered the candles, on which I had spent so much money, I could not let it go to waste, even if I started to feel increasingly insecure about the plan. I jumped to my feet and told Heero to wait here for a little while.
He quirked an eyebrow at me, but obliged, waiting where he stood as I went into the bedroom.

I got the lighter out of the nightstand and lit all the candles, trying to keep my focus as I felt hurried and nervous and excited simultaneously. When I was certain all the candles were lit, I was somewhat impressed with the setting I had created, the candles provided a nice warm glow and even though it was cheesy and an utter, inexcusable cliché, I did have to admit that it looked romantic. It was the best I could do. I put the lighter away and went back to get Heero.

"What were you doing? I heard you cursing." He said as I approached him.

"Uh, yeah, couldn't get the stupid lighter to work."

Heero frowned deeply.

"You'll see." I reached out my hand, inviting him to take hold of it. He did and when he held my hand and looked in my eyes, I suddenly wasn't nervous anymore. Instead of thinking of all the things that could go wrong, of the many way in which I could fuck up, I only thought of us, together. Hope pushed everything else away. It made my head much quieter and my heart much calmer. I smiled at him and led him to the bedroom. I felt silly standing there in the doorway with him as he took it all in.

"Why did you do this?" He questioned without any negative nor positive disposition, looking around the room.

"It's romantic."

"It's hazardous." He commented dryly, but he looked at me with a kind expression.

My smile was beaming, my heart was fluttering insanely. I was either extremely happy or about to drop dead from a cardiac arrhythmia. Whatever the case, it felt deceptively good.

We idly stood in the doorway, both of us unsure how to proceed, but I assumed I was expected to take the lead, so I did. I pulled him towards the bed and said down at the foot end of my own bed, looking up at him with a smile that I hoped to be reassuring.

Heero stood in front of me, hesitant, his hand felt sweaty in mine. "Do you want me to undress?"

I shook my head. "We'll work on that along the way... Sit down."

He slowly sat down next to me, wiping both his hands on his dark jeans drawn taut over his thighs.

I scooted a little closer to him, till we sat hip to hip, the entire length of our legs pressed together, down to our feet. I tilted his head and kissed him slowly, not involving the tongue for the time being. Leaning against him I could feel his whole body was stiff except for the part of his that was supposed to be. His response to my kisses, though favorably, were unfocused. I pulled back. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes." He seemed confident in decision.

"Really?"

"Yes! Stop asking me!" He snapped, looking apologetic immediately after.

"Okay, okay..." I shushed. "I just want you to know that we can stop whenever you want to..."

With a grin I added teasingly: "But I hope you won't want to."
He nodded but apparently could say anything intelligible.

I had him place his hands on the mattress so he could lean back on them comfortably, making it easier for me to lean in and kiss him. I started out gentle and relatively modest, only moving my lips against his, waiting for him to relax. When there seemed to be progress, I licked his lips and after some sensual persuasion he opened his mouth to allow me access. I quickly lost myself in the taste of him and electricity shot through me when he became more curious with his own tongue and the kiss became like heaven.

I brought my hand around and rested it on his thigh, my fingers extending down the side of it, between his slightly spread legs. I carefully massaged the strong muscle through the fabric, but my hand froze when I felt Heero shift. I was afraid I had moved too quickly and he would have me take a step back, but instead he had brought his own hand up. First to cup my cheek, then to slide around my neck and press my lips tighter and more urgently to his. His fingers delved into my hair at the base of my braid.

My hand on his thigh grew bolder, rubbing back and forth, dipping down his inner thigh, feeling the warmth of his body. I slowly worked my hand further up his leg, curious to feel if Heero was as aroused as I was. I stopped briefly with my hand in the crook of his thigh, but I abandoned all careful contemplation, if I kept second guessing myself, it would never be the way I imagined it.

Heero surprised me as he moaned quietly into my mouth when I rubbed my hand between his thighs, not disappointed by his aroused state. Overwhelmed with lust I pushed him down onto the mattress and moved to lay half on top of him, one of my legs between his thighs, most of my weight supported on one hand as the other kept touching him through the front of his jeans. Our kiss became sloppy, but possibly the hottest kiss we had ever shared, both uninhibited and shamelessly pursuing sensation.

Heero shortly worked both hands into my hair and I could feel some strands pulling on my scalp, but it only gave me delicious shivers. He quickly realized he could use his hands far more interestingly, so he let one draw down the front of my shirt, curiously exploratory. There was a moment of hesitation when his hand was at the hem of my T-shirt, but with a sudden surge of determination he slipped his hand underneath and his fingers moved up my abdomen, lingeringly feeling the shape of the muscles before sliding around to my back, pulling me against him.

I felt incredibly hot and the urge to shed pieces of clothing was indisputable. I raised myself up on my knees, leaving Heero to stare up at me in surprise at the sudden loss of contact. I smiled at him and grabbed the hem off my shirt, pulling it over my head and then throwing it to the floor, mindful not to throw it in the direction of any of the candles. I remained upright for a moment longer, enjoying the way he looked at me while he was pretending not to.

"Move a little further up the bed." I told him.

Heero toed off his shoes and did as he was told. He lay back down with his head on my pillow and abruptly formed a frown. He propped himself up on one elbow and I felt my face becoming red without the mother of all irrational blushes when his hand disappeared under my pillow and he pulled out the tube of lubrication and the condom. "This is what you went to the grocery store for?" He asked with a monotone.

"Uh... no, I went to the store for the candles. I actually... I got those quite a while ago, when we first talked about having sex."

"Oh." He moved to put the products on his bed, out of the way. "So did I." He admitted matter-of-factly.
I grinned through my shock. "You bought condoms and lube too?"

He shrugged. "It seemed to be the responsible things to do."

My smile brightened. I leant down to continue our kiss, quickly making us both forget about the short conversation. Still up on my knees, I had both hands available so I hungrily moved them over his chest, becoming intrigued by the stiff nipples that stood out through the fabric of his thin, cotton shirt. When I stimulated them with my thumbs, Heero's loud gasp broke our kiss. He looked at me with wide eyes and flustered cheeks, perhaps more shocked by the sound he had made than the sensation. I smirked at him and started our kiss anew. Heero was considerably more uncoordinated whilst I pinched my thumbs and forefingers around his nipples and teased them relentlessly. As I continued the pleasurable torture, Heero could not maintain the kiss. He angled his face to the side and bit his lower lip. His eyes were squeezed shut tightly.

Offering him time to catch his breath, I ceased my assault and instead moved my hands down his stomach with feather light touches.

"You're so hot." I admired, looking down at him.

Heero nodded, his head still turned away, his eyes closed. "I feel very hot."

I chuckled, obviously he didn't understand what I meant by my comment. Rather than explaining it to him, I helped him find relief from the heat he admitted to feeling, pulling off his shirt and throwing it to where my own had landed.

I started at his jaw line and kissed my way down his torso, my whole body tingling with anticipation, my erection nearly painful in the confinement of my pants. I sat back down on my calves and undid the button of his jeans, noticing him raising himself up to look at me through heavy lidded eyes. Keeping eye contact with him I carefully lowered the zipper, in the silence I could hear the movement of the metal teeth as they were released. Once the pants were undone, I placed my hands strongly on his hips. Heero understood what I wanted and lifted his hips off the mattress just enough for me to pull his jeans down and peeled off both his socks in the process as well.

Left in only his black boxer briefs, clinging and straining around his arousal, he must have felt terribly exposed and vulnerable, but his eyes were calm and trusting and that reassured me and gave me a warm feeling in my heart to match the hot sensation coursing through the rest of my body. I briefly got off the bed to strip down to my underwear as well - it was relief to get out of those jeans - before kneeling back on the bed just as I had.

Sitting back and studying his features, I touched him through his underwear first.

Heero closed his eyes and lowered himself back down and brought his hands up to emit loud pants.

At this juncture I was quite a bit uncertain myself. Oral sex was one of the few things I skipped out on during my experimental teenage years with the young, adolescent members of the Sweeper's crew. I had never done more than a curious lick across the tip during an otherwise plain hand job. I simply never wanted to that for them, it made me feel vulnerable and like I was being taken advantage of. Now, I realized with flushed cheeks, I was eager to do more than just a single lick.

I carefully pulled off his underwear and it followed the path our shirts and jeans had previously taken.
I bent down and started by taking the base of his erection into my hand, giving it a few tentative strokes to familiarize myself and get my bearings. I looked up at Heero face and found him staring at me, the curiosity in his eyes clouded by lust. I dipped my head down and gave the head that first experimental lick. I felt Heero shudder violently and he barely managed to swallow a moan. His sensitive reaction boosted my confidence.

Heero couldn't hold back his moans any longer as I grew bolder with my mouth and started to discover the best and quickest ways to drive him mad. But he kept fighting them, keeping them as quiet as he possibly could.

I realized he was close to climaxing and knew it would probably be best if he did, to relieve him of the tension he must be feeling. I proceeded by focusing on the areas and methods that he seemed to enjoy most judging by his muted reactions and the writhing of his body.

Between deep breaths Heero suddenly gritted through his teeth in a deep voice: "Duo, stop... Ah... I'm going to come..."

I paused my actions long enough to say: "It's okay... it'll help take the edge off."

Heero hadn't been lying when he warned me, it only took a few more downward strokes with my mouth to bring him to orgasm, with a low groan coming from deep down his throat.

I spat his come out into my hand. I wasn't very keen on swallowing it, even though it didn't taste as badly as I had thought it would. I reached next to the bed and grabbed one of our shirts that had landed there. I think it was Heero's, but I didn't let that stop me from using it to wipe my hand, grinning as I did so. I was the one who had to clean it anyway and besides, it was his come. I dumped the shirt back down next to the bed and used the opportunity to rid myself of my own underwear before crawling back up his body, giving him a lazy kiss to share with him his taste that lingered in my mouth.

I lay on my side next to him, kissing his ear and neck as my fingertips drew patterns on his chest and abdomen that caused him Goosebumps. We waited for some time to pass, allowing his body time to recover and he seemed pleased enough enjoying the aftermath of his orgasm. After several minutes had passed, my touch became more urgent again. Even though my arousal was happily sandwiched between my stomach and Heero's side, it was throbbing for release and I'd best oblige. Kissing him deeply I used my hand to ease Heero back into the same needy state.

In a split second I decided that I was going to let Heero top. Personally the top was a position I preferred, but I trusted that with Heero it would be good either way. My undeniable motivation for my decision was the fact that I had to take care that he didn't feel forced into anything. I wanted him to have complete freedom and offer him some control over the situation, to help ease him into it and make sure nothing would be done that he wasn't ready for.

With that decision in mind, I rolled over onto my back and pulled Heero along with me, maneuvering him to lie on top of me.

Our lips parted and Heero looked down at me curiously. I hope he understood what I was offering with him above me, lying in between my spread legs. I didn't regret my decision, I happily sacrificed the added pleasure I'd experience as a top for his comfort.

It seemed he understood. He lowered his mouth back onto mine, but the kiss was not the same. He wasn't as relaxed, nor as confident. He hands moved down my sides but whereas he had been doing so well before, it appeared like he had suddenly forgotten how to touch me, his movements were awkward and more hesitant than they had ever been. I took a little bit more initiative, taking
control over the kiss. When he seemed to become more comfortable again, I broke the kiss and reached for the condom, just to make sure there wouldn't be any confusion about the positions. I handed it to him with a wink.

"Put it on." And again to make sure, I clarified: "Put it on your dick." Something surged through me as I said that, it was dirty, but hot.

He took the condom and sat back, his elbows occasionally brushing my raised knees as he fumbled with the wrapping. He wasn't making much progress, it didn't appear like he was even giving it much effort. He was more fidgeting with it than trying to open it. "I..." He started, but his voice was hoarse. He scraped his throat. "I don't know how to do this." His voice was barely more than a whisper this time around.

"Oh... That's okay. I'll open it for you." I reached out and took the condom from him, blabbering as I did, to diffuse the sudden awkwardness between us of which I didn't yet understand the cause. "You have to find the right corner where there's like a little bite out of it, from there you can easily rip-"

"That's not what I meant." He interrupted me.

I still'd just after ripping the package an inch open and with my erection painfully hard I suddenly worried it was going to go to waste.

"I don't know how to do... this... I mean, I researched it this afternoon so I know the technicalities, but I just don't... I don't know. I just assumed-" He stopped himself and bit his lip, that adorable nervous habit of his.

So that's what he was doing on his laptop today. I had to fight a pleasantly surprised smirk. "You assumed what?" I encouraged.

His expression was openly embarrassed as he admitted: "I assumed that you'd be... doing that..."

There was no fighting the smirk now. "That I'd be on top?"

"Yes." He cast his gaze to the side.

"Do you want me to be?"

He was silent for a heartbeat or two and then directed his gaze back at me. Fear of rejection joined the embarrassment on his face. "Yes." He breathed.

I sat upright and put my hand behind his neck to pull him down towards me. With the tips of our nose touching, I said: "That can be arranged." and then I kissed him deeply and lengthily. I reached out and gave him a few playful jerks to help him back to a prominent state of arousal after losing that to his uncertainty and then flipped us over. Heero landed on his back on his own bed and I positioned myself on top of him, settling myself between his spread legs. Our chests were flush against each other and our heartbeats felt as one.

I admired his body with my hands and with my mouth for as long as I could stand it with my erection dripping with need between my legs. When it started to become too much, I searched for the condom and ripped the package all the way open. I looked him in his eyes intently and for one last time asked him if he was sure.

He could only nod.
I focused on putting on the protective latex - a necessary precaution even though Heero was a virgin and I had always been careful, we could never be sure what the scientists exposed us to with the way they pricked and prodded us. Then I reached for the lube and poured a liberal amount of it onto myself and then spreading it with my hand. With my fingers slick with lube I prepared Heero quickly.

When I deemed him ready and I was crazy with lust, I hooked my hands under his knees and pushed them up towards his chest, granting me better access. My face hovered above his, his breath felt hot washing over my cheeks. I let go of his legs so I could lean my weight onto my arms and without any direction or urging, Heero wrapped his long legs around my hips.

His pants were short and shallow, his arms stiff by his sides.

"Try to relax." I whispered and placed a light kiss on his lips. I reminded him: "If you want to stop-"

"I'm ready. Please..."

I angled my hips and pushed forward, but he was so nervous he was too tight for me to enter him. Even just pressing against him was almost too much stimulation for me to handle. I breathed deeply through my nose, calming myself so it would last. To help him relax, I distracted him with a passionate kiss, my tongue toying with his.

When he finally relaxed enough for me to push inside, he let out a loud moan in a high pitch. Embarrassment instantly settled over him. He tilted his head to side and closed his eyes, like he didn't want to be there anymore, too ashamed. His fingers were clenching around handfuls of the sheets, gripping it so strongly he would nearly rip them.

I took my time completely pushing inside of him, not repressing any of my own moans, hoping to let him know it was okay - desirable in fact - for him to express his pleasure.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, the only sign that the penetration caused him pain. Muscles and tendons in his neck strained and stood out as he turned his head away even further, burying the right side of his face in the pillow.

To stop never occurred to me, that may have been selfish, but I knew at that point, for me, there was no turning back. Turning back meant undoing something that we both needed and it would break something between us that might never be fixed. I trusted that he knew his own limits and dared to speak up if they were being trespassed.

Allowing him time to adjust, I leisurely kissed his cheek and neck and licked his ear teasingly. When I pulled my face back to look at him, I noticed his eyes had opened slightly, narrow slits of intense blue peered through the thick curtains of black eyelashes. His mouth had opened as well, his lips parted temptingly. I looked at him for a long time, certain he could feel my gaze burning, but he didn't look back. Not taking it personally I kissed his cheek one final time - gentle - and then slowly started to move, building a rhythm my body was instinctively familiar with, rather than by extensive practice.

The moment I moved, he squeezed his eyes shut again and closed his mouth, his lips became a taut uncomfortable line across his face. I knew him to be able to handle pain better than this, I knew it was more the emotional aspect, than the physical aspect, that had him hurting. So I didn't stop, because it something he would have to work his way through. I started to lose myself in the motions of my own hips. Heero did not shy away but he didn't encourage me either, yet even with him impassive, it was the best sex I ever had - I could safely conclude that after mere seconds. The
pleasure surpassed the boundaries of the body and leaked into the spirit and the soul, filling them with something I never wanted to be without, ever again.

Suddenly, Heero gasped. My eyes drew to his mouth, he kept his lips parted, to allow for quick, sharp pants. His eyes were still closed, but not squeezed shut tightly. The muscles had relaxed and his eyebrows had slightly drawn up. I planted an appreciative and encouraging kiss on the corner of his mouth. His eyes opened and looked at me directly. I had never seen them like that. The soldier had been locked deep inside a dark recess somewhere within him and passion colored the blue of his eyes in a breathtaking shade.

As I made my thrusts deeper and longer, he moaned again, low and sexy and drawn out.

I leaned down to capture his lips in a warm kiss. My braid snaked around my shoulder and landed heavily on his chest. It startled him, making him gasp and tense up. I kissed the tension away and he kissed back lazily, unfocused. When the kiss ended he let out a raspy moan, causing him embarrassment again. He turned his head back to side, but quiet pants and moans kept resounding, he couldn't stop them. His cheeks were tinted a bright red.

"I love hearing you." I whispered breathlessly in his ear.

The red on his cheekbones flared even brighter.

I felt his splayed hand on my chest and worry coursed through me that he was going to push me away, and maybe, initially, that was his intension, but instead, after a short pause of hesitation, he dragged the hand up, over my shoulder and wrapped his arm around my neck. He pulled me down. Our sweaty chests rubbed together as we moved and we were panting in each other's ears. I would have found it incredibly arousing if I hadn't been painfully aware of the fact he was using this position to hide his face from me because he was ashamed for me to see the pleasure evident on his features.

I placed a few open-mouthed kisses on the shell of his ear, becoming aware of how sweaty I had become and how quickly the end was drawing near. The pleasure was so powerful it almost made me sick. I firmly planted my hands back on the bed on either side of him so I could raise myself up a bit. Heero reluctantly let me create the distance. His sweaty face came into view. He looked like a completely different person. His eyes were passionate and soft, lidded with thick eyelashes, his mouth relaxed and opened to emit endearing sounds, his hair, damp with sweat, had fanned around his head like a crown of dark strands, his bangs had fallen out of his face, giving him a more open and welcoming appearance.

"You're beautiful." I said, in between my own groans. I looked in his eyes, knowing I was seeing a side of him that I had never seen before, more vulnerable and emotional than he had ever allowed to show.

One of Heero's arms started moving. It abandoned my shoulder. He threw his arm across his own face, burying his nose into the crook of his elbow, hiding his eyes from sight. It was clear he didn't want me to look, he didn't want me to see.

It saddened me, it weighed down on me. But I was a teenager in the throws of passionate lovemaking. Even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to stop. I kissed the sharp end of his elbow, not forcing him into anything that he wasn't ready for, even though I desperately wanted to see his the look in his eyes. The anonymity behind his arm apparently gave him the freedom to be more vocal, his moans became louder as we were building up to the climax.

I raised myself up further, coming to sit on my knees and took hold of his hips. He let out a pitched
appreciation at my assertion of control and the different angle.

It was over soon after that. I realized that no matter how long we would ever be able to drag it out, the end would always come too soon. As I neared my own completion I recognized him to be ready too. I knew myself to be an adequate lover, I had never been told I had left someone disappointed, but this had been nothing like anything I had ever experienced before and though I knew it was Heero's first time, I wanted it to be equally amazing for him and I hoped dearly to succeed.

He came first, it took only a few heavy pets of my hand. I held back my own orgasm for as long as I could, fascinated by the way his back arched off the bed and he moaned loudly. Then a shout of my own joined the aftermath of his.

After a few final, lazy efforts to prolong the lovemaking I stilled, catching my breath with my mouth wide open, but still finding a way to grin like an idiot. For a moment my concerns were gone and I simply appreciated the little victory that we had accomplished together. I stroked my right hand up and down his thigh, trying to soothe him as he breathed heavily and quickly, most of his face still covered by his arm.

I chuckled breathlessly and stupidly. I pulled out, took off the condom and stood on shaky legs and walked into the bathroom to dispose of it and get a towel to clean Heero off. When I returned he had stretched his legs out and had raised his arms above his head, resting them heavily on the pillow as his fingers toyed with the ends of his slick hair. I straddled him and quietly and lovingly cleaned his stomach and chest, all the while Heero was stubbornly avoiding eye-contact. When I was done I threw the towel onto the pile of our clothing and then climbed over to his other side, settling between him and the separation between our mattresses. I lay on my side and propped myself up on my elbow, looking down at him. I still sported a satisfied smile. Can you blame me?

Heero looked like himself again. Like his old self, to be specific; analytical. I already started to miss the passionate him he had shown me, but I had grown confident I would see that side of him again, now that it was proven that that side existed. I lay my head down on his bicep, staring at him staring at the ceiling. The chill of the surrounding air was a nice contrast to the smoldering heat we had both experienced, so I didn't bother with covering us up with the sheets just yet.

His thoughtful expression prompted me to ask if he was okay.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Did you like it?" I asked with a grin.

"Obviously."

My face turned more serious. "You shouldn't be embarrassed Heero."

He didn't respond.

"What are you thinking about?"

He sighed deeply, his eyebrows moving to make that frown again. "I was thinking that... the feeling is already starting to fade away."

"Yeah, post-orgasm bliss sadly doesn't last forever."

"No, I mean... I don't know what I mean. But when we... did that, I felt something in my heart and it was perfect and painless and none of the bad memories could hurt me." He tilted his head slightly to look at me with disappointed eyes. "But that feeling is already starting to fade away.
And soon it will be gone, won't it?"

Thinking I understood what he meant, I nodded slowly, I also secretly had high hopes of the sort. Apparently he had had high hopes as well. He too had hoped that the lovemaking would cure him, that it would erase all the bad feelings. In a way I blamed myself, even though that was irrational, because I made a point of calling it "making love", I might have filled his head - both our heads - with ideas and false hope that, however wonderful the intercourse, it could never live up to.

He still had his issues, there was no quick fix for those. He would still have to work on them or this would never be the way we both wanted it, but we would work on them together. And for the time being, I was very happy with this step that we had taken.

He directed his gaze back up at the ceiling.

"Does this mean you regret it?" I asked with fear in my heart.

His answer was simple but relieving: "No."

We shared a silence for a long time, both lost in our own heads, toying with private thoughts. Pondering in the aftermath. I felt myself becoming tired rather quickly and I threw a glance over my shoulder to look at the time. It was only eight thirty, but after our bedroom acrobatics, I was exhausted. My body and mind were ready to sleep, I didn't want to think anymore. I wanted to escape from all bad thoughts and just enjoy this night in my sub conscience.

"Hmmm..." I moaned tiredly. "Let's go sleep..."

"We should blow out the candles first."

I cursed under my breath, I should have know it would be a bad idea. Reluctantly we both got out of bed and worked together to blow out all the candles. With all the candles going out at the same time, the room filled with a smoky sent of lilac. I coughed as the pungent smell attacked my nostrils and irritated my throat. "Oh man." I disproved. "That's fucking horrible." I shut my trap when Heero started chuckling, fascinated by the sound.

We both got back into bed and instead of limiting us to our own mattress, I invited him to join me on mine, happy to have him accept the offer. To be able to share the narrow space of the bed, we had to lay close to each other and it felt most natural to hold each other, rather than laying bunched up. I lay on my back and Heero lay flush to my side, his head resting on my chest. His arm was wrapped around my waist and my arm was wrapped around his shoulders. The sheets were pulled up just enough to offer us some modesty.

I was equally pleased with the way we slept together as the way we had "slept together". I realized we had never slept in each other's arms before and I, for one, thoroughly enjoyed the closeness, sharing warmth and what felt like a single heartbeat. I petted his hair with a light touch, reveling in the feel of the silky soft strands. I could feel Heero's breath spreading over my chest like a warm, loving touch every time he exhaled.

"I love you Heero." I whispered.

"I love you too." He mumbled.

And for now that would have to do, even though I wanted more. I would wait for more. I would wait for him. For as long as I could stand this bittersweet hardship.

I hoped I was strong enough to stand it for as long as it would last.
Dawn was never a more welcome sight. Instead of waking up alone, the sunlight filtering through the curtain drew my eyes to head with messy dark hair resting on my chest. A long arm had extended out across my abdomen and slim fingers had a loose grip on my wrist lying at my side. Warm breath spread over my skin in a slow and comfortable rhythm. I couldn't stop the smile from forming on my lips as last night rushed back to me in a succession of flashes, each more amazing than the previous. As if the situation wasn't already approaching a too-good-to-be-true status, I realized with a darting glance to the clock precariously propped up on the headboard above my head, that it was obvious we had missed our window to jog before the heat would build up. It was relieving, even though, admittedly, the last time didn't turn out too bad.

Heero stirred, maybe I had done something to wake him. I could not see his face but I knew when he became fully aware of his surroundings after losing himself to unconsciousness. His arm slowly slipped away and he rolled onto his back, leaving my chest feeling empty and cold.

"Good morning." I said and joined him in staring up at the ceiling.

"Good morning."

"That was some night, huh?" I chuckled sheepishly, feeling far too much like a giddy schoolgirl to my comfort.

Heero didn't respond, I guess he had no soldier worthy way to react to my silliness.

Feeling discomfort moving to occupy the small space between our bodies, I tried to keep the conversation alive, casually inquiring: "Are you sore?" I realized it might be a stupid question to ask. Why would I ask the Perfect soldier that? Why would I start now? I didn't ask him if he was sore when he fell down a rocky cliff to proceed and set his own leg. I didn't ask if he was sore when we plummeted off that railroad bridge and nearly drowned.

"No." He answered as suspected. Heero could be bleeding from the jugular and still claim to be just peachy.

"Really? Because, you know, usually I leave guys quite sore..." I trailed off, I could kick myself. What kind of idiotic conversation starter was that? Bringing up former sexual experiences after just spending the night with the guy you love? Haven't I learned anything from those pre-colonial romantic comedies?

"I'm assuming your comment is an ill-veiled remark about the size of your manhood?" Heero retorted dryly.

I would have choked on my own spit if I wasn't acutely aware of how incredibly dumb it was to die like that. My whole mind just blanked at his words, my own string of thoughts completely submerged and drowning in the awkwardness of the moment. My lips and tongue worked tirelessly to regain some composure, but it was a disappointingly futile attempt: "I...uh... uhn..."

"Don't worry, you don't have to be self-conscious about that." He assured me monotonously.
"Great. Thanks..." I blurted, keeping my eyes trained on the ceiling from underneath crooked eyebrows. Suddenly it dawned on me that it might be best for me to return the gesture, so I said: "Neither do you." The thought of the Perfect Soldier being self-conscious about "his size" was ridiculously hilarious, but I couldn't help but note with an egotistical boost of my own ego that mine was a little bigger than his. Hot on the heels of that was shaming myself for even having noticed the difference.

"I know. Relative to my body size I'm actually somewhat more generously endowed than you are."

I felt a twitching in my left eye as I broke out in an abrupt but brief coughing fit at his flatly toned observation. Once I had caught my breath, I turned my head to look at him wide eyed and became aware of the mischievous grin on his face. I started chuckling, but it soon evolved into genuine laughter. Heero joined me with his own rumbling chuckles and neither of us stopped it till it died down naturally a few moments later with a deep exhale.

I got over the novelty of the fact that we finally participated in the age old ritual between young man of comparing sizes and managed to joke: "Are you always this evil or is it just the sex?"

Heero shrugged and didn't waste any words on the matter.

I smiled. I liked the vibe between us. It was honest and young, if that made any sense. For a moment I felt we were free from all the seriousness that has been repressing us since a time we only had vague and fleeting memories of. I felt we could just be us, the us we would have been if history had turned out differently. I realized with a bittersweet feeling in my heart, I liked the way we would have been. I hoped we could hold onto that feeling till someday it wasn't a fantasy crossing over from an alternative reality, but the actual truth, the actual us.

I learned to dream big on the streets.

"I want to come with you tomorrow."

Heero frowned. "Because of the size comment?"

I chuckled. "No, I didn't mean I want to come with you to see Nettle... I want to come with you to HQ, to talk to Une." I couldn't hide out in our apartment forever. It doesn't work that way. I don't work that way.

He tilted his head to look at me curiously. "About what?"

"Well, you said that Une would basically offer you any position in the agency. I figured I might check if that offer applies to another Gundam Pilot as well."

Heero was quiet for a while and then spoke: "You are very skillful. I'm sure she will hire you."

I rolled onto my side and propped my head up to look at him seriously. "I'm not becoming an agent though. When the time comes and they really need us, I'll be there, I'll do what I have to do to make sure that the shit we've already been through, wasn't in vain. But this is not that time." I hoped he would understand and accept that.

He just nodded, I didn't really know what that meant.

I might have preferred to remain in bed all day but soon Heero felt the need to start the day and I decided to go along. I arranged our breakfast as usual as Heero showered. You never expect life to return to it's normal ways after something important like last night happened, but in reality, nothing can stop the grind of a routine, no matter how much you fight it, you soon slip back into it. When
Heero turned the television back to the news channel it felt like a slap in my face, I could feel the sting, but in my heart rather than on my cheek. Feeling a little discouraged by the lack of epic change that I had yearned for and foolishly had hoped to achieve, I left him to his newsreel and his breakfast and headed to the bedroom. I didn't idle around. I spent a large portion of the day, extending well into the afternoon, scraping candle wax off the nightstand and closet and plucking it out of the thread of the carpet. A tedious and mundane chore, but I poured myself into it, giving it as much focus and precision as I would arming an anti-MS bomb. A clear reminder that I needed direction and purpose in my life beyond mothering over Heero.

I didn't emerge from the bedroom till I felt completely satisfied with the result of my labor. The TV was still on, a selection of intelligent and intellectual men and women dressed twenty years beyond their age discussed the topic of Ethiopia, each approaching it from a different viewpoint. I couldn't see Heero anywhere. I peeked into the office, but he wasn't there either. I walked to the kitchen to rid myself of the amount of wax I had collected and when I turned around I found him. He was lying stretched out on the couch, previously hidden by the back of it. It appeared he had fallen asleep.

First I grinned when I thought I may have exhausted him last night. But the grin vanished when a more probable explanation came to mind; that he hadn't gotten much sleep after our lovemaking. I worried what might have kept him awake. I remembered our conversation shortly after, regarding the relentlessness of the bad feelings. I wondered if he still had hope, or if he had by now lost it, somewhere along the path that was so hard to walk.

I moved over to the couch and my eyes searched for the remote between his limbs. If he wasn't conscious, I saw no point in keeping the television on the Depression channel. I saw the end of the remote sticking out from underneath the pillow he was resting his head on and extracted it as delicately as possible. I was startled by a pair of blue eyes suddenly blinking open and looking at me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Heero sat up straight and took the remote back from me. "That's fine. I shouldn't sleep anyway." He pushed his bangs out of his face but they fell back the way they were, dangling haphazardly down his forehead. His eyes looked tired in the shadow of his chocolate dark hair, but he fixed them on the screen with diligent determination.

I opted for another day of ignoring him and the television - a device that usually brought me much joy - but that tactic hadn't been getting us anywhere, aside from last night, we only appeared to be drifting apart, both of us too stubborn to fight the current. I decided on a different approach. I sat down next to him heavily, extending my arms along the back of the couch, kicking my feet up on the coffee table casually.

Heero averted his eyes to gaze at me with a slightly surprised and confused expression, my systematic ignorance of the matter had not gone unnoticed by him, this disruption of the routine threw him off. He looked at me lengthily, paying no heed to the television as he studied me, trying to make sense of this, trying to will a confession of ill-intentions out of me, but I just stared at a screen with a blank expression that could match the best of his. Finally, he sat back himself, his hair tickling my bare arm that was draped over the back of the couch behind his head. The remote ended up on the cushion between us and I had to repress a physical reflex, supported by mental desire, to grab it and change the channel before hurling the thing through the window.

I didn't want us to fight, I wanted us to unify, in mind as much as we had in body last night. If that meant me paddling against the current of my own will and wishes, so be it.
"Andy, let's be realistic here. His methods obviously could be argued but don't we all agree that a change had to be made? Ethiopia has huge debts, a lacking economy, near monumental unemployment rates, and the previous president, although a good man, was unable to resolve this. Maybe NgGasi's tourists plans aren't as bad as all the media makes them appear."

"Oh please, Emory, where have you been getting your information from? AC 187? Ethiopian economy has shown great development over the past two years, but it will all collapse on top of itself if suddenly the plans are drastically changed, as NgGasi is currently doing. Former president Rayan was working on getting Ethiopia established as a great natural reserve, which will draw tourists as well as international funding for the maintenance of endangered species, as well as elaborate research programs. On top of that he had been improving the educational system, so the future generation can elevate the economy. NgGasi on the other hand, greenlights a dam that will leave several large natural reservations without water supply and wants the future generation to clean toilets and serve French fries in Western fast-food restaurants, to the influx of American and European businessmen who will occupy the entire top layer of the industrial landscape."

"How wonderfully dramatic Edna. Shouldn't you be holding up pictures of mass graves and starving children during that little speech of yours?"

"I don't know Emory, why won't you release some of those photo's, which your department has been covering up."

"Rumor! That is a foul and slandering rumor!"

I rolled my eyes. Politicians, I thought with a shiver. My patience would be severely tested, I knew. I looked over at Heero and noticed a troubled look in his eyes. His lips were a thin line and his eyebrows low and furrowed. I sighed. "Why are you watching this if it gives you a face like that? Don't you already know everything you need to know?"

"I don't know why I still watch it." He answers to my surprise. "I guess I'm... I guess I'm disappointed." He elaborated candidly. "This is nothing like the image I had in my head when I fought in the war. People are fighting and disagreeing with each other so much, it's like we are still at war. With everyone. Even with ourselves."

I sighed. "I know. But this is not up to us to solve. I don't mean the Ethiopia thing, or just the Ethiopia thing at least, what I mean is that we have no control over fate or politics. Things just go certain ways... and people make certain decisions... It has nothing to do with us."

"But that is exactly the problem. There's nothing we can do, we're just helpless. I don't like that."

I offered him a sympathetic smile and placed a hand on his knee. "Saving the world is not your purpose in life... Well," I scratched the back of my neck, "it was... twice... But you know: been there, done that. It's time for you to do the next big thing and you can't top shooting a piece of spaceship to bits right before it destroys half the earth and nearly killing yourself breaking into an underground fortress. You have to pick a different category."

He looked at me with big, lost eyes and it made me chuckle with a nervous and uncomfortable feeling. He asked the question I anticipated: "Like what?"

"Well..." I looked around myself, like the answer would be on one of the empty bookshelves. "You could..." I smiled, "We could... go travel... or, or buy a real house, you know, a proper one. Maybe a fixer-upper... yeah, that could be nice. We could get our hands dirty, rebuilding it. Building a home. And we could make our own furniture. I'm pretty good working with wood you know? I built the Sweeper crew all kinds of shit, desks and chairs and tables... I could teach you." I looked
at him hopefully and enthusiastically, losing myself in the idyllic qualities of my little fantasy. I imagined what our small house would look like and I pictured Heero dirty with sawdust, but smiling. It was a great little fantasy.

He blinked and looked away pensively. "You seem to really like this idea."

His tone cast a shadow onto the sunny picture I was imagining and to save face and avoid awkwardness, I guess I could have lied, but I couldn't deny that it was the kind of life I wanted, even though I never really realized I did. It wasn't fair to either of us to lie, so I told him truthfully: "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

He slowly shook his head. "I don't see my life that way."

"What do you mean? How do you see your life?"

He closed his eyes and seemed to search within himself for a while. When he opened his blue orbs, they looked empty and sad. He focused them on the TV screen, where NgGasi officials were bringing lines of protesters into a prison facility. "I don't see my life at all." Heero admitted. "I see myself doing that," he nodded to the television, "doing something to help them. But after that... everything else... I don't see it."

This is the moment I chose to lie for the benefit of us both, with feigned determination I solemnly spoke: "You will." In my heart I felt no such steadfast certainty, but anything else I couldn't bear to say, I had no words for it. I had no words to assure him and I had no words to comfort myself.

We struggled our way through the day. I could only guess where Heero's head was at. I myself was thinking a lot about the previous night, about the hope that had sparked and was then crushed. I felt the heavy burden of unasked and unanswered questions on my chest. My faith in my own resolve had been shaken. Previously, I had had such determination. With one hand I would clear the way before me through the rubble that had fallen on top of us and with the other I would pull Heero along, I would pull him to safety. I would get us both out of the debris that was a life and death that I felt we were meant to escape. Even in the darkness I had faith that we would climb back into the light, in some epic, end of the movie scene, when the dramatic but hopeful music starts and the credits begin to roll with a short chronicle of our life after that moment. Now I wasn't so sure. The way was clear, but the weight of Heero as I pulled him with me, became heavier and heavier. How long till I couldn't get him to budge at all?

I was anxious to talk to Une. She may not have been the most appropriate person, but at least I always knew her as a person of action, a person who gets things done. I needed someone like that, because I felt myself becoming passive and helpless. I needed her to do something. I needed her to prompt a solution that both Heero and I could make our peace with. I was unsure such a solution existed, I hadn't been able to come up with one, but I wasn't the most clear of mind. After all, for all intents and purposes, whether or not I had my eyes on the light, I was still in that pile of rubble as well.

So the next day I tagged along. I killed time till noon and then followed Heero downstairs where a Preventer car was already waiting for us. The luxurious vehicle with leather seats and polite driver brought us over to the Preventer agency head quarters, which looked more imposing than it ever had. The car parked at the front entry, in the shadow of the towering building. We got out, but I looked back at the car. It was no standard issue Preventer agency vehicle, which were much like police cars. It looked like the kind of car they would send for important people. It was the first time I realized just how much the agency valued Heero as an employee.

I followed Heero into the building. He announced me at the front desk, declared that I wished to
see Une. The receptionist had no other option but to alert Une of my arrival and let me go up, Heero's expression left no room for argument. We got into the elevator and he flashed his card in front of the scanner and stated the desired floor. I felt a heavy feeling in my gut as the elevator ascended. The doors dinged and opened and I prepared to get out. Heero stayed behind.

"I have to go to a different floor. You know your way around, right?"

I looked over my shoulder, it was the floor that Reid Mixson had brought me to that unfortunate evening. I already spotted the hallway that lead past the special agents' offices and to the command center and Une's office. "Sure." I wish I didn't.

He nodded curtly and let go of the doors. I watched him disappear from sight.

"Hello. Duo Maxwell?"

I turned around to a tall, slim man with thick spectacles and thin hair, his suit looked disheveled, he had lost his jacket somewhere during the day, his eyebrows were frayed, from frowning, I presumed, he seemed to be caught in that expression perpetually. "Yes."

"Good. I'm here to take you to miss Une."

"Really? It's just "miss" now?"

He paid me no heed. He walked away and I assumed I was expected to follow, so I did. He took the way I knew, through the bullpen of bustling activity into the narrow hallway, past all the offices with official looking nametags. The door that used to read "PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT LEVELT" was blank and the room beyond it empty, even stripped from furniture. We passed the door that read "PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT YUY" and I briefly checked the handle out of curiosity. It was locked. A note was posted under his sign: "All proposals and requests: redirect to special agent Santiago indefinitely."

"Excuse me. Excuse me, sir?" The tall man huffed impatiently. He was already standing at the locked door to the command center, his card at the ready.

With a quickened pace I closed the distance and he opened the door for me, pointing me to the office I could have found on my own accord and then he headed in a different direction. I used the unsupervised opportunity to peek around the dark room. On the large, lit up map of the world, the only red light was still the one positioned on Ethiopia. In the corner a small television set illuminated the space with the news channel, two men in suits were standing in front of it with their arms crossed, discussing something with each other. I slowly started over towards Une's office, feeling shivers as I passed the station where I recognized the static to be an old-fashioned Morse coded SOS.

I knocked on the doorpost. The door was wide open but still I didn't want to risk intruding.

At the knock the Lady looked up from her desk - invisible underneath the many layers of paper - she smiled as her eyes fell on me. "Duo... Come in." She rose to her feet and met me half way. First she offered me formal greeting, but when we had shaken hands, she chuckled and then gave me a brief, tight hug. "It's good to see you again. How are you doing?" She circled back to her desk and seated herself. Her fingers worked to assemble the scattered papers into neat stacks, certain files were turned upside down so I couldn't read their titles.

"What's going on?" I sat down on one of the chairs opposite of her desk.

She scrunched up her face but sighed and soon admitted in a hushed tone: "We have a team
underway to Ethiopia. Just recon, nothing invasive." She said with a meaningless hand gesture. "And we coordinated a ship with the military, to be ready to go up the red sea to supply the civilians with food and water and other basics, but right now there is nothing they can do. Red sea is off limits at this point. But we want them to be ready, you know, when this is resolved..." She trailed off and then looked at me with perplexed eyes. She chuckled nervously. "I don't even know why I'm telling you all this... I certainly shouldn't."

"It's okay. Your secret is safe with me..."

"Why are you here? Nettle really is the only one who can give you insight into Heero's progress."

I shook my head. "I'm not here for that. And to be honest, I doubt she has much insight, but I don't want to get into that right now. I came here for a job."

She blinked and mindlessly shuffled some papers around. "Oh. Well, I certainly hadn't expected that. Usually I'd refer an applicant to General Administration but obviously a former Gundam Pilot doesn't have to jump through those hoops. I actually have an empty office, so all it takes is a desk, name sign and a uniform."

"No." I rushed, gesturing for her to slow down. "I don't want to be an agent." I explained, with an awkward look on my face.

"Of course." She brushed hair out of her face. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have assumed... What did you have in mind?" She was talking quickly and out of breath, she was obviously overwhelmed by the workload. It might not have been the best time for me to drop by with a request, but I didn't let that stop me.

I crossed my legs, feeling somewhat nervous and uncomfortable, not really sure what I wanted and what I could expect. "Heero told me that you basically offered him any position he wanted. I wondered if you would make me the same offer."

"Naturally. It's good to have at least someone take me up on that offer."

"Heero isn't interested?"

She sighed. "Well, he was at first. But then this happened." She held up a random folder which I interpreted as a reference to the situation in Ethiopia. "From what little I heard from Nettle, he seemed eager to get back into the field as an agent."

"Yeah, that's what I feared." I looked down at my fingers, fumbling with each other in my lap. I suddenly grew bold, directing a strong gaze at her and wondered aloud: "Can't you make him stay here though? Don't you have other agents to deal with this?"

Une nodded but she bit her lip and seemed hesitant to elaborate with words.

"What?" I demanded.

"Look, Duo, of course I have other men who will be able to perform the task at hand. As soon as we have a definitive location on NgGasi, I have the straightforward order to have him assassinated, the only condition being that it has to be plausible that the civilians of Ethiopia did it. It's a tough job but not something impossible for anyone other than Heero. However... I think it might be good for him to do it himself."

"You're kidding." I blurted. "Nettle told you this shit?"
She looked at me dangerously. "No. If you have forgotten, I didn't exactly sit on the sidelines during the war. I know what it's like to be in the thick of it and I know what it's like to be confronted with your own failure. I am sympathetic to Heero's desire to correct his mistake."

"I can't believe this. You want him to go?" I exclaimed.

"Don't twist my words, Maxwell, I said no such thing." She warned with a pointed finger. "All I'm saying is, if he wants to go, if he feels he has to do this, I will let him."

"What and in the meantime you are just going to postpone the mission? Wait for Heero?"

"We will move in the moment we have a window. When we do, I will give Heero the choice to participate, if he declines, we will go without him."

She seemed so adamant and sure of everything, like there isn't anything that could happen that wasn't in her plan, that wasn't previously calculated. How good it must feel to stand on such sturdy ground. With a sigh I admitted that at the moment it did not appear they would have to perform the mission without Heero.

Une slowly nodded, it seemed she had figured the same. She folded her hands on the surface of the desk, her right hand momentarily breaking the bond to straighten a folder to her right. She resumed her nod, but I had no idea what she was thinking about. The silence between us was thick with our own thoughts. Sounds came through the open door but they merely registered in a muted tone. It scared me to be sitting there. I wasn't afraid of Lady Une and there wasn't anything she could say that could truly frighten me. I just realized that right behind me, right through that open door, people were making decisions regarding life and death and it was nothing but an indistinct murmur, meaningless. It made me feel uncomfortable, but the underlying reason eluded me. I wasn't sure if I was bothered by the fact that I might be getting back into it, or that I ever left.

"If insist..." Une started, pausing to get my attention, "I could make sure that he is not included in the mission." Her movements were slow as she turned in her seat slightly and opened a drawer. Out came another folder, unlike all the black ones already littering her desk, this one was blue and instead of the front reading only "CONFIDENTIAL", it read "REINSTATEMENT APPLICATION H. YUY". "He filed this last week... he seemed pretty certain that I would sign it in the near future. I don't have to." She looked up at me poignantly. "If I don't sign this in time, he won't be allowed to go on the mission. If I don't sign it at all, he will never be an Preventer field agent again."

I could not deny the sense of relief that filled my heart, even with the gnawing of guilt at my every nerve and pulsing vein.

"If you want me to, I'll do that for you. But before you decide I must ask you to consider the question: do you think it will help?"

"It will keep him safe!" I blurted and I had to stop myself from reaching for that folder and making sure no one would ever sign it.

"Heero has risked his life in many other, much more dangerous situations. Truth be told, I think he'll manage to get out alive and successful once more," Une argued. "I'm not saying this because I so desperately want Heero as an agent." She explained hastily. "Because I don't. Heero is the best at saving the world, completing the mission, there is nothing he can't do, I truly believe that. But as an agent, who is required to work with a partner, who is supposed to follow international rules and orders from some paperpusher, instead of working by the rules of war... I have to be honest, he is not that desirable as an agent." She chuckled and I joined in, because she was right, Heero was only
good at following his own logic and the orders he personally agreed with. "But he gets the job done and maybe, this time, he can accomplish something for himself. Let him at least close this chapter and then let him decide whether he still wants to be an agent or not." She reached back into that drawer and another blue folder appeared. "And I thought maybe you could help him, as the only partner he has ever trusted." She pushed the second folder towards me. "I took the liberty of writing this up."

APPLICATION PREVENTER SPECIAL AGENT, D. MAXWELL.

I stared at it. I was in shock, there were so many thoughts rampaging through my head.

"If we both sign that, we'll get you a uniform and an office with a view. Most importantly, you'll have the ability to keep Heero safe." She reached out and flipped open the folder. With a long red fingernail she pointed at a specific line. "Definitive partnership with Preventer Special Agent Heero Yuy." She read aloud. She must have known the words by heart, there was no way she could have read the small print upside down. "You and Heero both can quit or transfer to different departments whenever you want."

I exhaled lengthily, one of my fingers was on the folder, just touching it as my mind was caught in doubt. I chuckled sheepishly. "You make quite the talk. You should have been in sales."

Une smiled kindly.

"How long have you had this?" That questioning finger pulled the folder towards me and then my hands reached out to take it into my lap.

"Since Heero came into my office and made a very convincing speech about the Preventers needing guys like him - and you - on payroll. He would have made quite the salesman himself. As I prepared his application form, I figured I might as well be prepared."

With a sigh I looked down at the folder in my lap, overwhelmed by the amount of information in that small black print and the mere idea of becoming an active agent. I couldn't tell her what I wanted, simply because I didn't know. I liked being needed and useful as much as to be expected, I just didn't like that I liked it. It was confusing. I had all these cons, all these disadvantages, still they barely weighed up against two very important, but embarrassingly emotional points: wanting to have a purpose and wanting to protect Heero.

"I need to think about this."

"I understand. Take as much time as you need. Whenever you are ready, for whatever position, you'll know where to find me." She finished with a genuine and reassuring smile.

"Thanks..." I shut the folder and my thumb involuntarily stroked the title on the front, feeling a distant kind of pride that I hadn't felt in a long time, but not too long ago to remember it was a kind of pride that came with a sick and heavy feeling in my stomach at night. "While I consider this-" I waved the folder in the air aimlessly, feeling the weight of it even though it was feather light, "is there something else I can do in the meantime? Something to keep me busy?"

"Did you have anything in mind?"

I didn't. It was one of those moments when you would just wish someone else would make the decisions for you, because it's too hard when it concerns yourself and even harder when you have only yourself to blame in case you choose wrong. "I don't... I don't know... Just not a desk job. But also not in the field..." I scrunched up my face. "If that is even possible?"
"Of course. Preventers offers a grand grey area." Une answered with a smile. She looked off to the side as she pondered my request. "We can assign you to one of the maintenance or engineering departments."

My ears perked at that. I always liked the feeling of grease on my hands. "That sounds pretty good."

"Well what you prefer, construction or repair?"

"Definitely repair."

She looked at me with a little smirk. "Sounds somewhat poetic and fitting, doesn't it?"

I pretended not to know what she was talking about, even though my "fixer upper" would be coming home with me in half an hour.

"You can work in the flight hangar as Aero-technician or in the garage as general mechanic and maintenance employee. I'm assuming however that you are not suitably familiar with the SuSo53?" at my nod she continued: "Than you'd probably perform best in the garage. Damaged vehicles and equipment find their way back to us after pretty much every mission, along with maintenance jobs from our ongoing peacekeeping efforts overseas, so we can always use an extra set of hands down there. I'll see to it that you can mostly do projects on your own."

"Thanks."

"So, do you want me to call administration?" She sounded quite hopeful to have me join the agency, even as just a mechanic.

"Sure, that'd be great."

"Great. I'll give them a call and set everything up so you can start as soon as you want."

I shrugged. "Monday is fine with me."

"Monday it is then. If you want you can go downstairs and take a look around, Heero won't be done for a little while anyway and I should probably get back to work." She made an exasperated gesture at the imposing stacks of papers.

"Okay. Cool."

Without even looking her finger landed precisely on a button of her telephone and she suddenly spoke. "Joseph, come in here please."

The tall, slim guy from before came rushing in a few seconds later, looking a little bit flustered. "Yes, ma'am?"

She looked at him with a blank, almost cold expression. "Take mister Maxwell down to the garage." She turned to me and said: "I'll have Heero come pick you up downstairs when he's done."

"Okay." I mumbled, feeling a little bit rushed, but at the same time, it felt good, to finally get off my ass literally and figuratively. I shook hands with Lady Une, very professionally, but we exchanged kind and understanding looks. I thanked her again for her generosity, but she brushed it off as nothing and then shooed me out of her office with a tiny smile.

I followed Joseph back out the way we came in, having to pick up my pace to keep up with him.
"So what is it like working for her?" I asked mischievously to kill the short time we had to wait for the elevator.

He threw a mean look my way that condemned any possibility of future conversation and I knew better than to push my luck. We stepped through the steel doors, Joseph swiped his card in front of the scanner and spoke clearly "Garage". The elevator went down with a speed that caused a funny feeling in my stomach.

"Here we are." Joseph announced with a grumbling tone right before the doors slid open.

As it had no fancy name, I had conjured a completely different image of the garage than it turned out to be. Of course I should have known better, considering the kind of facility I was in, but the space that opened up before me was mind boggling. I had no idea how far underground we had gone exactly, but the ceiling was at least three stories high, with large floodlights illuminating the vast concrete area. I estimated to size to be near to three football fields, extending beyond my vision. Sparks flew from several sights where mechanics worked on cars, trucks, hovercrafts and impressive artillery all in different stages between mangled and pristine. Mechanic arms spread cargo of various material and size across the room through a network of steel piping that lined the ceiling.

I was jostled back into conscious thought when the doors of the elevator closed behind me. But I soon returned to marveling at the sight before me.

"Hey you!" A deep, raspy voice called out and for no particular reason, I felt like I was the "you" in the question.

My eyes settled on a tall man with broad shoulders and big arms sticking out of the rolled up sleeves of his black overall, he walked over to me with impossibly long strides. His hair was trimmed military style, but his eyebrows were bushy and exaggerated his frown. He had a sort of wry, stern look to his otherwise solidified features.

"You're Maxwell?" He said as he closed the distance.

"Yeah." I extended my hand out to him and nearly flinched when he gripped it tightly to shake hands as an introduction.

"Hi, I'm Stanislaw." His lips formed in what might have been a smile. "Don't worry, you can call me Stan."

"Oh, good."

"Une asked me to give you the tour."

"Oh..." I was very eloquent that day. "I don't want to keep you from your work, I can show myself around."

"No, that's fine." And it seemed like he insisted. He placed a big hand over my shoulder and guided me to my left.

As we walked throughout the garage, Stan pointed out all the emergency exits and introduced me to mechanics as we passed by their designated stations. I noticed lines in different colors marking the concrete floor and Stan explained that to organize the large space, the garage was divided into several grids as indicated by the colored marks on the floor. With a tone that presumably indicated a joke, he told me it took "newbies" a little while to figure it out. He warned me never to venture in between the red lines because those routes were reserved as roads. Once a vehicle is fixed, a
mechanic can drive it all the way to the back and park it on the platform elevator to be taken up to the surface outside.

Most of my responses consisted of "Oh".

"The bigger the project, the more to the back you work, closer to the elevator, to minimize traffic. Une said you'll be working alone mostly, so you'll spend most time in the front working on equipment and occasionally smaller vehicles."

"Cool." I said, purely because I had to come up with an alternative to "Oh". Trying to come across as less than a mute than I might have given him the impression that I was, I asked curiously: "So what's all the way in the back?"

"Regular maintenance on the mobile suits." Stan answered.

"Mobile suits? The Preventers have mobile suits? I thought... I thought..."

"It's just in case. They don't use them."

"But I thought after that whole Christmas 196 AC incident, all mobile suits were supposed to be destroyed." I remembered with a sting in my heart having to destroy Death Scythe as part of those orders.

Stan nodded and casually leaned against the side of an armored truck. "Yes, they were banned, just like Gundanium. But from what I've heard, most missions involve taking Gundanium away from people with bad intentions. They aren't suppose to have it, but they do. What happens if we destroy all our mobile suits and we have to deal with bad guys who have managed to preserve some?"

"I guess..." I muttered. I curiously looked around myself but trucks and cars prevented me from seeing anything in the back. I did catch a glimpse of the platform going up. The section of ceiling above it was supported on the platform by pillars and raised up with it. Sunlight poured in. It seemed almost surreal. I suddenly realized how much the garage looked like a facility in outer space. I suddenly became hungry for the feel of sunlight on my skin.

"We should probably head back to the main elevator. Une said Heero would come down to get you right about now." Stan started towards the front, from where we had come, zigzagging through the different stations.

"You know Heero?" I asked, simply noting the fact that he used his first name, not to mention that he pronounced it correctly.

"Sure." Stan looked over his shoulder and this time I was certain he was grinning. "He breaks a lot of stuff."

I chuckled. "Yeah. He does that. So what's the most destructive thing you have known him to do?"

"Well, I guess there was that time when he drove a truck right through a solid brick wall. Don't really know the details, his report just said: "the door was locked". The front and the engine were totally mangled. I heard from the Aero-guys that he purposefully crashed a chopper to create a diversion. Funny thing is, I think those were the only two times he took anything with him. It's usually just him. No partner or anything."

"Yeah, he does that too."

"Hard core guy, real tough."
"Yeah..." I replied hesitantly, "in a way..."

As we neared the elevator, I noticed a familiar pair of jeans and legs sticking out from underneath an armored, camouflaged car. A mechanic was standing by holding a wrench to his chest, rolling his eyes.

I smiled. Yeah, he does that too, I thought privately. I stopped next to the car and with my foot I jostled one of the legs.

Hands grabbed hold of the bumper and Heero slid himself out from underneath the chassis with an expectant look on his face as I had obviously interrupted him.

"Having fun, dear?" I jested.

Heero got up to his feet and brushed off the back of his jeans with his hands. "Well, he was looking in the wrong place." He grumbled, to which the mechanic snorted.

"Oh please, you spent all of five minutes under there. This thing was blown by an IED, no way it's gonna start." The insulted mechanic argued.

Heero looked at me and his eyes sparkled mischievously. In a hushed tone he told me: "It will start."

The mechanic overheard him and sputtered: "Fuck you."

I placed a hand low on Heero's back and urged him towards the elevator, informing him with a soft tone that I was going to have to be able to work with these people come Monday. Heero didn't push the argument and responded to my lead.

"Thanks for the tour, Stan." I threw over my shoulder.

"No problem."

As Heero and I waited in front of the elevator doors, just quietly standing next to each other, we heard a car starting some distance behind us with a perfectly smooth rumble, followed by a loud, obscene curse. In the reflection of the steel doors I saw Heero smirk. With my elbow I nudged him in the side. "Show off." I accused.

In the privacy of the elevator, Heero questioned: "So you'll be joining the agency as a mechanic?"

"Yeah." My tone was neutral. I was grateful to have a more useful way to spend my days but I wasn't particularly excited about the job itself. It would be good to work with my hands again, but the feeling that struck me in the garage didn't suit me, too much of a "small fish, big pond" kind of sensation. I felt a little lost and swallowed. "So you talked to Une?"

"She informed me briefly over the phone. She called Nettle's office."

"Hm." I wondered if I should tell him everything that Une and I had discussed, it seemed to be only fair, as it involved him personally, but the doors opened before I could make up my mind. We were back in the main lobby and the receptionist informed us that our car was waiting for us.

In the car I decided to tell him: "Une showed me your reinstatement application."

Heero didn't respond. He had the habit of watching the driver like a hawk, if a mistake would be made, he would see it and most likely comment on it. Occasionally his gaze darted past the
windshield to the traffic up ahead.

"Why didn't you tell me you filed it?"

"It was just a precaution." He informed me. "To be ready as soon as Nettle clears me."

I sighed, turning my head to look out the side window, a landscape dotted with trees. "You still really want to go on this mission, huh?"

"And you still really don't want me to." He retorted.

It was a justified observation. He was right. I was scared. I was scared of something I was never scared of before and vowed to never will be. Heero had gotten to me. Without any conscious intent on his behalf he has become a part of me, more and more so each day. The best part of me, I realized, the part I cherished most, the part I feared to lose most. The part I would miss the most. Unfortunately Une hadn't been able to offer me any resolve. Surely she was right in pointing out the odds that Heero would survive yet another mission, but that didn't sway my mind towards his cause in the slightest. No matter how favorable the odds, there is always that chance of failure, catastrophe, death. I was angry with myself for being so cautious and so indecisive, yet at the same time I grinned at the bittersweet irony; I was finally becoming more like a normal person.

"Here we are." The driver said and parked the car at the curb in front of our apartment building. He didn't bother to get up and open the doors for us, he knew better. Heero had his hand ready on the handle before the car had even come to a full stop.

"Thanks man." I said, my expression of gratitude nearly lost in the sound of Heero slamming the door shut behind him.

I caught up with him in the lobby and followed him up the stairs with soft, grumbling curses. He was too damn stubborn for his own good. I staid behind him the entire way up, not so much for the view, that was an added bonus, I was afraid he might miss a step with his ruined knee. The last flight of stairs he didn't walk up as much as he pulled himself up by the railing.

"Lunch?" I asked upon the entry of our apartment.

"I'm not hungry."

I caught him limping and cringing his way towards his regular seat on the couch, where the remote awaited him and without much thought I called out his name.

He defiantly turned to look at me.

I sighed, I'd almost forget that last night had been the most amazing night of my life, Heero sure seemed bent on ruining the blissful aftermath of it. "Come here. Can we let the TV be for one day?" I practically pleaded.

Heero remained impassive.

"Come on, buddy, one day." I breathed, no longer pretending not to be desperately begging him. I was relieved when he wordlessly started his way over to me and I fled from his challenging look by wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my face in the crook of his neck. Heero was unresponsive for a while, but I melted with relief when he finally reached his arms up over my shoulders and wrapped them around my neck. I liked the way his body pressed up against mine and the way his skin felt through the thin cotton of his dark blue T-shirt and the way his hair and neck smelled like a mixture of soap, shampoo and just him, a scent that made the plain drugstore
mixture smell exotic. Heero's warm breath came through the open collar of my shirt and made the hug sheer perfection.

I was reluctant to let him go, but I knew I should before he would grow uncomfortable. I drew my arms back and kissed him on his head through his tousled hair. "Let's just go eat, okay."

Heero knew better than to repeat he wasn't hungry. He sat down in regular seat at the table, studying the grain of the wooden surface while I prepared a simple lunch of soup and bread.

"Are you going to be okay being alone here when I go work?" I asked, dunking a torn piece of bread into the tomato soup.

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Just checking." I mumbled. Then I went out on a limb: "You could join me. You are the best. It might take your mind off things."

"My mind doesn't need to be taken off anything." He responded matter-of-factly.

"Right."

I let the silence be for as long as I could stand it. Distracted by dripping sounds as we both dipped our bread into our soup. I allowed my mind to wander and it found it's way back to last night. I wished every night could be like that. Not necessarily the sex, just us being together and us being about something else than we normally are; a break from all the difficult thoughts, unbearable memories and uncertain future. Just us, two people lost in each other, so much so that they are one. Sadly, morning had to come and life becomes complicated once more. "You know, Une offered me another job as well." I started and I waited for him to look up from his bowl. "As a field agent."

"You turned it down." A statement, not a question.

"Not necessarily. I'm still thinking about it." I said candidly.

"I don't understand." There was that little frown of his again, accompanied with a little, confused pout. "You don't want me to go to Ethiopia, but now you are seriously considering becoming an agent yourself?"

I allowed a sad smile on my lips. "The only reason I'm considering it, is because you are."

"I don't need your help." He muttered somewhat childishly and looked back down at his soup.

"I know. I just need you. I need to know you are safe. Even if that means doing something I have mixed feelings about. Even if that means risking my own life."

He looked up at me with narrowed, accusing eyes. "Is this just a new way to make me change my mind?"

I shook my head. "No. It's my way of having you realize that it is more complicated than you think it is. You think you can just go down there and do this all by yourself and for yourself, but there is one aspect you are forgetting. Me. I just wanted to make you realize that there are two of us now. Decisions you make affect me. Decisions you make don't just determine your life, it determines mine as well." I looked away, pained, from his blank expression it didn't seem like I was getting through to him.

I didn't think he was going to say anything, till he suddenly did. His gaze cast far away. "I don't
I was amazed by his heartfelt confession. I closed my eyes, to shield my guilty expression, even as he said that, I could not bring myself to earnestly agree with him. All I knew at that point, was that I was fighting a losing battle and I immaturely disliked it. I couldn't help but think that the Ethiopia mission could never mark the end of something, only the start of something. It would only reaffirm to him that violence is all he was good at and all he felt good and confident doing. Then I would lose him, if not to death than to himself.

"You seem upset." He innocently observed.

"I am." My admission left him silent and biting nervously on his lower lip. I wanted to apologize, but didn't, my mind just didn't seem to work, leaving my lips passive. All of a sudden I was back in Une's office, the imagination was so real it was completed with the sound of typing and ringing phones in the background. There is a folder with Heero's name on it on the desk in front of me, an offering. The temptation built. "Oh my God!" I exclaimed and I rose out of my chair, burying my fingers into my hair.

"What?" Heero reacted startled, he was glued to his seat as he was yet again faced with something to which he had no built-in response or solution. A mixture of feelings and thoughts were evident on his face.

"Nothing, nothing." I assured him, making random movements with my hands. It wasn't nothing. The mere fact that I was considering it, felt like betrayal. I didn't like that the thought suddenly came to me and I didn't like that part of me was still tempted to accept. I had been so focused on helping Heero recover from being someone he didn't want to be, that I myself slipped into someone I never wanted to be. This isn't me, I told myself. I'm better than this! "It's just-" I started to Heero aloud, "Une made me another offer. And I just now considered taking her up on it and I don't want that, because I don't want to be that guy."

He frowned with utter confusion. Finally, he mumbled: "What was the offer?"

I bit my lip, hesitant to confess because I couldn't predict how he would react. "She offered me the decision to allow you on the mission or not." He blinked away every trace of emotion in his eyes and his features relaxed into a blank expression. His stare was empty and disconcerting as he mulled over my words.

"There is this form that she has to sign before you are allowed back into the field." I continued to explain. "And she said that she wouldn't sign it if I ask her to. I should have never even considered it! I mean, I don't want you to go, but I should not do something like that behind your back and manipulate your life like that. I will never do something like that and I'm so, so sorry the thought ever occurred to me!" I blabbered.

"It's fine." He said.

I was a bit taken aback. His emotionless tone stung in my heart. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He answered dryly and returned his attention to the remainder of his soup.

I sat back down again, frowning deeply. I was about to continue questioning him when I noticed a dark grin on his face that made me feel sick to my stomach.

"You know what?" He stirred his spoon around in the bowl of soup, churning the liquid. He held
the handle of the spoon so tightly, I would not be surprised if the metal ended up warped upon release. "Maybe you should decide. Une obviously doesn't value me as an agent. If I'm so useless, maybe I shouldn't go. She probably thinks I can't do it... And maybe I can't. Maybe there is nothing I can do right anymore."

"Heero, don't say that." I reached out and placed my hand over his forearm. The muscles felt so tense. "Une has great faith in you. She said that she believes there is nothing you can't do and I do not disagree with her on that. We disagreed on whether or not this mission would be good for you, that's what started it."

"You don't think it's going to help? With the things I've been feeling?" He looked up at me with begging eyes, begging for an answer I couldn't give him because I didn't believe it to be true.

"No, I don't." I swallowed as I caught a deeply desperate expression in his eyes before he looked away. "I don't think it's going to help. Maybe with the guilt about not being successful last time... but not with the other stuff." I kept shaking my head as I continued: "I don't think it's going to fix the bad memories of your training... and the war..."

"Then what will?" He asked without looking up at me.

I sighed. "I don't know. It's a long process... Maybe Nettle could help."

He snorted. "She's not helping. She's only making me feel worse."

I squeezed his arm sympathetically. "I think that's part of the process."

He retreated his arm. With his shoulders slumped he announced: "I'm tired. I'm going to lie down for a little while."

All I could do was consent and watch his go into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. I felt strange with a myriad of emotions. Mostly I just felt very sorry for him, but I don't think he would appreciate that very much. I thought letting him go to Ethiopia would be allowing him to slip away from me, but, I realized with a heavy feeling, he had long been slipping and I was left with only the most pathetic hold on his fingertips. One must wonder if struggling to hold onto him at this point was the best thing to do. I didn't mean letting him go and ending the relationship, giving up hope, I meant acceptance of the fact that what I have been trying is no longer effective at creating change and instead let him do differently than what I thought to be right. After all, what do I know? Painfully little, a voice in the back of my head supplied.

I didn't have anything meaningful to say to him, but after an hour of watching bread dry and soup grow cold, I followed him into the bedroom. I was surprised to find him lying on his stomach on my bed, his face buried in my pillow. Deciding not to comment on it, I toed off my shoes and crawled onto his bed, lying down next to him and looking at him.

He turned his head to face me after a long silence and he mumbled apologetically: "My bed wasn't as comfortable."

Our bed were identical, but I didn't say anything, I just smiled. "That's okay. I like this bed just fine." The sheets smelled strongly of laundry detergent, I had changed them that morning, to erase the scents of last night. Dirty as it may have been, I wish I could still smell it, our passionate sweat. Last night ghosted through my head. I wanted to recapture that, not necessarily the sexual aspect of it, most importantly, the intimacy, but I felt like it wasn't there between us at that moment. We were lying in each other's beds, only a physical arms-length away, but the separation between our two beds might have well been an infinity of dark space that neither of us could successfully cross.
We just lay there, so distant we were almost in our own separate universes. Mostly I struggled to find words with which to span the distance, but words could not build bridges like that.

I gave up my vain attempts and started wondering whether I had done the right thing coming clean to him regarding the offer Une made me. It only appeared to knock his last stable leg out from underneath him, only seemed to make him devalue himself even more. Honesty was always the best policy, I’ve heard that so many times, from so many different people, you almost have no choice but to believe it. If everyone agrees on it, it must be true then, right? I wasn't so sure anymore and Heero's forlorn look fuelled the doubt. Maybe the kinder thing to have done, was never having told him, after all, what good did knowing do for him? And maybe I should have asserted control and made that decision for him, tell Une to leave that signature line blank.

That option I threw out the window the moment I confessed to him. If I took Une up on her offer now, he would be right to question her when she would try to cover for me. It was out of my hands now. Une wants him to go. Heero wants to go. Nettle is Une's employee, who is she to deny her boss? There was no one left to stop him.

That thought made me feel sick.

If I would have to allow him to go, I would have to come with him. I could not stand to watch him walking away from me, going back to someplace he might never return from - and I didn't just mean the physical location of Ethiopia.

"Heero."

His distracted eyes settled on my face.

"I meant what I said. If you go. I will go with you."

Obviously he heard me, but he responded in no way, keeping his eyes fixed on mine, the emotions and thoughts behind them unreadable.

"But please just think carefully about it. I mean, you don't need to consider my safety, I just want you to really be sure that going is the best thing for you. Okay? No rash decisions."

Heero looked away briefly, his features seemed to soften. When he looked back at me I was overwhelmed by my all-consuming love for him, it was almost unnatural, yet my heart warmed when he didn't answer my question, but said earnestly: "Thank you."

"Sure." I said casually, even though giving him my blessing to go was the hardest thing I ever did.

That cute frown returned to him and he wondered aloud: "Why, though?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you offer to come with me when you don't want to go and you don't want me to go?"

I smiled. "For the same reason you stuck with me that night on the railroad bridge and nearly got pancaked yourself. We're in this together." I studied his thoughtful expression and felt him slipping away from me again. To diffuse the tension, I suggested with an upbeat tone; "How about we get out of bed and watch a movie? I have a really good one from Pre-colony 1993."

Heero never did care much for my pre-colony classics, it was a fascination shared by few, I suppose, but he never said no, never even admitted that he didn't like them - even though it was evident - and that is probably the most important part. That he would do that for me.
After brief consideration, Heero slowly nodded his head, so we both got up and relocated to the couch.

I made sure the ancient DVD-player had completely booted up before turning on the television, to ensure we wouldn't catch glimpses of the news channel.

We wasted the rest of the day with a movie, a slow dinner followed by a routinely clean-up and an early bedtime.

We lay in our own beds this time. I would have casually tried to make my way over to his side had it not been for the crevasse between our two mattresses; extremely uncomfortable, combined with the risk that the weight of my body might wedge in between the beds, pushing them apart and have me sinking in between them. Heero caught me off guards when he asked, several minutes into complete silence: "Did you want to have sex again?"

I rolled my eyes in the dark. Of course I would always want to have sex with him, but I dreaded it becoming a routine, till one day in the future you go to bed and you realize it's the second Friday of the month and you are supposed to have sex. "It's really something that would have to blossom out of a certain moment."

He was quietly contemplative for a while, presumably figuring out on his own accord that the current moment did not qualify.

"Did you want to?" I dumbly inquired. I promptly envisioned us as this old couple, who sleep in separate beds except for special occasions. I didn't mind the prospect too much, mostly because I was just endeared with the thought of us ever making it to that point when we would be "that old couple".

Heero didn't answer. I'm assuming because the honest answer was no only he realized that would offend me. But I shouldn't put words in his mouth.

He proved me wrong with a tentative hand slipping underneath my sheets, fingers searching and finding my hand, wrapping around it.

I tried to see his eyes in the dark, they were nothing but glistening dots of moonlight blue. I responded to a slight but persistent tugging, crossing over to his mattress, as he moved over to make room for me. We lay chest to chest, our fingers intertwined, faces invisible in the absence of substantial light. I asked him if he was sure and my response was a soft but persuasive kiss to my lips. I didn't give myself time to second guess anything, or wonder why now and why he would initiate it. I wrapped my arm around his slim waist and pulled him so tightly against me one might suspect I was trying to merge our bodies together. I returned his kiss not as innocently as I had received it and the heat quickly built. Our soft pants filling our bedroom. Our arousals enjoying the friction against the other's thigh. I just let it all wash over me. Thoughts were not allowed.

With my hands I first caressed Heero's face gently and then moved down to more roughly stroke up and down his sides, feeling the muscles, his ribcage and the heat of his body through the TAMPA HIGH T-shirt that he had confiscated. Heero's hands weren't idle either, he had them against my chest, his thumbs moving in delicious circles that sensitized my bare skin - it had been too hot for a T-shirt for me. When he dragged them down and his rough palms grazed my nipples, I broke the kiss to emit a sharp gasp and I stopped the movement of my hips, realizing that I had almost orgasmed just from the built up excitement. This was crazy. Our love was so crazy. I loved it even though I was drowning in it.

"What?" He asked with a breathy voice.
I smiled sheepishly. "I just had to take a little break." I responded with a whisper.

"Please don't stop," he begged in that same, hushed tone. "Please make me forget again." He finished with light kisses to my throat that sent powerful shivers down my spine.

I recaptured his lips in another passionate and devoted kiss, but I became increasingly distracted by the acute awareness of his hard length pressed against me and my own pressed against him. I maneuvered my hips slightly to align the two and we both moaned in unison, so much so Heero might have denied having ever moaned at all. The heat and sensations were so intense, I knew we had to go to the next step quickly, or miss it altogether. I cursed the rules of time and space because the nightstand with supplies was a distance away and crossing it would cost me precious time.

It was difficult to break the kiss. Each time I succeeded, I just leaned forward once again to kiss him one last time. Finally, I managed to pull away, rolling my body away so I wouldn't be tempted to immediately dive back in again. "One second," I whispered. I crawled over to my bed and got out on my side. In the dark I groped around, using the edge of the bed and the wall as guidelines to find the nightstand, which was harder than I thought. My briefs giving my erection an unanticipated treat didn't make the matter any easier.

I hurried back over with the package and tube clutched in my hands. I bumped my knee against the frame of my bed but I didn't even feel it much, pleasure overwhelmed everything. I climbed back over to him, not really being able to see him in what little faint moonlight the curtains allowed access, but apparently Heero suffered no such handicap. As I crossed over onto his mattress, warm hands slipped around my neck sensually and pulled me down. He met me halfway, sitting up, in a soul searing kiss. Then one of his hands grabbed hold of the base of my braid and pulled on it, pulling my head back and he started kissing my exposed neck, his tongue paying extra attention to the vulnerable Adam's apple.

Startled, but pleased by his passion, I was frozen and surrendered to him. I tried to ignore the fact that the dark - preventing us from seeing each other - seemed to have a profound effect on him, allowing him to be more free and expressive. It was a worrisome aspect, but I was young and aroused, sensations from my body made sure my mind had no time to worry.

Clothes were quickly and efficiently removed, thrown into various directions. The lamp balanced on my headboard made a thudded landing on my pillow when it got hit by Heero's underwear.

I was filled with a youthful excitement and anticipation. This time felt less loaded and heavy than last time. If I tried hard enough, I could pretend we were just regular teens, in regular love. Instead of being the warped characters that we were, brought together by this thing, this force to which we were powerless.

His hands were so warm on my body, even when his hands moved I could still feel the heat of his handshake where they had been. They traveled all over my body and seemed to pay curious attention to every muscle, tendon and bone that could be felt through my skin. I kissed him with distracted lips and tongue, my focus more devoted to the sensation of his digits leaving fingerprints all over me, like he finally dared to think of me as his. One of his hands was between my shoulders, feeling the individual bumps of my spine, his other hand was on my abdomen and slowly moving south, causing me to still.

Heero responded to my sudden freezing in kind, with the tip of his fingers already at the coarse hairs.

We were looking at each other, even though we could barely see each other in the dark. For a long moment it seemed nothing was going to happen, both of us too unsure. But then Heero grew boldly
curious and his hand steadily moved further down till finally he wrapped his fingers around my erection. The loose, slightly hesitant hold was enough to make me gasp. I moved so instead of holding myself up over him, I lay next to him on my side, facing him. My arms had instantly become too shaky to support me.

His hand was still around me. I could feel his quickened breath spreading out over my face. His instincts had brought him somewhere his limited experience didn't know how to proceed. He seemed to be waiting for direction.

With the start of a smirk I reached out my own hand and wrapped it around his arousal that matched mine. His breath was shaky when I gave him a light squeeze.

"Like that?" I asked teasingly, slowly running my hand down his length. I felt and heard, rather than saw him nod. I stroked my hand back up to the base and shivered when Heero copied my actions, bringing his snug fist down to the tip and then back to the base. "Yeah, me too." I kissed him with the intent of getting us both out of our heads and into the heat of the moment. I succeeded. His tongue responded to mine sloppily, his breathing through his nose harsh along my cheek. With the building pressure low in my stomach as Heero's hand grew bolder and more inventive, I realized the matter of top versus bottom might not even be an issue worth discussing this time around. Judging by Heero's panting, the tension in his body and the pulsing of his hard and slick erection, he was close too.

To make the evening a little bit more interesting than mutual masturbation - even though that had never been as interesting as it was at that time - I angled my hips forward, bringing our pelvises together and our arousals touched and I made slow thrusts that created light friction. We both moaned at the new sensation, our lips separating. I guided his hand to the base of our erections and wrapped his long fingers around the two of them, holding them together. This time when I thrust forward, the friction was more powerful and ultimately more pleasurable.

"Is this okay?" I asked, never stopping to wait for an answer.

"Nnn." Was Heero's only response and I was inclined to take that as a yes, his mouth searched mine for another deep kiss.

While I kept making short thrusts, I placed my own palm over the tips adding to the stimulation.

Heero's warm lips covered my own and his tongue darted out to run along my bottom lip and then he softly bit it, like he so often bit his own lower lip. For some reason, out of all the stimulus my body had the joy of receiving, that was the sensation that did it and I came first with a sharp gasp that made Heero's lips disappear. Any fear that he might have hurt me based on my gasp and the following low groan, was probably erased by my warm come coming out against his erection and his abdomen and he couldn't contain a surprised gasp.

Luckily, even through the haze of orgasm, I managed to wrap my other hand firmly around Heero's stiff manhood and give him the last few tight jerks that did it for him, catching his passion in my palm to prevent adding to the mess I had previously made. Either way his sheets would have to be changed yet again.

Our pants filled the dark room. The sheen of sweat felt cool on our skin. I ran my clean hand through Heero's hair, exposing his sweaty forehead, which I kissed.

"That was fun." I said and I chuckled.

"Yeah." Heero breathed.
We both awkwardly retreated our hands, wiping them on our thighs. I was a little unsure of how to act. Perhaps he expected us to continue, like we had last time after I brought him to orgasm. "We should probably get cleaned up." I suggested, looking down our bodies. I couldn't see much, but I felt come cooling and drying on my stomach and it wasn't a feeling I wished to prolong. With a groan I raised myself and climbed over him to get off the bed on his side. Once my feet were firmly planted and my knees had steadied themselves, I offered him a hand and hoisted him up.

Heero was avoiding eye contact and used one hand to pull a corner of the sheet up with him to cover his private parts.

"Don't be embarrassed." I whispered. I leaned in and kissed him softly on the down turned corner of his mouth. With my right hand I gripped his wrist and with my left I pulled the fabric free from his hand, draping it back over the mattress. "Let's go take a shower together." I said with a grin that went unnoticed in the dark and I playfully pulled him with me to the bathroom. The light that I switched on was bright and blinding to our eyes which had become adjusted to darkness. We were both squinting heavily, the direct light was the worst, but the light reflecting off the white tiled walls wasn't easy on the eyes either. I reached over and flicked on the small light by the mirror over the sink and told Heero to turn off the large light. The atmosphere became more bearable. The soft yellow light was far kinder to our eyes than the harsh white light and the vibe was more romantic and befitting the moment.

I ran the shower nice and hot, testing the spray with my hands firsts to make sure we wouldn't be in for a cold and nasty surprise. When the water was sufficiently heated up I carefully stepped over the edge of the tub and then helped Heero over, making sure the quiver in his damaged knee would not cause him to slip and hit his head somewhere unfortunate. Sometimes the whole bathroom just appeared like one giant deathtrap to me. Getting into the tub you could injure yourself horribly if you slipped and fell with your head against the wall or the metal rack where we kept our shampoos and shower creams. Coming out of the bathtub both the porcelain sink and toilet were imposing obstacles to avoid once in freefall. I didn't care to remember how many almost-accidents I had had in there.

I focused my attention back on Heero, standing naked before me. "This is nice, right?" With a washcloth I gently rubbed his abdomen, chest and thighs clean, liking the way his wet skin glistened and how trails of water traveled down his body in varying patterns.

Heero didn't respond. He looked like he wanted to say something that I would probably not like to hear, which is why he was biting his lip to refrain himself from speaking.

God, I mused, I have learned to read him well... when he allows me to... "What's wrong?" I tried so hard to sound casual but I think even Heero was able to see through this act.

"Nothing." He lied.

With a heavy feeling I remembered the conversation we had had after the first time and I had a feeling his discomfort was related to the same topic. "Disappointed?" I started carefully, though I wasn't sure for whose benefit I was being careful.

He sighed and looked away. Water cascaded down his bangs, covering his eyes.

"Heero, you can tell me, please. You can be honest. You would hurt me more by lying to me."

He shrugged and remained silent for a while longer, deceiving me into thinking he wasn't going to say anything, but when I moved my hands off his body to wash myself, it seemed to ease his awkwardness and he confessed: "I guess I had just hoped that this time the feeling would last. That
this time things would change, because I wasn't as nervous as last time." He suddenly looked at me, eyes slightly widened and mildly hopeful. "Maybe it's because we didn't do everything this time."

I sighed, feeling bad about having to deny him his hope, but I demanded honesty from him, so I should return it in kind. "Heero, I really don't think sleeping together is going to help you in that regard." I felt a clenching in my chest when he looked away again. "I mean, I like that you feel better in the aftermath of it. I'm flattered and I'd be happy to help you anytime you want," I chuckled nervously, "but it's not the solution. I'm sure you'll find a way to hold onto that feeling though. I'm sure one day you'll find a way to keep those bad memories at a distance."

Again Heero didn't say anything. He was done talking. For some reason, despite the heat of the shower, the space between us grew cold. We further washed ourselves, not touching each other, not even as much as a brush of elbows. We got dressed in new underwear and headed back into the bedroom. I quickly gathered our discarded clothes from before and assembled them in a pile that I would deal with in the morning and then settled into my bed and I put the lamp back on my headboard. I had hoped Heero would join me as he had before, but instead he opened the closet and got out a set of clean sheets, proceeding to change the sheets of his bed.

I offered to help but he declined adamantly, he told me to go to sleep.

But I couldn't go to sleep. I just lay on my side, facing away from him, listening to the rustle of fabric as he worked. I felt hurt, even though Heero didn't intend on hurting me. Somehow, we often end up hurting each other despite our best intentions. It could be exhausting and challenging.

He finished quickly and silence reigned the room once he had settled under his fresh sheets. I reached up and without saying anything I turned off the light. Lying there in the silence, it didn't feel right. We had so much working against us, working against our relationship; our past; our immediate future; our social skills; society itself... Love was the only thing that bound us and bound us tightly it did, I never wanted that ease up. I never wanted that strength to fade away, because if it did, I had the gnawing, nauseating feeling that we would just violently rip apart - two beings that had been joined as one, that had to separate again.

So I rolled onto my side and my hand moved over to his bed, slipping under the sheet where it quickly found Heero's hand. I felt him looking at me, his intense stare fixed on my face. I intertwined our fingers and I told him: "I love you. And I have faith in you."

"I love you too." He responded in the dark. But he didn't say anything else, leaving me to wonder if he had faith in himself.
The weekend was an unremarkable blur. I tried to see Sookie, just to have someone to talk to about all the relationship stuff that had been giving me a hard time, but she was taking care of her grandmother who had just been operated on her heart. The phone-call was a stark reminder of my selfishness. I was so self-centered and preoccupied with anything and everything that revolved around Heero and me that I didn't even know her grandmother had been so sick she was in need of surgery. Making up to her would have to wait, Monday I started at my new job. I didn't have an inkling of what to expect, but I was ashamed to admit - if only to myself - that I was grateful to get out of the apartment. I had been cooped up inside for so long it had felt like my universe had been shrinking and had been reduced to just these walls that I knew so well. It was time to expand this life of mine again. Although Heero would ever remain the precious center and beating heart of my existence, it was good to get away, it was good for the both of us to have a life that extended beyond the reach of the other. When Heero worked as an agent, I didn't like that distance, I wouldn't like it now, but the better and only alternative wasn't reeling him in so close that I was smothering him. I realized that now.

Heero sat at the table across from me. For whatever stupid reason, I was nervous, so I couldn't handle more than a single bite of my still warm bagel. Coffee was much more welcome.

"You have another session with Nettle today, right?" I asked, for the sole purpose of eliminating the silence.

"Yes. Why?"

"No reason." Another hot sip. "Although..."

"Although...?"

I shrugged. "I'm not saying you should, but maybe... maybe you could talk to Nettle about this mission you insist on going on, see what she thinks."

"I already know what she thinks. She agrees with you. She recommended not to go."

"Well..." I searched for words, trying to reinforce her assessment. "She did study human psychology so... she probably knows best..."

Heero looked up at me critically, one of his eyebrows impossibly high. "You never agreed with her before. You don't even like her."

"You see, I'm not agreeing with her, she is agreeing with me." I tried to save myself, but it was hopeless judging by the skeptical look in Heero's eyes. "Look, Heero, I know I'm not Nettle's greatest fan but I think that at least regarding this, she is right. If even she thinks this isn't going to be helpful to you in any way, maybe you should reconsider. I mean, isn't that why you are seeing her, so she can help you? We've both been unconvinced, but maybe we should trust her." I was talking out of my ass and it looked like Heero noticed, but finally someone was on my side and I had to take advantage of that.

"You should go or you'll be late for work." Heero dryly noted.
I rolled my sleeve up and looked at my watch. "Damn. I swear, I wasn't this tardy during the war. Hey, I saw that!" I pointed an accusing finger at him after catching him rolling his eyes at my claim.

Une had emailed me with instructions for my first day, such as where to get my assignments and find my overall, other than that and a non-discriminate job description I was heading into the unknown. In spite of leaving a little later than panned, I still managed to catch my train as planned and I used the half hour trip to find myself a new mindset. It was quite a change and I realized I shouldn't have made this step any later in time or it would be even harder to adjust back to a life or structure and goal-oriented work. It's too easy to get used to a bag of potato chips for lunch, watching random video's on your computer. But that is not the life for me.

Instead of entering the facility through the front entrance, I followed a path that took me around back. I walked amidst many more worker, my colleagues, dressed in their black overalls. They all headed to a back entry that lead straight into the garage. At the steel gates that protected the staircase down to the workplace, everyone took out their access passes and each individual swiped it in front of a scanner and the revolving metal gate turned just enough for one man to go through. Waiting just off to the side was my friend from before.

"Good morning Stan, sorry for the trouble again." I shook his hand.

"Not at all. Here is a temporary pass, good for only one entry. You head straight for Garage Administration, it is just to your left, looks like an armory cage. There they will have your permanent employee pass, your overall and your designated coordinator who will give you your assignment."

I took the card from the tall, broad man and thanked him for his help. I got in line to enter and slowly shuffled closer. I got up to the gate and reached back to swipe the card. The gate immediately started rotating, startling me a little. I was grateful that even though I was tall and well-built, I wasn't particularly broad, or it would have been uncomfortable squeezing through the opening, I imagined. I headed left and approached the "Garage Administration" a small space stacked with boxes with narrow aisles in between, separated from the rest for the space with tall chain link fencing. There was a small opening for handing out supplies. I waited there for a while, when no one came, I knocked on the vertical pipe that lined the fence, causing the fence to rattle. The sound drew a clerk towards me.

"Yes?"

"Hi, I'm new here so I don't-"

"Name?" He asked impatiently.

"Duo Maxwell."

His eyes searched a list on his clipboard. "Right. Wait." He left, quickly disappearing out of sight between the high stacks of boxes with short, hurried footsteps. He returned moments later with a black bundle that was my overall and a spare and op top of that a keychain with an employee access card. "Here." He handed me both items through the opening in the fence.

"Thanks. I was also told-"

"Coordinator is Jett Benson. He's-"

I stepped back when the clerk poked his head through the opening and looked to his left.
"- right there."

I followed his line of sight to where two men were talking to each other, each holding clipboards and leafing through them. "Which one?" I turned back only to find the clerk gone. Oh well, I thought, every workplace is bound to have a character like that, that weird, devoted, don't-bother-me type of guy. Of our group I wondered whether that guy had been Heero or WuFei. I smiled and shook away the thought, approaching the men. "Hi. Jett Benson?"

"That's me."

Jett was apparently the tall, blonde, handsome one of the two. At first he looked at me with stern eyes but once I identified myself his lips formed a pleasant smile.

"Right, welcome to the Preventers. Une told me you have a lot of experience with mechanics and engineering. We can always use skillful people down here. After all, this is the heart of the operation." Jett said glibly as he guided me away.

I smiled but didn't say anything, pretty sure everyone said that about his own department.

"We have dressing rooms over there, you can use those in a moment. But as you see most men come to work already dressed. Stan I believe had already told you about the grids?"

"Yes."

"Good. Well, this is the grid you will be working in."

We had moved to one of the first marked area's in the vast space.

"Firearms, medium to heavy artillery and light equipment. These are mostly projects that can be completed by one mechanic, but there is plenty of work."

From what I could tell the grid was indeed heavily occupied, with over twenty men working individually on a variety of smaller equipment, each with his own station of a large worktable and a necessity of tools. For additional, more specific tools I was referred to the closest "tool shed", an enclosed area with what Jett told me to be all the tools I could possibly need.

"This is your station." Jett stopped me in front of one of the only remaining empty tables. The tools were neatly arranged and in the center lay a large, long distance rifle with a red folder.

"In the folder you'll find a description of the damage and a report of the malfunctioning. Before you hand in weapons you have to test them. There is an indoor shooting range right through there and you are always provided with a pack of the appropriate ammo for testing. Once you deem it fixed you sign the report and you alert me and I'll have someone come pick it up and bring you your next project. All clear?"

I must have looked a little dumbfounded, only because I was a little underwhelmed. I looked at all the mechanics around me, sitting or standing at their tables, tinkering away at their "projects" and felt like a tiny part of some of mass production system. I pushed the feeling away, deciding to approach it with an open mind. Jett reminded me that if I needed anything, I could call him and with that and a "Good luck" he left me be.

"Alright." I said and I pulled the high chair up to the table and sat down in front of the rifle. I took it into my hands. It felt so familiar, the shape, the weight. I didn't like it but my hands felt complete, like the weapon was an extension of my arm that I had been trying to do without. I put it back down and picked up the paper report. This felt much more alien. I flipped it open and was a
little staggered at the amount of information but I dutifully read through the entire report and set to work.

The weapon was used in "precision operations" - I knew those to be assassinations from experience - but the settings of the rifle didn't correlate with real life results and this problem had led to several misfires.

I started taking the thing apart, becoming determined to solve the problem. I felt like a veritable Sherlock Holmes of mechanic parts. I looked around, wanting to share my thoughts with some of my colleagues, but their tables were several meters away and they were completely focused on their jobs, so I looked back down at my own work. They wouldn't have gotten the reference anyway, Heero is the only other person I knew who was familiar with the name Sherlock Holmes and that was exclusively caused by me.

As I took the setting mechanism apart, I realized rather quickly that one of the serrated wheels had come a little loose and I discovered that as I tried to set the rifle to a certain distance the little wheel that was supposed to turn another, didn't always get a good grip, it's teeth slipping. The result being that if you turned the settings wheel - visible and accessible from the outside - six clicks, the internal wheel might miss two of them, so you had actually changed the setting only four clicks. Using my fingers I screwed the wheel on tightly and then reached for an adjustable wrench to secure it.

Surely it can't be this easy, I thought to myself. I put everything back together and picked up the rifle and the supplied ammunition, walking it to the back, through the hallway Jett had pointed down. A door at the end of the hall read "Testing area small arms and rifles". A sign made several warnings and requirements. I grabbed the mandatory ear protection and opened the door. I found a large shooting range with several targets at quite a substantial distance. I was all alone. I walked to the back where there were special set-ups for rifles. There were mats on the floor so you could lay down comfortably.

I lay down and propped the barrel of the rifle up on it two foldable legs, resting the stock against my shoulder. I exhaled slowly, feeling a rush as memories flooded me, lying there. I don't know why but the particular mission that came to mind, I didn't even get to hold the rifle. It had been with Heero and he had insisted on being the sniper, leaving me the lame job of spotter. It had really pissed me off back then, now it made me smile.

I rolled my shoulders, relaxing myself, I armed the rifle with a single bullet of impressive size and moved my finger to the trigger. I made sure to extensively play around with the settings before turning it to the appropriate one for the circumstances, short distance, zero wind, zero elevation. I realized that even if the settings still didn't line up, I would probably easily make this shot, so I would have to mention in the report that they should do long distance tests before sending someone out into the field with it.

I was pretty determined to make this a good shot, so I took my time, breathing in and out calmly a few times and then on the exhale...

The shot echoed through the concrete space. My spine felt compacted by the backfiring pressure of the rifle against my shoulder. The feeling of the rifle powerfully pushing into my shoulder on release of the bullet was another strong reminder of a past life.

I squinted my eyes to look at the target, a black, paper silhouette of a man, now with a hole right through the center of his head.

"Ha!" I exclaimed, I felt victorious. But the feeling soon ebbed away. This was it, this was the job.
This was as big a rush and sense of accomplishment that I was going to get. It was a leveling experience, mostly disappointing.

I walked back to my station and luckily Jett just walked by. I signed the report, made my recommendation about further testing and then some faceless guy in a blue overall took the rifle away and another faceless guy, also in a blue overall, immediately brought me my second project.

Jett complimented me on a job well done and then walked away again.

I looked at the rifle in front of me with dead eyes, this time an assault rifle.

The work got dull long before lunch, so that was a welcome break. Different grids had lunch at different times, to avoid overcrowding of the garage cafeteria, where you had fifteen minutes to eat your provided lunch and then another half hour of break time outside on the terrain. Grid one - my grid - and two lunched earliest. This was as much an advantage as a disadvantage. The first part of the day seemed shorter this way, but the second part of the day, I realized with dread, would only be longer.

We stood in line, mostly quiet and were served our lunch which I presumed to be a prison recipe. I sat down at a table with some guys from my grid and said hallo. One of the four looked up and nodded, other than that: no response. I looked down at my lunch and wished I had finished that bagel for breakfast. I looked around and noticed most guys had brought additional food from home, which was actually edible. Une couldn't have included this in her memo? I grumbled. I ate as much as I could before I started to question basic hygiene, but by then we were shooed out of the cafeteria anyway, to make room for the next two grids. We left the cafeteria through double doors leading to a space that bared many resemblances to a schoolyard. The paved area was mostly filled with benches and picnic tables but in the back some space was reserved for whoever was up for a game of basketball with two rusty orange hoops.

The "heart of the operation" could sure use some love, I thought to myself. It was painfully clear that only Jett thought of the garage as the heart, to someone who had seen the inside of the main building, as I had, which was all high tech and shiny steel and glossy marble. That angered me a little, but then I remembered the stretching graveyard. Considering none of those headstones paid tribute to a mechanic, I realized poor food and rusty hoops were a small price to pay. But in a way I was still a little angry, resentful maybe, for being shoved into such an underappreciated position.

I rolled my eyes at myself. I had only been working there for a few hours and I was already starting to get worked up about it. It was however instantly obvious to me that this is not what I had had in mind. I wanted to be necessary and important. It wasn't the case that I was full of myself - or maybe I was - I just felt like I could do bigger things and be of more importance. Amongst the crowd, I felt invisible and even though I hated myself for thinking so, I felt like I deserved better than this, that I was better than this.

Regardless of my soul searching during lunch break, the break inevitably had to end and I had to return to work. My third project of the day was another long distance sniper rifle. Apparently my "team" had a whole load of those coming in today, a crate of them got damaged on their way back from some undisclosed foreign place and the orders were to fix whichever ones were salvageable. When one of the guys in the blue overall brought my neighboring mechanic one of the rifles, I heard him speak for the first time that day.

"You'd think they would just trash these and buy new ones." He commented.

And the mechanic in front of him turned around in his seat and retorted: "They have to pay for the marble floors with something."
I couldn't help but speak my mind. "I'm sorry but isn't it the case that with the strict regulation on the production of weapons nowadays, it's easier to fix slightly damaged weapons than go through all the paperwork and waiting time for purchasing a new batch?" This I knew to be true. Hell, I was bound to learn something with the news channel turned on constantly.

The two looked at me momentarily and then both returned to their work with a shake of their heads.

Obviously I was not making friends. Still, I felt good about standing up for the agency, the agents and soldiers employed by them did good work and I didn't want that to be defiled because two mechanics didn't understand how it works. And how it works is very unlike what they might see in action comedies. Production of guns is so heavily controlled - for good reason of course - that even with the right paperwork it could take weeks for the order to be cleared and we currently had men and women abroad who needed functional weapons right now, not several weeks from now. It was quicker, more efficient and money saving to transport broken material back to the RUSA with a carrier jet to be repaired and sent back the same way.

I glared when I caught one of the two looking at me. Great, I thought to myself, now I'm the suck-up to the Lady upstairs. My focus staid on the job, I wasn't there to make friends anyway. The next few projects were simple matters of replacing firing pins, replacing the scopes that had suffered broken lenses and check if the dimensions of the barrel were uncompromised.

"Wow, Duo, you are on a roll." Jett complimented as he waved over another "blue overall".

"Thanks, it's not really that hard."

"Have you handled rifles before? You sure are swift at taking them apart and reassembling them."

I decided not to answer that, merely because it would be hard to explain without lying and it would be difficult to fathom a good lie on short notice.

"Anyway, keep up the good work." He patted me on the shoulder and moved on.

Okay, I thought, this is nice, appreciation, if a little exaggerated. But then I caught my co-workers staring at me again. I instantly knew what my nickname behind my back would be: Jett's pet. Honestly I couldn't be very bothered, I didn't see myself working here for a long time to come. It might grow on me if I let it, but I don't think I should let something like this grow on me. As I continued my work, I already started mentally writing an email to Une requesting a transfer, perhaps I'd be more suited as a traditional mechanic, lying on my back under a truck or having my head under a hood all day. This job was too reminiscent of a desk job and ultimately no challenge whatsoever.

Around 13:00 my eyes kept darting to clock on the wall behind me. Heero should be finished with his session with Nettle and I wondered if he would come down here to visit me. On one hand I hoped he did, it would be nice to briefly enjoy his company. On the other hand, I didn't really want him seeing me like this, hunched over a worktable staring down a barrel with one eye closed, from the opposite end of where I preferred to be.

Another rifle passed the inspection and was sent on it's way back to God knows where. I looked at the time and was hit with disappointment. It was 13:40 already and Heero hadn't shown up, making it most probable that he wouldn't.

When a blue overall guy came over with another rifle, I started: "Hey, don't you have something else back there?"
"I have 14 more of these and another 82 assault rifles."

"You're kidding..."

"No."

I snorted. "Yeah, I figured."

"A platoon just came back and all their weapons are up for regular maintenance."

I looked at the umpteenth rifle on my rifle. "Great. Thanks." As I skimmed through the report, my mind started to wander to the platoon, wondering where they had been, what their mission had been and whether they had been successful. But as I discovered that the only things wrong with the weapon was some dirt caught in the loading mechanism I wondered why these revered agents and soldiers didn't take better care of their own weapons, considering how valuable and hard to come by they were. I used to baby my rifle. Until of course it got damaged during a particularly bad explosion which was in no way or form my fault.

My mind trailed back to that mission with Heero again. His rifle hadn't been stolen and he sure seemed to enjoy reminding me of that fact or as he liked to put it: "I'm not the one who lost his rifle."

I don't know why I kept thinking about that mission, it certainly wasn't the most memorable, or spectacular. It was a regular mission, but I suspect I was just being nostalgic, because all I could remember in hindsight, was how much fun it had been, even though at that moment, lying on my stomach in cold mud, it was as far from fun as a party could be.

I don't even remember when it was, but I do remember it was one of our last missions together on earth during the initial war. We got teamed up because a sniper mission always required a pair and I happened to be closer to Heero's current location than the others. So I responded to the email sent by G to meet up with Heero and then travel to the target location together. It was funny to think back on how much I dreaded being paired with Heero. I always liked him - especially after he risked his own life to save mine-, but it was so brazenly clear that he was doing his best to dislike me, pointing out every little flaw, that made it hard being around him and for some reason always led to me annoying him. I guess I just figured I might as well give him a reason for disliking me.

I never told anyone the story, but if I would in the future, I'd imagine starting it in a certain way, namely: our gazes met from across the room in a smoky bar.
"Where were you?" Heero demanded to know. His voice was always monotonous but for some reason that exaggerated control only made me take the anger in his eyes more seriously.

"What are you talking about?" I reached back and grabbed a snack from the plate I'd been brought. "Chicken-nugget?" I offered.

"I've been standing outside for forty minutes." He informed me, his eyes becoming increasingly threatening.

"Well, that's your problem." I brushed him off, nibbling on the chicken-nugget myself. "Boy scouts taught you to pack reverse osmosis units but not an umbrella?" I mumbled under my breath.

Heero cast a sideway glance to the bartender to scare her off and then continued to me in a more hushed tone: "The email specifically said to meet in the parking lot."

"Yeah. It also specifically said to meet at 1100 hours." I said dryly.

Heero blinked. "No it didn't."

"Uh, yeah it did."

"The email said 1700 hours." He sure sounded very convinced that he was right.

"Nice try, buddy, but I think I can read."

Heero took a deep breath, the tendons in his neck momentarily stood out as he tensed up with what I could only guess was repressed anger. "Fine." He hissed, even though he still believed he was right. "Did you rent a room?"

"Oh no, I forg- Of course I did!" I pulled the keycard with wooden moose keychain out of my pocket and dangled it in front of him.

"Let's go."

I paid with a generous tip and then we left the bar. On our way to the room Heero got his duffel bag out of presumably his stolen vehicle of choice. It took several tries to get the door to open, the keycard had probably been used so often that the magnetic strip had been damaged and it was hard for the lock to read it. I finally managed to open it to a dusty, hillbilly styled room. Everything was brown or made out of robust wood, except for the sheets, which were red and checkered like any lumberjack's flannel shirt is ought to looked like.

"Cool." I commented and placed my bag on one of the single beds. I left Heero the bed closest to the window, or as he would call it: "the emergency exit". We had gotten into that discussion way too many times before and even though I was increasingly prepared for it, I kept losing.

Heero didn't say anything. He got a clean - dry - set of clothing from his bag and disappeared into the bathroom.

"I'll just check and see if we have any further orders." I called through the closed door. I settled down onto my bed, with the pillows propped up behind me for support. My laptop booted up in my lap.

Heero quickly emerged, dry again, except for his hair which was still darker than it usually was. I looked again, blinking and noticed that he had brushed his bangs back, out of his face. He looked different, not nicer per se as I had always enjoyed the tousled look to his hair. He just looked... real,
if that made any sense. Like a real person whose clothes and hair could change. In my mind I had
elevated the guy to some sort of unchangeable super being. I was mistaken, but I liked it. I focused
my attention back on my mailbox.

"Well I'll be damned." I uttered.

Heero looked at me expectantly.

"It did say 1700."

Heero dropped down on his bed with an unmistakable groan.

"I must have mistaken the seven for a one." I squinted and closed in on the screen. "You can hardly
blame me, the lettering is damn small... Oh, they sent us the coordinates and a picture of the
target." I picked up my laptop and angled the screen towards Heero. "Who is this ugly dude?"

Heero glared at me.

"Well, the email just says what he is. Apparently he is some sort of engineer who invented this
new super laser and he has been communicating with Zechs suspiciously frequently... Awww..." I
suddenly exclaimed. "Maybe they're in love." My cheeks suddenly went red. For some reason it
felt especially awkward thinking about that with Heero right there.

Heero rolled away from me, facing the window.

"You sleeping, buddy?"

"I wish." He mumbled.

I chuckled. "He's supposed to arrive at the provided coordinates at 1900 hours tomorrow, so we
should leave in the morning if we want to get there in time to find a nice spot and set up. How
much gas do you have left?"

"We're taking my truck."

"Okay... if you insist..." I didn't argue with him, mine had barely enough left to make it a few miles
and we had quite a distance to cover. I shut off my laptop and stuffed it back into my bag.

We both used the warm water of the shower gratefully and ate instant noodle soup before getting
into bed early. I woke up early in the morning, cracking one open to see what had awoken me. I
spotted Heero in just his pants, searching for something - I'm guessing a shirt - in his bag. I noticed
deep purple bruises on his back and wondered what stupid, self-destructive thing he had done this
time, but I didn't ask. When he started to turn, I closed my eye again and pretended to be sleeping
up until the moment he walked over to me and shook me awake.

I feigned a yawn then grinned at him hovering over me. He looked a little perplexed but hid it
quickly and walked away. I didn't know why, couldn't put my finger on it, but I liked the guy, even
though the only things we had in common were violent and there was no sustaining a conversation
with him.

We left the motel room shortly after, I brought back the key and paid the low price while Heero put
the equipment in the back of his truck, covering it with a tarp. The pouring rain that had lasted all
night had thankfully stopped and I hoped the drought would last, nothing is worse than stake-out
while drenched. Before we left I used an alcoholic wipe, originally intended to clean glasses, to
wipe my fingerprints off the wheel and door handles of my stolen truck. They had nothing to
compare it with, but it's best not to be in the system at all. I stuffed the wipe in my jeans pocket, I would throw it out later and walked up to Heero's truck. He had chosen one of a more demure color and an older make. I stuck my tongue out at him when I noticed him already sitting in the front seat. I got into the passenger seat, slammed the door shut and questioned: "So you get to drive and you get to shoot."

"My car, my rifle." Was his curt response, but with Heero you should consider yourself lucky for getting a response at all.

The drive up to the location took several hours but seemed even longer due to the uncomfortable silence between us. Damn Heero for stealing a truck with a broken and unfixable radio. Of course we couldn't drive the car all the way up to the coordinates and park it in front of the estate that we were targeting. As Heero drove I plotted out the best route to take by foot and at my suggestion we parked the car at a roadside diner, away from the majority of the cars, shared the load of the bags and simultaneously worked to rid the inside of the vehicle from our prints and then we headed out into the woods, making sure no one saw us disappearing into the shadows of the tall trees.

It was a three hour hike ending with a climb over a relatively steep hill. Occasionally it started raining softly, but each time it thankfully stopped. When we reached the apex of the hill we could faintly spot the shape of the mansion through the trees. It was at the other side, at the foot of the hill, lost in seclusion, with a single private gravel road leading up to it. We started down the hill and found an ideal location about a third of the way down, still at sufficient distance to go completely unnoticed. A landslide a long time ago had gathered earth up against large rocks, creating a level platform that had perfect view of the front of the mansion through a line of trees that completely hid us from sight and offered us some protection from the wind that sheered past the hill.

We smeared our faces with dirt and pulled on thick, olive green coats, on top of which we put on our ghillie suits; previously constructed suits of twigs and leaves that were designed to disguise the shape of our bodies and resembled the surrounding nature so we could blend into the environment. Heero set up his rifle, roughly aiming the barrel at the front door through tall blades of grass that would allow it to go undetected. Our two remaining bags we hid in bushes a short distance back up the hill where we could pick them up during our escape. Once we had set up the way we wanted it, we lay down on the ground in the undergrowth on our stomach. Our pockets were stuffed with some additional supplies and equipment; food, water and our hand guns amongst other things.

A stake-out mission always starts with a lot of adrenaline, wondering if someone is going to see you while you are setting up, wondering if someone is going to spot you after. But this adrenaline quickly fades. And when rain starts pouring in sheets of water, it's just really annoying. Our clothes were water tight, but drops still managed to seep through the open collar and get your exposed face so wet that it's hard to keep your eyes open with raindrops trailing down your eyelashes.

"Where the fuck is he?" I grumbled after we had laid there for four hours and it was long past 19:00.

"You're sure the email said 1900, right?" Heero asked, peering at the mansion through the scope of his rifle as he had been diligently for as long as we had been there.

I tensed up briefly but then shook my head. I was absolutely sure, I had checked several times. Besides, Heero had checked his email too, he didn't trust me. Maybe, for once, I had given him reason not to.

"He's just delayed."
"Why are they always delayed when you are waiting to shoot them?" I muttered, picking up my binoculars and looking around the perimeter. Not a sign of life. "Maybe they sent us on a fake mission."

Heero ignored me.

"I know what you're thinking, "why would they send us on a fake mission?" Why indeed? I don't know, you tell me. Maybe they don't trust us. That's it, isn't it? They don't trust us? They probably think I'm a loose canon and you're-' I looked over at him, "a suicidal hand grenade." I looked through my binoculars again. Still nothing. "Hey, what do you say we trade the rifle for the binoculars every five hours? Keep ourselves on our toes."

"No."

"Why not? Why do you get to shoot?" I sulked.

"Because last time, you shot and you missed."

"I did not! I got him both times."

"Exactly. You are supposed to kill the target with one shot. In the head. You shot him in the chest first, then in the head."

"I did that on purpose..." I muttered, even though it wasn't true. I had been freezing and a shiver had almost caused me to miss the target entirely. Then I boosted: "How quick was that reload though?"

"You kill on the first shot, so they don't know where the shot came from. The second shot gives away your position." Heero said as if he was reading it out of an instruction guide. He probably was, he had memorized all the Goddamned instructions and guidelines.

I snorted. "They didn't know where we were."

"Then how did you get shot?"

"They were firing like madmen, they weren't aiming at anything! They just got lucky!"

Heero didn't say anything but for some reason I think he thought: lucky indeed.

More and more time went by, but still no activity. Heero kept staring through the scope, sometimes I wondered if he could sleep in that position and had been sleeping for several hours. He never responded to me, not even when I started to whistle or threatened to pee in my pants. Finally, I shimmied deeper into the forest to a private bush to relieve myself. When I returned and lay back down I got a squished pack of crackers out of my pocket. We had been there in the cold so long even those tasted good.

It wasn't until I thought to myself "hey, the sun is rising" that I realized we had been there all through the night without result and time didn't stop.

"This is just ridiculous." I sighed after even more time had passed. "How long have we been lying here, six weeks?"

"Nineteen hours." Heero matter-of-factly supplied.

"Right, like I said: for-ever! And we're still here, lying in mud that smells like wild boar shit, drenched down to our underwear and socks. So much for water-resistant clothing... You know
what, I am writing a very strongly worded letter to the company that made these things." I put the binoculars down and reached into my suit to search my pockets. I pulled out a receipt from yesterday's lunch and a stub of a pencil.

"Duo."

"I'm writing!" I warned. I turned the receipt over and used the blank side to write.

"Duo."

"Shhh... I have a really good opening and I don't want to forget it. Ow!" I hissed when Heero's boot suddenly kicked against my shin. Hard. "What?"

For the first time in nineteen hours - apparently - Heero turned away from the scope and he did it to dangerously glare at me before turning back again.

I got the hint and picked up my binoculars, spotting two identical black cars coming up the road to the mansion. "Finally..." I followed the cars as they made their way up to the house and parked just to the side of it. It became clear rather quickly that the target wasn't arriving quite yet. Emerging from both SUV's were big men in black suits, some of them carrying impressive automatic assault rifles. They had arrived ahead of their detail to secure the location. It was always a matter of guesstimation how far ahead of their clients they would be, but at least their arrival assured us that the target would be showing up at some point in time.

Adrenaline kicked in again. You never know for sure if you are hidden well enough. Even though Heero and I could talk as loudly as we wanted and we would still go unheard because of the distance, we both kept quiet. Not unusual for Heero, I admit. I even quieted my breathing, keeping my eyes mainly fixed on the men with the big guns. I tensed up when one of them got a big pair of binoculars out of the back of one of the cars and started scanning the surroundings, paying extra attention to the hill. Luckily, in case the binoculars had thermal imaging like mine had, my body temperature was so low and my suit so thick that even then he probably wouldn't see me.

For a moment it seemed like he was looking right at us and my whole body felt electrified, but then he moved on again. When none of the men were looking towards the hill, we allowed ourselves the small movement of readying ourselves for an eminent sweep. I tucked the receipt, pencil and old wrapping of a cracker back into one of my pockets and I placed my binoculars underneath my chest. Heero wasn't idle either, he slowly pulled back the long rifle, tucking it under his body so it would disappear under his body, dressed in the ghillie suit.

The guards were heading out into the woods in pairs of two to sweep the surroundings. We had no idea how large their perimeter would be, but in case they would come near us they still wouldn't be able to see us thanks to our disguising suits, unless they would get really close.

Two sets of guards headed up the hill and it looked like they would pass on either side of us, one of the pairs would get dangerously close.

We lay face down and relaxed our bodies in a comfortable position, you can't wiggle away a cramp in your leg when an armed guard is standing nearby, looking for you. The shape of my gun and the binoculars under my chest wasn't very comfortable, but it was necessary. In case they did spot us, we would have to be able to defend ourselves. We had to rely on sound to detect where they were and were never allowed to lose focus. If they were close we had to know exactly where they were so we could shoot them if necessary.

Judging from the sound of rustling leaves and breaking twigs, the closest pair of the two passed us
by on Heero's side, only approximately ten yards away from us.

"Hey, what's that?" One of them suddenly called out, causing me to tense up.

"Relax dude, it's just a deer."

"Oh... Damn."

"What?"

"The deer is looking at me funny."

"Maybe because she thought you screamed like a girl and almost shot it for no good reason. Like I did"

"... I should shoot you both for that..."

"Hey, would you say we're half a mile away from the house?"

"And then some."

"Cool. Let's head back."

Slowly their footfalls became faint again.

We both waited a long time before we raised our heads again. I got my binoculars out from under my suit and looked down at the mansion, the first thing I did was count the guards. They were all there and they appeared relaxed, talking to each other. One of them laughed, I think that one guy was telling the deer story. "Boy, are they going to get fired..." I mused, snickering. They proceeded to do an explosives sweep in and around the house. People must really want this engineer dead.

The wait then continued. My stomach started to growl so hard I thought that they might be able to hear it all the way down at the house, so I dug out a granola bar. In the past 24 hours I had had way too many of those and it was hard finishing it, but it was the tastiest food we had. I offered Heero one as well, I didn't like eating alone, made the sound of my own chewing seem so loud. He didn't say thanks, he just took it, looking at me only briefly.

Dusk drew in, the shadows of the trees grew darker and more ominous. At this point, I prayed that our target would take a little longer to arrive, so we could take advantage of the settling dark for our escape.

"Hey, Heero?"

"Hn."

I put the binoculars down and looked at him, still peering through that scope. I wondered how on earth he hadn't gone cross-eyed yet, but I suppose when you are revered as the Perfect Soldier, your body can defy anything. "Look, I know I complain a lot... and I like getting on your nerves from time to time... but the truth is, I like going on missions with you."

He didn't move a single muscle or say a single word in response.

"I just wanted to say that..." I trailed off. "I don't even understand it myself, I mean, we don't have fun or anything and we don't talk a lot - well, I do, you don't - but I like being with you." I didn't know where that came from, but I knew it to be true. I didn't expect him to say anything in return, I didn't need him to. I had no intention of befriending him, I knew he would resist me every step of
the way, but I wanted him to know that should he ever be interested, for some reason, I really did believe that we could be friends, if we let it happen. "And I guess I owe you an apology. Sorry for shooting you. Twice."

He looked at me, he seemed a little surprised. It had been a long time since that day we first met and there had never been an apology for my actions before. I had never been sorry, till that night he saved my life and the words had been stuck in my throat ever since.

I smiled at him. "You know Heero, I think that you are actually a really nice guy. You're simply very good at hiding it."

The almost kind look on his face that I had been enjoying disappeared as he glared me and he snapped: "Could you please be quiet?" He turned away and looked through the scope again.

"Sure thing, buddy." I picked up the binoculars again to resume spying on the house. As the world slowly went dark again, lights came on around the house, giving it a romantic feel, an ideal get-away in the woods. If you weren't about to be shot that is. For us the lights just made our job easier, we could see them clearly, but they could not see us. I focused my attention on the gap in the tree line where the gravel road appeared out of the forest. I turned my binoculars to night vision so I could observe.

I estimated the hour to be around 21:00 when multiple sets of headlights came up the road and broke through the line of trees. I alerted Heero with a soft calling of his name and turned off the night vision before all the bright lights could blind me. Six headlights, three cars. They approached the mansion and came to a gentle stop right in front of it. The first man to came out, emerged from the first car and looked like another guard. He approached one of the guards at the door, holding an assault rifle to his chest and they conversed shortly. Once it was confirmed that the area had been cleared, the man that had come from the car talked into his sleeve and then all the doors of all the cars opened. Ten guards in formal tuxedo's stepped out, one of which opened the door for our target.

The man was becoming of age, he was bald but his thick moustache was grey. Sadly for him, he wouldn't live long enough to see the sunrise again. Fortunately for him, he would never know what hit him.

"You got him?" I whispered to Heero.

"Yes."

I moved the vision field of my binoculars away from the man, up to the roof of the house where a flag with the family shield moved in the wind, then I looked back down and studied the rustling leaves of the rose bushes and noticed the ties of the guards moving in the wind. "Wind is 15 miles per hour. Direction... 40 degrees." I heard the ominous clicking as Heero slowly turned the settings of the rifle to adjust for the conditions. "Distance," I looked at the reading inside the view of my binoculars as I aimed it directly at the target, "2755 feet. 2-7-5-5... 2-7-5-7. He's walking up to the house. Bystanders are clear. Fire at will. 2-7-6-1... 2-7-6-4." I kept reading out the distance to Heero as he prepared for the shot. My voice was hushed so as not to disturb him in his concentration. In spite of the relative rough wind, the shot was easy enough for him, I've heard him mention a shot made at over two and a half miles and even though that sounds ridiculously impossible to me, I was inclined to believe him. But a sniper can never get arrogant. He has to make the shot, if he misses, reloading might offer them time to duck for safety and then the mission is a failure.

The easier shot was hitting him right in the center of his head. But targets who get shot like that
have the tendency to drop straight down and guards can easily deduce the direction of origin of the shot. In ideal conditions we had been taught to go for the temporal shot, either side of the head. This shot oftentimes causes the target to spin on his final decent to the ground and once he is down bystanders often don't remember exactly which way he was standing, making it more difficult to trace the shot. Also, with the size of the bullet we are firing, there is no risk of the target surviving a temporal shot, as is sometimes the case with smaller fire arms thanks to the marvels of modern medicine. They still don't have a cure for a hole in the side of your head the size of a grapefruit.

In the view of my binoculars I watched the man, unbeknownst of anything, unbeknownst of his fate, make his way up to the house. I briefly felt sorry for him and for any relatives he may have. He may be up to no good, he was still someone's family, maybe a protective brother, or a doting uncle, maybe even a proud father. As I watched the man, I listened to Heero's breathing, calm and controlled, readying for the shot. It was strange the way my senses, visual and auditory, brought victim and assassin together in a way. It is a strange idea, knowing that the man you see is about to be shot by the man you hear.

"Ready to get out of here?" Heero asked softly, indicating he had the shot and was about to take it.

"Oh hell yeah..."

He breathed in twice more and then the shot echoed down the face of the hill. The powerful recoil of the rifle pressed the stock into Heero's shoulder and I heard him groan right when I saw the bald man's head be covered in blood, flesh exploding outwards and I watched him spin and fall to the ground. The guards all reached for their guns but they had no clear sense of where the bullet had come from, the sound ricocheted off the hill, dispersing into every direction. One of them walked up to the man and checked for a pulse in his throat. When he shakes his head to the others, the kill is officially confirmed and Heero and I slowly crawl back.

The guards would come looking for the killer and would surely head in, at least, our general direction, so we had no time to waste. Once we were deep between the trees we dared to stand to our feet and with bowed back we hastily walked back over the hill, stopping briefly to each pick up our own duffel bag, flinging them over our shoulders. As we cleared the top of the hill, I was already feeling victorious. We started making good speed and there was no way the guards would catch up with us as they were probably still combing the undergrowth on the other side.

"Nice shot." I complimented between pants.

"Which way?" Heero asked, ignoring my comment.

"Over here." I lead the way and Heero followed. I had planned out a perfect escape route that would take us through the woods to an abandoned church just outside of a small town. It would be a hike that would last all night, but we had to cover a great distance to avoid being caught by possible road blocks in the aftermath of the assassination.

It was a misty dawn, with dew droplets gathering everywhere, when I spotted the shape of the church through the tall trunks of the trees as the forest thinned. We both crouched down and scanned the area, when there was no life to be seen or heard for over ten minutes, we were satisfied that the coast was clear and we made our final approach, entering the old religious building through a creaking side door.

Light poured into the chapel through the tall stain glass windows that depicted a multitude of biblical scenes. I looked up in awe, it was beautiful and it reminded me of a better time on L2.

Heero was already stripping himself of his ghillie suit. Awe was not in the soldier's repertoire. I
turned away as he fully undressed himself and quickly dried himself off with a small towel before dressing in regular civilian clothes. Shame was obviously also lost on him. And why wouldn't it be? He had a great body.

I took his lead and also undressed, dried off and got into a simple pair of jeans, a T-shirt, a sweater and a wind jacket on top. I completed the look with a worn baseball cap of an American Football team. We stuffed our military clothes back into the bags and emerged from the church as casual as you please. If anyone caught us at this juncture, we could innocently pretend to be tourists who had traveled down to the remote Canadian woods for some deer hunting - we had to explain Heero's imposing rifle somehow.

"Let's find ourselves a car." I said with a grin as we walked into the town. It was still early so there weren't many people out on the street. I had a feeling there never were, the town had a very abandoned feel to it. We snooped around for a few minutes and then found a small parking lot with a few cars. Most of the cars were new and looked like they were regularly used, but parked in the back was an old pick-up truck that looked like it hadn't moved an inch in several years. When I curiously tried the door handle I found that it wasn't even locked, the inside was covered in dust and the vehicle reeked terribly. I poked my head out and looked at Heero with a big smirk. "I think we have a winner." Luckily for me I was already at the driver's side, so there would be no arguing about who would get to drive this time. It's the small things in life.

Heero walked around to the passenger side and got in, throwing his bags on the backseat.

We used our sleeves to clean most of the dust off the dashboard to avoid suspicion and I hotwired the car, smiling when the engine sputtered to life. The poor thing didn't have much life left in it, but I was confidant in my abilities to fix anything that might get broken along the way.

In complete silence I drove us to a small airport, parking the truck all the way in the back so it would go unnoticed for a long time.

"So where are you headed?" I asked him.

"Can't tell you." He said dutifully.

"Right." I looked away. As soon as we got out of the car we were to pretend we never met and each go our own way. Each time we did that, I feared I would never see him again. Hopefully I would be proven wrong again. It are always the quiet ones that grow on you.

We got out and grabbed our duffel bags, significantly lighter after we had dumped our ghillie suits and big green coats along the way. Heero's rifle was back in it's bag.

"How are you going to get that thing on a plane?"

"J sent me the right paperwork."

"Ah." Fake paperwork. "So I guess this is goodbye."

Heero quirked an eyebrow, he didn't understand my sentiment. He gave me a curt nod as a matter of goodbye and then walked away.

I had watched him go and smiled. For some reason, that time, I was sure I would see him again. And I was right.

I looked at the rifle on my work table, now fixed. I flipped open the report to the appropriate page and signed it. Another Duo Maxwell mechanical success story, I thought bitterly. Maybe, after all
this time, I couldn't fool myself anymore. I couldn't fool myself into thinking that one day this regular existence would satisfy me. I had been able to do so for a long time, but now I stood neck deep in reality. And it stank.

The day came to a thankful end. I was one of the few men to make use of the dressing rooms, feeling a little uncomfortable going all the way back home in a black overall that had my name on it. I was eager to get home so the line I had to join to come out the same way as we had gotten in moved horribly slow in my opinion. When I was finally outside, I felt a sense of freedom. That's not good, I noted.

After the train ride I ran my way from the station to our apartment building. Not that I was so exuberantly eager to get home, but it was good to get my muscles working after a whole day of uncomfortably sitting on that stool, hunched over the tiny parts of a rifle.

I opened the door and I called: "Honey, I'm home!"

And Heero unexpectedly emerged from the kitchen, looking a little apologetic.

I sniffed the air and scrunched up my face. "What's that smell?"

He bit his lip. "I made dinner."

My eyebrows raised in surprise. "Oh. Smells great." I lied, it smelled like something had been burnt terribly. "What did you make?"

"Chicken and pasta."

"Nice." I looked at the dinner table, it was set with plates but there was no food. I also noticed that the pans on the stove were empty, as the microwave appeared to be. "Where is it?" I inquired with a frown.

Heero demonstratively stepped his foot on the pedal of the garbage bin, opening the lid.

"Oh... Well that's okay. We'll just order something." I tried to console him as he looked terribly displeased with himself. "Heero, it's okay. It was only your first attempt, you'll get better at it. Or not!" I said with a chuckle. "God knows I haven't."

"At least you don't burn everything." He grumbled. He released the pedal and the lid slammed shut.

"Don't worry about it. I really like that you tried it." I leaned in and kissed him on his cheek.

"Nettle told me to do it. She told me to do something "homey", she called it."

"Really? Why?"

He shrugged. "She said I should try it, to see if it gave me the same sense of accomplishment as when I complete a mission." He pointedly looked at the garbage bin. "I don't feel very accomplished."

"Come on, buddy, it's not that bad." I approached him and hugged him but Heero was completely unresponsive. I petted his hair and kissed his brow. I was fully aware of my inadequacy at easing his feelings and self-loathing thoughts, but I was doing the best that I could, hoping that somehow that would be enough. I figured the best strategy to cheer him up was to remind him of a successful mission, so I told him about the mission I had been daydreaming about half of the day. "We were a
pretty awesome team, right?" I said, releasing him.

"We were successful." He dryly concluded.

"Yeah. And we can be successful at anything we want to be. You'll see. It just takes some work. We didn't just magically know how to do those missions, did we? It took time and training. The same goes for cooking."

"Right." He looked away, his eyes hooded, he seemed a little upset but didn't let me comment on it.

"Let's just order. I'm hungry."

"Sure thing buddy." I ran my hand through his hair, causing him to look up at me. I smiled at him, hoping to cheer him up. Heero offered me a small smile in return, but it seemed insincere.

I ordered Heero's favorite, he looked like he could use some comfort food, and we had a quiet dinner at the table. Heero politely asked me about my day and I politely lied, claiming it to have been great. I didn't want to tell him the truth, that it had been awful and boring and had me thinking back to violent missions. I didn't want to give him yet another reason to think that those missions were the only things we were capable of. I wanted him to believe that he was free to choose whatever life he wanted, even as I myself started to doubt that.
I went to work with a very real sense of trepidation. I feared my future would betray me. Was I so long engrossed in an illusion that could never be, or was I jumping to conclusions? I was hoping for the latter, but as the train approached my destination, I couldn't imagine myself ever coming to love, or even look forward to, a day of work under these conditions. I was desiring impossible things, I knew that, but these desires I could not easily shake. I wanted a normal life, I wanted that house with Heero, I wanted a relationship that is real and open. And at the same time I wanted my life to be of a greater importance, of a greater significance, to mean something to more people and to more causes than just to myself and to my own. My role in the war had spoiled me. It wasn't so much that I required a position that satisfied the God of Death - I was done with that character - I needed a position that satisfied my sense of morality and honor. I had helped create a fragile peace and now the sense of duty was upon me to help maintain it.

I didn't feel very involved in that all important maintenance of this delicate peace unclogging rifle barrels and doing routine check-ups on small electronic field equipment, like navigation devices and night vision goggles. For that was all I had been doing for three days now and I just felt myself sinking into resentment, it seemed like Une hadn't received my digital request for a much needed break in the routine.

Every attempt at conversation with my fellow mechanics, ended in a quarrel that had them turning away from me. I was being the nicest I could possibly be, though unable to refrain myself from correcting them occasionally. They weren't stupid, they knew I wasn't one of them. My eyes and face, in spite of my tall posture, betrayed my youth, if only they know how young I truly was. Too young to be a decent mechanic, they all figured, I could see that in the looks they sent my way. Above that the coordinator was paying too much kind and thoughtful attention to me and my work, I didn't notice it until the second day, that he never talked to any of the other mechanics, causing them to realize someone higher up must have demanded kindness and understanding of him towards me. Put two and two together, as they did, and they recognized me as a special case, someone who had been given an extraordinary opportunity based not on skill nor work ethic, but on the people I know.

I could not blame them. If in their shoes I would have approached a person like me with the same skepticism. In fact, I had. On L2, when I was still very young, a boy wanted to join our gang. He was older than me. He wasn't starving, he wasn't homeless, he just wanted to be part of something rebellious as boys his age wanted to be. We all disliked him, but we let him hang out with us, for the sole reason that his father owned a bakery and would happily provide his son with a warm break every day to share with his friends. And I wasn't even that boy, my colleagues couldn't even muster the effort of decency.

The train stopped and I got out. I was already wearing my black overalls and merged with the crowd, yet I felt no part of them. The ones who knew me immaturity avoided me, the ones who didn't know me, were just shamelessly uninterested. We all made our way inside, most keeping to themselves. I spotted Stan in the line ahead of me, not knowing what had gotten into me, I called out his name and waved when he turned to look. He waved, but then turned back again as he was about to enter through the gate. I didn't see him after that.
I made my way over to my station, where my first project of the day would be waiting for me. I frowned when my table was empty, there was nothing there like there had been for the past two days. I wondered if Une had finally received my email and had misinterpreted it as a resignation. I found myself not really caring whether or not she had, but I spoke to Jett when he passed me by.

"Hey," I said.

He looked up from a folder he had been reading. He smiled. "Good morning, Duo. How can I help you?"

I could feel the stares of my colleagues on the back of my head, but when I turned they all redirected their attention to their projects. "Well, I don't have a project waiting for me, but the others do. Is something wrong?"

He reached for his clipboard with assignments which he had held between his arm and the side of his torso. "No, nothing is wrong. There's just been a little delay, the supply crew from last night didn't get the update in the assignments. The new shift should be working on getting your project to you right now. You should be quite honored, normally we don't let new mechanics work on the bigger projects in Grid One, we leave that to the more experienced crew. But Une assured me you are plenty experienced." He smiled at me and I couldn't decide whether or not it was genuine, I leaned towards not. "Ah, here is your project right now." He nodded over my shoulder.

I turned around and a worker in a blue overall roll a camouflaged dirt bike to my station, causing me a somewhat childlike, enthusiastic thrill, seeing all those parts which are far more interesting and abundant than those of a simple rifle. He placed the accompanying report on my table and left with a polite nod. In the background I could see my surrounding colleagues twisting their necks to curiously observe.

"Awesome."

"Well, enjoy." Jett said and then he walked off.

I delved into the report for clues to the damage and my excitement built as I realized I would have to take the entire engine apart to locate the problem.

I worked, uninterrupted and quite pleased with myself, on the motorcycle till after the mandatory lunch break, shortly after which I had reassembled all the parts and replaced a couple of them as gunfire, as it appears, had ruined them beyond repair. I mounted the bike and started it's engine, satisfied with the deep rumble and soft vibrations of the machine. For the first time, I made use of the outlined red "roads" leading to the back of the grand hall. There was a certain sense of victory as I drove the bike the distance to the back, keeping my speed in check with effort. The closer I got to the platform elevator, the bigger things got, till finally, behind the wrought chassis of a sand colored tank, a mobile suit became visible. A regular Leo, painted a matte black, the Preventer logo on it's shoulders. It lay on it's back, the vaulted door to the cockpit was wide open and reflected the flickering blue lights of malfunctioning screens. A second mechanic was circling it, holding a holographic note pad, he systematically checked the joints for circuit strength, entering the data into his note pad.

A voice came from the cock pit, shouting: "What about now?"

The other shook his head. "The robotics of the limbs are still not responding to the input from the cock pit."

"Impossible, we checked all the connections!" Was the echoing response from inside the machine's
stomach.

I was about to make a suggestion, having quite some experience with mobile suits in general, but also Leo's in specific, when someone to my left called for my attention.

"Are you done with that?" A stocky man in blue overall asked me impatiently.

"Uh, yeah, all fixed." I started to dismount it but stopped as he asked:

"What are you doing? Drive it onto the platform, you can park it next to the dragonfly."

I settled myself back onto the seat and slowly drove it onto the platform, outlined by studded double red lines that caused a shock through my body as I drove over them. I circled the mostly empty platform and backed it up in the far left corner, next to the dragonfly, a magnetic levitation transport device, basically: an overgrown, flying motor cycle sent back from repairs in Grid Two. On my way back I handed the grouchy man the repair report for the dirt bike, neither of us said anything.

I walked past the Leo again and noticed the two mechanics talking to each other, one looking over the shoulder of the other, at the data holographically displayed by the note pad. Even though giving my other co-workers advice on how to improve on their work had not been well received in the past, I figured I should give it a shot as the two looked obviously lost over a problem that I knew to be easily fixable. I walked over to them.

"Hey."

The two looked up. "Hello." Only one of them replied, black bangs framed friendly and curious eyes.

"Would you mind some input?" I started friendly enough, nodding at the unmoving assembly of steel and carbon fiber next to us.

They both seemed skeptical but the black-haired one said: "Sure, we're hitting a dead end anyway. Do you know MS technology?"

"You could say that." I replied somewhat mysteriously, hoping to avoid further questioning.

The mechanic showed me the data they had gathered and relayed: "All systems seem to be working, there is no problem with power supply or the hardwire connections, but nothing responds to commands and the main screen in the cockpit just keeps giving default information and then all systems report major error regarding circuits that we know are intact."

I nodded, briefly skimming the data. The information was unnecessary, I had encountered this problem a couple of times before when I tried to "borrow" one of the enemies Leo's. If they had had a former OZ soldier on staff, this would never have been an issue, as they had long learned to deal with this technical malfunctioning. "It's the boot-up procedure," I started explaining, "it's screwed up in all Leo's. You see, they are programmed for automatic start-up, which basically means that all individual systems start booting-up as soon as you turn the MS on. This should be no problem, except for the fact that some systems start up quicker than others, just because they are less complicated, such as the Satellite Control Systems that operate each limb individually in reaction to commands from the Main Operating System. The Main Operating System starts up last, being the most complicated system, but this system needs to be up first to coordinate the start-up process of the subordinate systems, like the four SCS. Without the input of the MOS, every single system starts up independently of the others and then they can't communicate. The MOS doesn't
recognize them as it's own extensions, so it gives an error, because there is nothing for it to operate and in turn the SCS are useless without the input from the MOS, so they report errors as well."

I watched understanding dawn on their faces, mixed with a wondrous sense of awe, as they obviously grew curious as to how I know all this. I finished with a shrug and a casual smile: "This is unique for Leo's, none of the other Mobile Suits do this because for those special systems were created, the MOS and SCS and all other systems are one. Leo's, being low-budget and low-tech as they are, are basically just an assembly of parts and operating systems originating from different branches of technology, made to communicate with each other and function as one. That's why they are so fussy."

The two nodded as this explanation seemed reasonable enough to them. "How do we fix this?"

"Well, two ways actually. You can go through the reset process and manually boot up the systems. However, this would have to be done each time you want to use the Leo and in battle situations it is too time-consuming, it takes about fifteen minutes each time and it's not fool-proof. OZ engineers found a way to fix this problem for their Leo's permanently, with a massive recalibration of the system, taking it back to it's most primitive settings, from where you can change the start-up sequence, coordinate it to start up the MOS first and then the MOS will boot up the other systems automatically in the right order. It takes a couple of hours, but at least then your problem will be fixed once and for all."

One of them frowned: "And you've been taught this by OZ engineers?"

The truthful answer was no, it was more a matter of reverse engineering, with a healthy dosage of logic, after having successfully stolen many recalibrated Leo's and then coming across one who was giving me the described problems. However, the answer most appropriate for a young guy who had supposedly spent the war up on L2, away from the majority of the action was: "Yeah, well, you know how it goes. I knew a guy who knew a guy." I casually brushed it off.

"Right. Well, thanks, we'll certainly give it a try." The guy with the black hair said appreciatively.

"No problem. It really should fix it, if it doesn't, I'd be happy to take a look at it. An extra set of eyes never hurt."

"Okay, that's fine, we'll let you know how it goes. What grid are you from, heavy artillery and armored transportation?"

"No, I'm in Grid One, actually. Fire arms and small equipment." I brushed the back of my neck sheepishly when I saw the strange look on their faces.

"You're kidding." The talkative black-haired one of the two said, clearly baffled.

"Nope."

"Well, I'm not here to judge, but maybe you should really reconsider a re-assignment. Seems to me like it would be a waste of talent to let you replace the lenses of binoculars, or, whatever the hell you guys do down there." He reached out his hand towards me and I excepted it, shaking it.

"Thanks for the help, -"

"Duo Maxwell."

"Duo Maxwell. Grid One." He repeated, with a hint of friendly mockery to his tone of voice, the other mostly idly standing by, "I'll let you know how your suggestion turns out."
"Great. And you are?"

"Landon Jones, Grid Five." He answered with a smile.

"Nice to meet you."

I went back to my station, feeling good about myself, about being able to help and about meeting a friendly co-worker, which was a novelty. All good feelings faded away when I neared my work table and I spotted another rifle propped up on it's legs, waiting for me. The report was brief: "Trigger is stuck". It would be an easy, but tedious fix, one I had performed three times already over the short course of time spent here behind this table, which started to feel like an eternity.

In this manner the day grinded on. The motorcycle had been a welcome break but Jett informed me those were few and far between, anything bigger than that dirt bike would be taken care of by Grid Two and obviously the Preventers didn't exactly use and abundance of dirt bikes. At my obvious disappointment at this news, Jett seemed confused and reminded me that Une had specifically arranged for me to be working by myself, which, to maintain speed of repairs, was only possible when working on the small projects of Grid One. To that I could only consent, though I never requested Une to place me on individual projects, rather, when she suggested it, it seemed to make sense. I didn't know what limitations this would bring me.

Obviously I had to send another email.

The day was over and the garage started emptying out. I waited by my work table a little while, I had been unable to finish my newest project - a compass that didn't point North - within the time restriction of my day, but that was not why I remained seated. I waited for Jett to finish up his end of the day meeting with the four other grid coordinators, one of them being Stan, I couldn't help but notice. As soon as the group of five started to break apart, I hurried over to Jett, tapping him on his shoulder.

"Bye!" Stan said to me as he walked away.

"Bye." I turned to Jett who was expectantly looking at me. "I was hoping you would have some time for me."

"Sure. What can I do for you?"

After only two days I was really starting to hate that question. It was brazenly apparent that Une had given orders to all the superiors to tend to my needs. I disliked this. I had always taken care of myself, finding my place in any environment that naturally had a pyramidal structure of command. I wanted to matter, I didn't want to be treated as a special case. But for once, I realized, I might as well take advantage of it, so I wondered: "Working in Grid One isn't really what I had imagined. Is it possible to be transferred to a different grid on short notice?"

"No." Was Jett adamant answer, but then he elaborated: "Though I'm sure Une would make an exception for you."

To the tone of his voice my anger flared and ignoring the fact that he was my superior, I told him: "Look, I'm not here to abuse the fact that I know Lady Une personally. I don't need you to kiss my ass because I'm on friendly terms with your boss. I'm just looking for a job that will suit me. I don't think you get to make snide comments at me just because I'm not satisfied replacing firing pins all day."

He seemed taken aback by my outburst, but didn't comment on it. "I'll make sure your request for
re-assignments makes it to the appropriate desk this evening." He spoke haughtily.

"Thank you." I bit back.

He parted with me with his usual, perfectly polite smile and I watched him go, his footfalls a little heavier than usual. I made my way back to the train station where I discovered that I had narrowly missed my train. With a sigh I lowered myself down on the steel bench facing the platform, looking back at the tower of the head quarters, the expanse of the garage invisible underneath. I felt invisible, meaningless. Each day I developed more and more understanding for the fact that Heero could no longer remain seated behind a desk as a hacker, being confronted with the reality of the situation. Just as he discovered information on hostile intents, I too saw the enemy in the world far outside the space of my own little worktable, in every damaged gun or equipment and in the bullet ridden vehicles in Grid Two and Three, perfectly in my line of sight.

You get that feeling you are needed somewhere, somewhere you are not. Why aren't you there? Or why isn't there someone out there who knows what you know and can do what you do? That cynical little voice in the back of my head that was oftentimes quiet but never missing, leered: You aren't out there because you've been too mentally screwed up, like your boyfriend and there is no one out there who can do what you guys can do because no one else can.

It was quite a dilemma to be stuck in the middle of.

"Duo Maxwell Grid One!" Someone called out as if that was my entire name.

I looked up and I saw the friendly face of the MS mechanic I had met earlier that day. His raven black hair matched the color of his overall. "Landon Jones Grid Five." I responded in kind.

He heavily sat down next to me, his hands deep in the pockets of his overalls. He extended his legs out, leaning back in the seat. He groaned as he rolled his neck. Finally, he spoke again. "Oh, we recalibrated that Leo, you were totally right. We changed the start-up sequence and now it's working perfectly." He looked at me with a big genuine smile. The kind of smile a true mechanic has when he has learned something new and has an even more intimate knowledge of his machines. "Thanks man."

"You're welcome."

"Dumb thing is, we've been working on that thing on and off for almost a week, checking every system... we even rewired part of it... I guess when your nose is so close to it, you can't see the big picture anymore huh?"

"Yes, that is possible. Fresh eyes always help."

"Nah," Landon said and he shrugged his broad shoulders, "I'm just making excused for myself. Truth is, we would have never figured to recalibrate. Know why?" He didn't wait for an answer and immediately continued: "We would be too damn afraid we wouldn't be able to boot it up at all once we started to mess with the core settings. We have eight guys working on those things around the clock, none of us had any prior experience with Mobile Suits before we started working for the Preventers. We're good mechanics, we just don't know shit about Mobile Suits."

I frowned. "How is that even possible? No offense, but there are a lot of guys - and girls - in this world who, after the war, have experience with Mobile Suits." There weren't that many engineers, but soldiers grew attached to and familiar with their machines over the course of the war and developed a reasonable technological insight in the specific field
"Well that's the damn thing, former soldiers or employees of military organizations aren't allowed to join the Preventers. The threat of previous affiliations and such. Especially soldier, or pilots, no one who knows how to actually operate them is allowed near them. Afraid their going to nab them or something. Preventers are a damn paranoid group of people."

I looked away because I couldn't hide a smile. Little did he know that the man sitting next to him and his own boss had pretty strong "previous affiliations".

"Our grid coordinator is the only one with some previous experience, as a manufacturer, mind you. Even he is at a loss sometimes. MS mechanics are a dying breed, you know."

"Yeah." The fact that no one in the world is still supposed to have Mobile Suits didn't help.

"You what I'm thinking sometimes?" Landon sat up straight and looked at me seriously.

"What?"

"The Preventers don't even have qualified mechanics to repair the Mobile Suits. Sometimes I wonder how in the hell they are supposed to train adequate pilots. Who's going teach them when they don't allow former soldiers of the Alliance, nor OZ to join?"

"Good point. I don't know. Maybe Lady Une herself, she's a capable pilot."

Landon frowned. "What the fuck, she is?"

Right, I scolded at myself, I wasn't supposed to know that, more importantly, he isn't supposed to know that I know.

Luckily, Landon didn't make a big deal of it. He sat back. "Just something I think about sometimes."

He had got me thinking about it too. Though surely Une had managed to find someone with the capacity and time to train new recruits, or do it herself, it was to be doubted any of these new trainees could hold a candle to us, or even the OZ soldiers we used to fight during the war. I wondered if Zechs or Noin were involved in the training process, but I quickly dismissed that idea as I knew them to be in the Mars orbit, overseeing the construction of a new colony, defending it against possible attacks. It wasn't exactly a short commute to make on a regular basis.

I rose to my feet when my train stopped at the platform. Landon remained seated so I turned back to him and asked if he was coming.

Landon shook his head. "I need a different train, I live in Jacksonville."

"Okay. Have a nice evening." I stepped into the train.

He returned the sentiment right before the doors closed and raised his hand in a wave as the train took off.

I seated myself in a chair away from the other people on board, closing my eyes to rest them after staring at tiny parts for the duration of the day.

At home I found Heero asleep on the couch, still wearing his running shorts and a shirt that clung to his body with sweat. He had added late afternoon exercising to his work out schedule, going to the gym we had nearly become strangers to. I still joined him for a run early in the morning. This intensification of his routine made me aware that the time may be drawing near when he would
embark on the mission he previous failed. There was nothing I could do except run with him whenever I could, to remain close to him, but also, to physically prepare myself for the abusive strain that a high priority mission puts on your body, my mind working equally hard to come to accept the fact that I would be joining him.

I slowly turned down the volume of the television before shutting it off, to avoid the sudden silence waking him.

In the bedroom I shed myself of my overalls and took a hot, leisure shower before getting to work on a second email to Une, in case Jett wouldn't keep to his promise. She had sent me an email in return in regards to my previous request. Her words indicated that she had been enthusiastic and pleased with the offering of the motorcycle and I felt a little bad for having to tell her that her kind effort had not been sufficient. In the email I told her about what I had learned today; the inexperience of the MS mechanics and suggested that I would make a valuable addition to that grid. I ended with a sarcastic remark about going to shoot myself with one of those rifles if I would be subjected to the dull job of fixing them much longer. As I pressed SEND, I wondered how far removed from the truth that statement was. I wouldn't kill myself, but I would probably shoot at the ground at Jett's feet as a release of frustration and if I were to accidentally shoot him in the leg... oh well, it builds character, or so I've been told.

I ordered dinner over the phone - Italian because it was Wednesday - and decided I'd better wake up Heero or else suffer the lecture of not letting him disturb his natural rhythm again for future reference. I approached him and softly placed my hands on his shoulders. Even this soft touch stirred him, he let out a meek, dissatisfied moan and threatened to fall asleep again, so I gently shook him to permanently jostle him awake.

His vibrant blue eyes blinked open to look at me with momentary, innocent confusion. "Was I sleeping?" He asked, slowly sitting up.

"Yeah."

He continued with a mumbling voice: "I shouldn't sleep during the day, it disturbs my natural rhythm."

I smiled. "Why won't you go take a shower? Clean yourself off, wake yourself up. Dinner will be here in twenty minutes."

He nodded and left for the bathroom.

In the meantime I set the table and turned the radio on for some soft background music to accompany our dinner. Our meals arrived a few minutes early, but the shower had already been turned off. Heero would be done soon, his mop of short hair no where near the same time investment to dry as my long braid was, so I started unpacking the food.

"Right on time." I commented as he emerged, a small towel still around his neck to prevent water from dripping out of his hair and onto his clean shirt. "Hungry?"

"Very." Heero answered as he sat himself down and his stomach growled in agreement.

I sighed. "You did eat lunch, right?"

"I wasn't hungry then."

I looked at him skeptically. "You weren't hungry or you weren't here?"
He brought a large forkful of pasta to his lips and filled his mouth with it to avoid having to answer.

"How long did you go to the gym for?" I demanded to know.

He kept chewing silently, but once he had managed to swallow the mouthful he answered, because he knew I was going to force him to anyway. "Four hours."

"Four hours? Heero, you can't exhaust yourself like that! And you shouldn't push your knee like that either. You're going to fuck it up more than that piece of shrapnel did."

"It wasn't four straight hours of running, I did push-ups and weights and crunches." He argued, not at all liking this scrutiny and critique.

"Oh fantastic, so not only did you work hard to screw up your knee, you've been giving your shoulder a hard time too." I bit sarcastically.

Heero glared at me, his fork halfway between his plate and his lips, frozen in space even though his stomach was still growling from hunger. "Can we not fight about this?"

"We're not fighting we're having a discussion."

"Fine. Than I wish not to discuss it." He resumed eating.

I decided not to push it. The whole issue was putting a strain on our relationship as it was, there was no need for me to help it along, make matters even worse by confronting him about things he didn't want to be confronted with. Of course I worried about his well-being, but I realized that no matter how much I worried, it didn't increase my chances of getting through to him and so the effect was only directed inwards, as Heero stubbornly continues to run his knee to hell.

There was an unspoken deviousness to my surrender as well, it's origin being that little shadow of the cynical God of Death in the back of my mind, he didn't say anything, but if he were an actual tiny person I imagined he would have shrugged at Heero's opposing disposition. It was a horrible thing to think, but I thought it regardless: Une wouldn't send an agent with a serious knee injury on such an important mission. His own stubbornness may unknowingly cost him the chance to redeem himself. As his loving boyfriend, I think I was supposed to warn him of this, it would probably be the only logic to turn out effective, but he didn't want to discuss it, so I didn't say anything and suffered the gnawing guilt and doubt in silence.

All of a sudden Heero found an unrelated subject that he apparently did wish to discuss. As he scraped the remaining bit of pasta to the center of his plate with his fork, to gather up one last bite, he asked, with his gaze intently focused on his job. "How was work?"

That was something I didn't want to discuss. For starters I didn't have much interesting to report back to him, secondly, I was hoping to be able to keep him in the dark about the details of my work so any future transfers would go unnoticed until I finally found my place in the agency. Hopefully that place was Grid Five. I certainly was looking forward to the prospect. "It was fine," I lied. "A bit uneventful." Now that was closer to the truth.

"Do you like it?"

A tough question to bypass. "Every new job takes some getting used to."

He looked up at me from underneath frowning eyebrows, he had definitely caught on that I was avoiding direct answers to his questions, something he would have never noticed a few months
back, so I guess that was good. But what wasn't good was the way he looked at me, rightfully
distrusting, aware that I was keeping a truth from him. I expected him to call me on it, after all, I
had been the one to preach honesty and openness in this relationship. But he didn't. He didn't say
anything. He probably understood that he didn't have to say anything, his gaze said it all. He
looked away and brought the last forkful to his mouth.

In silence we cleared the table and then I disappeared into our little office as Heero turned on the
television to catch the eight o'clock news. Une had been quick in her response this time with the
return of a curt email.

Hello Duo,

I understand, I will see to it that you will be transferred. Tomorrow they will be expecting you in
Grid Five.

Sincerely,

Lady Une.

I was pleased with turn of events and found myself cautiously looking forward to the next
workday. Realizing how tired I had gotten from this long day, I announced to Heero that I would be
going to bed early. His only acknowledgement was a brief raise of his hand, a sort of frozen wave,
as he didn't even avert his eyes from the television screen. He had his left leg propped up on the
coffee table and his hands automatically worked to massage his knee and the surrounding muscles
and tendons in his lower thigh and upper calf. I refrained myself from walking up to him and
asking if he was in pain, or offering to bring him a pack of ice, I didn't think my help would be
received appreciatively.

I undressed in the privacy of the bedroom and crawled into bed, sighing as my body felt weightless
as it was supported by the soft, yielding mattress. I didn't expect to fall asleep swiftly, with all the
troubles that had been gathering in my mind, but my body was dead tired and my mind didn't stand
a chance at keeping it awake for the sake of pondering. I drifted away to a dreamless sleep.

The next morning my footsteps were a little lighter as I prepared to head off to work. Hope was a
powerful thing. I had just showered, after getting out of bed ridiculously early to run with Heero,
trailing behind him to observe the movements of his leg. Not just to check up on his physical well-
being, but also to distract my eyes from the way his shirt clung in his body. I had the bottom of my
overalls on, but the top I had tied around my hips, the white tank top I wore underneath was more
forgiving in the heat. I wasn't sure if it was the actual, environmental heat, lingering heat from our
work-out or remaining heat from quickly masturbating in the shower, but I was damn hot.

As Heero emerged from the shower wearing only his sweatpants, his hair still dark and wet from
his shower, I edged towards the latter of the explanations, feeling the heat rise. We hadn't even
kissed since our last toss around the bed, neither of us, so it seemed, found himself in the right
mood, but my body could care less about moods and felt electrified each time I couldn't stop
myself from remembering his kisses, or his body flush against mine.

I sipped my coffee slowly with a distasteful expression. Too much heat surrounded me.

Heero sat down across from me, reaching for one of the bagels we had gotten on our way back
from our morning exercise through the park. I had already finished mine and wrapped an additional
bagel in a plastic bag to substitute the truly inedible things that they served at the cafeteria. Sitting
there I wished I could just reach out and lightly touch his hand, but it didn't feel right. I didn't know
why I specifically longed to touch his hand, but I caught myself staring at them. Even though the
palms of his hands are rough as were mine, he had pretty hands, for lack of better words. That is probably a silly thing for one guy to think about the hands of another guy and I wasn't sure if our relationship justified the odd thought. But he had pretty hands, I noted. Long, slim fingers and clean, pinkish nails. The skin on the back of his hand I knew to be soft. I didn't want those hands to kill anymore, I thought, I only want them to hold me, to touch my face.

"Duo?"

I redirected my gaze to his face, blinking mental images away. "Yeah?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "You were staring."

I smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Are you still hungry, do you want my bagel?" He asked as he innocently assumed I had been staring at the bagel, rather than the delicate hand holding it.

"No, I'm fine. I wasn't really looking, I was just lost in thought."

His eyes betrayed his curiosity but he didn't ask any questions to satisfy it.

"I have to go." I rose to my feet and grabbed the small backpack with only a bagel and a clean shirt, just in case. I started walking away but at the front door I turned back to him and pleaded: "Don't overexert yourself, okay?"

"I won't." He said. Of course Heero had a completely different idea of overexertion and my plea would probably turn out to be useless, but it was worth a shot.

I took the train and traveled back to the agency, slowly moving forward in the crowd as each employee had to pass through one of only few access gates. I hoped my transferal had transgressed successfully, so I could be free of the tedious work I had been doing for the past three days and escape the looks of my resentful co-workers in Grid One. I decided to head towards the administration desk in the garage to verify, but halfway there a familiar voice called out my - extended - name:

"Duo Maxwell Grid One!"

I turned around and saw Landon approach me with a grin, coming from the access gates.

"It's Grid Five now actually, if all has gone well."

"Yeah, so I've heard, you sure made quick work of that transferal. The people upstairs must have been pretty impressed with your suggestion for the Leo's yesterday."

I got the impression that this time no one was notified of my rather close acquaintance with Une, so I innocently played along. "Yeah, must have."

"Well, come on, we already started work on the other ones." He gestured for me to follow him to the back, to the appropriate grid.

Along the way I curiously inquired: "How many Mobile Suits does the agency have?"

"Fifty-two." Landon answered with a proud smile.

The number staggered me. "Really? That many?"
"Yeah, I was surprised myself that they had managed to salvage that many. But in case another MS incident does happen, the Preventers have to have the upper hand, right?"

I nodded. I doubted any one else had managed to salvage that many. Even though during the war there were thousands of them, the integration of all of Earth's nations and the colonies into the Earth Sphere Unified Nation called for a destruction of all Mobile Suits and any means to produce them. Upon request, only a handful of world famous museums were allowed to preserve a single example of a certain type, but those had been rendered inoperable for obvious safety reasons. Obviously it wouldn't be difficult for a nation or private organization to stow away a few and write it off as a misplacement or damage during transportation to the designated destruction sight, where the "explosive dismantling" would be overseen by ESUN officials. But the ESUN board kept a close eye on the process and a number anywhere close to fifty would have set off alarms.

"So I assume ESUN condoned this?" I asked.

"Oh, hell yeah. Can't do anything without them breathing down our necks. Hopefully we'll never have to use them, but just in case, we have to make sure they are in excellent operating condition and that we are prepared for reparations in case something gets damaged during battle. All MS factories were dismantled. What you see is what you get."

We arrived at Grid Five, where four Leo's lay next to each other, their cockpits open and lit up. I couldn't help but wonder aloud: "Where are the others?"

"Downstairs, in the bunker." Landon said, getting a pack of chewing gum out of his pocket. "Want some?"

"No thanks."

He popped one into his mouth and then announced with a grin: "Let's get to work!"

He guided me to one of the Leo's and gave me the simple instruction of doing what I told them to do yesterday and introduced me to my partner, a quiet professional, who would be serving more as my assistant during the process, checking satellite systems at my request.

As the recalibration had worked wonderfully on the first Leo, there were now fifty-one of them waiting to be updated with the same procedure. I felt a heavy feeling in my gut at hearing that, but I ignored it and climbed into the cockpit of my designated project. Luckily I later learned not all of the Mobile Suits were Leo's, so not all fifty-two of them would need recalibrating, but the majority did. It would be an immense, time-consuming and sadly rather dull job.

Being in the cockpit of a Mobile Suit felt strange yet familiar at the same time. I knew where all the controls were, my hands finding them blindly. I pulled the main screen up in front of me and it flashed the well-known error message. I started work on the recalibration, which strongly reminded me of my hacking efforts during the war, long lines of white script scrolling past on a blue background, my eyes moving back and forth swiftly to keep up with all of the information. To change the start-up sequence might take the inexperienced mechanic about five hours, I could complete the task in little over three. There was no further shaving down the investment of time, three hours is just what it took for the system to go through all the different boot-up sequences as it is stripped down to basic setting and then has to be built up again. I was well into the process of recalibrating my second MS of the day when Landon poked his head into the cockpit.

"Hey man, lunch time."

I wasn't really hungry, but my eyes were already sore from staring at the screen for almost five
hours, so the break was welcome. I followed him and the other eight Grid Five mechanics to the front, to the cafeteria. We were the last grid to have lunch, Grid One had already gone back to work. When we passed their stations and I caught them looking at me, I mischievously waved at them.

"Friends of yours?" Landon asked.

"Not exactly."

"Good. Jealous little buggers those Grid One guys are..." He looked at me and jested: "With the exception of you of course."

"Of course." I returned with a smile.

The small group of eight - nine including me - was much closer to each other than the mechanics I had previously been hanging around. Working together, especially working together on such interesting projects as Mobile suits, had created a bond between them and it was like being thrown into a group of good friends. They were very kind to me and showed interest in my background, but I felt a little out of place, being the only one there with dark secrets to keep. We ate and then four of us, including myself, played a brief game of basketball in teams of two. Naturally, my team won, instantly making me Landon's best friend, or so he kept saying, as he teased the other two about their massive loss.

Landon, aside from me, was the youngest of the group, still I estimated him to be almost twenty-five. The oldest of the group was about forty years old but equally immature in spirit as the rest of them. I could feel the age gap, not that I was much younger, but that I was mentally far older than them. I could goof around like the rest of them, but as I did I wondered how they would fare as the only group able to fix Mobile Suits when a new war would inadvertently come.

We went back to work and I managed to reset three Leo's that day, leaving a little later than the rest because I was determined to finish the third, though I assured my partner he was free to leave and it didn't take much convincing for him to do so. When I emerged from the cockpit at the end of another long day, I saw Landon sitting on the leg of the suit.

"You didn't have to wait for me." I said, drawing his attention.

"Don't feel too flattered, man, my train doesn't leave for another ten minutes." He explained.

We headed back to the train station, Landon talked a lot, mostly about the details of his work. I liked him. For some reason I couldn't help but imagine that had it not been for the war, I would have turned out very similar to him and we would have made good friends. But right now, with my history dragging behind me heavily, I couldn't help but feel like an imposter and I realized we could never be friends as long as I kept pretending. Which I planned on doing.

He got onto his train and a few moments later I got onto mine. Thirty of the fifty-two Mobile Suits in possession of the agency were Leo's. To recalibrate all of them would take the entire team several more days. It was yet another wake-up call. And what would we be doing once we were done with all the Leo's? The suits aren't currently being used, so all there was to do was regular maintenance, which I imagined wouldn't entail anything much more exciting or challenging than systematically checking circuit strength and paint touch-ups.

At home I couldn't avoid Heero's questions successfully anymore, so I finally admitted that I had been working as a MS mechanic. He seemed to be intrigued by this, perhaps because he figured my renewed interest in Mobile mechanic would lead to more acceptance and understanding regarding his
The desire to go on that mission, much like we used to go on missions when we were pilots. He wouldn't be entirely wrong, at the very least the work made me realize that we had become addicted to adrenaline and being key players, so I grew more understanding of his craving for it, but my feelings remained mixed, I remained torn.

"Did you know the Preventers had Mobile Suits?" I asked over an otherwise dead quiet dinner.

"Yes, Une informed me. They don't have a lot of pilots though, they are still working on a suitable training program."

"Yeah, I suspected as much."

"But you like working on the Leo's?"

I decided to be honest with him, I might as well tell him because if things remained the way they were, I didn't see myself working as an MS mechanic on a long term basis. It sounded horrible to say, it was horrible to say, but the only way for this job to remotely work out of me, if another war started, than at least my job would be challenging, stimulating and important with the thrill of time pressure. The situation as it was, would quickly be unfulfilling. "I have to be honest, it's kind of dull. We have to recalibrate all of the Leo's and after that just regular check-ups."

Heero Hm'd, familiar with the boot-up problems that the Leo's suffered. "So you don't think you'll continue to work there?"

I could have lied, could have kept up the pretences, but I realized Heero wasn't just this person that I had to protect from himself, he was my boyfriend and I should be able to honestly talk about my feelings with him, for my own sake. I needed someone to talk to and that someone should be Heero. "I don't know. I'm starting to worry that there is nothing I can do for the agency that is really going to suit me. I mean, I could try another transfer to a different grid, maybe work on the tanks, or the trucks, at least those get used and are really in need of repair. But I'm always going to be just a mechanic... Is it totally stupid that I don't like that idea?"

"No. I- I know what you mean."

I sighed. "Look, I know what your thinking. The easy solution would be for us to become agents, go on foreign missions. Save the world one tiny step at a time... But there is one thing I've learned about myself since the war, that that is only a part of me. Yes, a part of me wants to matter, wants to save lives, wants to change lives. That part is very aware that I could do some greater good. But that is not the only part of me. There is also this part that wants the stuff that other people think is so straightforward." I looked at him intently, trying to gauge his reaction. "I want a house, a big house with a big garden. Maybe... maybe have some pets... I want to travel to all these places that I've always wanted to see and stay in hotels not safe houses. And most importantly, I want you. I want you to be with me, but be happy and free. I want to take you out to dinners and concerts... Surprise you with an impromptu trip to some romantic foreign capital for our anniversary..." I said dreamily, leaving it to be interpreted what kind of anniversary I was referring to.

Heero was obviously overwhelmed by my admission, he absentmindedly bit his lip as he looked away pensively.

I reached out and grabbed his hands, feeling their warmth and softness, rejoicing. I waited for him to look at me before I continued seriously: "We can't have those things when we are constantly away on missions. We'd be gone for days, maybe even weeks, or longer than that if we are undercover and you can't have those things when you are never home. I mean, sure, we'd try, like you tried - in secrecy - before... but we both know what that would lead to. We are two former
Gundam Pilots, we would take the hardest, most dangerous missions because we feel a responsibility, because we were trained for those missions. I... I don't want my whole life to evolve around that one part of me. That small part is the only part that will ever be satisfied with just adrenaline. The other part needs the house, the traveling, the concerts... the anniversaries... You understand what I mean? Where I'm coming from?"

Heero slowly nodded.

"Well, that is my dilemma. For which there is no easy fix..." I stroked my thumb back and forth on the back of his hand, in hopes of comforting him. It was a lot of information and feelings for him to take in all of a sudden. I could discern a certain detachment on his features, the only way he knew how to deal with all of this. "I've been trying to hide it from you, because I didn't want to confuse you. But I had to tell you, you are my boyfriend, I'm supposed to tell you these things. Because it helps."

He looked up at me and with slightly hoarse voice he wondered: "It does?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yeah, even if all you can do is listen, it helps."

He looked extremely uncomfortable, shifting in his seat. His hands became sweaty and he started a persistent tugging, trying to free them out of my grip.

"What's wrong?" I asked concerned.

"I'm not sure about the parts of me." He admitted. "That part you described, the one that can't live on adrenaline alone... I don't know if I have it. I think I have it, but I can't be sure. Every part of me other than the adrenaline part just... hurts... and makes me scared."

"Scared?"

He looked away, frustrated with himself. "I can't explain it. It's just what I feel."

"Okay. Okay." I was understanding of his pain. He had been through so much, it seemed only logical that he had shut out every part of himself that wasn't critical for survival. He had shut it out for so long that everything else about him had been tainted by the hurt and suffering he underwent as a young child and teenager. Having to open up to all of that again, couldn't be an easy task. I wished there was something I could do or say, to comfort him and to assure him that one day the pain will go away and he'll be safe to embrace those others parts of him. But there were no words or deeds. In this he was on his own. I only hoped that he wouldn't give up.

After dinner we parted, we both needed to be alone with our thoughts. Dinner had been quite emotional, even though Heero didn't show much, didn't open himself up much.

With nothing else to do to pretend I wasn't mulling, I disappeared into the little laundry room and tried to occupy myself there with my chore. Unfortunately the mindless process could not keep my thoughts from straying. I was struck with a sense of mental exhaustion. I was exhausted trying to get Heero to open up to those other parts of himself, while Heero only seemed to work to eradicate them, burying them under a sense of duty. I didn't know what he was thinking, how on earth he could have figured that that would be the best way to deal with things. Maybe he believed that once everything else would be locked away, the part of him he could stand, the distant soldier part, would evolve and grow to want the same things I wanted. But I knew better than that, he was threatening to give into something that was longing to consume him. It wouldn't let him rest, it would send him on mission after mission, in an endless search for a sense of belonging and righteousness, that would justify the heartache of his training. But there would never be anything in
the battlefield that would bring him peace. It is not in the nature of a battlefield to provide peace and answers. Battlefield were strewn only with turmoil and more questions.

I could understand his desire to want to go after the Ethiopian president, as Une said, it might alleviate some guilt. Unlike her though, I wasn't so sure if he'll be able to stop at that. In Heero's eyes he had a lifetime of mistakes to rectify.

I leaned back against the wall, rubbing my fingers into my tired eyes. I felt like crying. Never before did I feel so fucked up as I did at that moment. I seethed with hatred, hatred for J. A deep and dark hatred because he stripped and destroyed Heero and consequently he had destroyed me. Heero was the only thing in the world that could truly make me happy, but J had made him so he was also the only thing in the world that could make me feel like this; lost.

I quietly retreated to the bedroom. Heero joined me there an hour later, but I pretended to be asleep, wishing I was, because I was so, so tired.

The short night didn't offer me much rest. I tossed and turned in bed till I finally fell asleep. But an hour before the alarm would go off I suddenly woke up in a cold sweat. I tried to remember the nightmare, but I couldn't, I lost it the moment I woke up and sat up in bed. Of course it was most likely that it involved Heero.

We ran again. Against all odds Heero's knee seemed to be improving under the physical strain he put on it. His gait had evened out, there was no detectable limp in his step. Only when he climbed up the stairs afterward did I notice the stiffness in the joint. If he was in any pain I couldn't tell, he didn't wince anymore when he put his weight on it, but he might have just gotten better at hiding it. There was no way of knowing. If I would ask, he would just claim to be fine, as he always does.

Before I went to work, I suggested that he should come and visit me in the garage, after his session with Nettle that day. I didn't particularly want him to see me work there, but I just needed something, some form of conversation to distract from the awkwardness that had settled between us after last night's shared and unshared feelings.

He said he'd think about it.

I assumed that meant no.

Another train ride, another slow shuffle through the access gates, another MS waiting for me to be recalibrated.

"Good morning." Landon greeted me.

"Good morning." I returned halfheartedly.

"Wow, I don't know if we know each other long enough for me to be allowed to say this, but... you look like crap." Landon candidly observed.

"Didn't get much sleep last night."

Landon winked. "Gotcha, trouble with the misses."

I didn't know how he came to that conclusion, but he wasn't far off. "Actually," I started, before he walked away, "there is no misses." I paused momentarily with hesitation and then finished: "There is a mister."

Landon raised his eyebrows, but surprised me with a smile. "Cool. Good luck today, Grid One."
He walked off to his own MS with a wave.

"Cool." I repeatedly oddly once he was out of hearing distance. "Cool?" I shrugged it off. After that twisted high school I had grown way too used to bigotry and homophobia. I climbed into the cockpit and started my day of repetitive work.

During lunch break I had expected Landon to be awkward, or at least display inappropriate curiosity about my admitted lifestyle, but he didn't comment on the fact once and seemed no different from yesterday, being quick to invite me on his team for a game of basketball. I liked his lack of prejudice and discomfort, still seeing me as the guy he had gotten to know yesterday: good mechanic, good basketball player. I discovered a maturity in him that I didn't give him credit for yesterday.

We walked back to our grid once the lunch break was over. As we neared the Mobile Suits, I could see a slim figure standing by them, looking at them with expected scrutiny. I felt a wave of relief as I recognized Heero. I was glad he came, I felt like it was an important step in getting over the awkwardness. Moreover, I hadn't expected him to come, it was so unlike him to just visit. It sparked hope.

"Heero." I said with a big smile as I walked up to him. Landon casually walked past us to his MS but he twirled around behind Heero's back and showed me a stupid grin and a thumbs up.

"You asked me to come." He explained at my surprised tone, he looked over his shoulder with a critical frown, watching Landon go. Obviously he had caught on that Landon did something behind his back, but he didn't voice any questions.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm glad you did." I patted the steel panel on the side of the Leo's leg. "So, do you like my office." I gestured around us.

"It's spacious." Heero commented dryly. "But it reeks."

I smiled as I got the idea that he was making an attempt at a lighthearted joke. "Yeah, that mixture of gasoline and kerosene is quite pungent."

Heero ignored me and pointed at the raised platform the MS rested on. "Why is it on wheels?"

I chuckled. "Oh, we're not allowed to operate them, so once we're done with them and electronic system rolls them onto the platform elevator."

He raised an eyebrow. "You are not allowed to pilot a Leo?"

I shrugged. It was a little weird, but I wasn't insulted and I didn't exactly crave to pilot a Leo, or a Taurus for that matter, they were nothing compared to Death Scythe, it would just be bitter sweet. "Do you want to hop into the cockpit?"

He looked up at the open hatch briefly and then said: "Sure."

I climbed up onto the stomach of the machine and Heero followed me. I sat on the outer edge of the cockpit, my feet dangling in and Heero climbed inside, seating himself. He studied the screens and switches. "How does it feel?" I ask, leaning over to look down at him.

"Smaller." He answered decisively.

"Miss it?" I continued more seriously.
"Piloting a Leo? No." He said with a soft snort.

I chuckled. "Yeah, it's not the same..."

"I hated these things." Heero commented. "More so when I was in one, than fighting against one. The controls are stiff and delayed. The limbs are terribly inflexible. Every movement is sluggish. You could fit the Tallgeese in it's blind spot. And it took forever to get some of them started."

I nodded. "We're working on that last point."

With a sigh he climbed out of the cockpit and sat on the hull across from me.

"How did it go with Nettle?"

"Fine."

"Did you tell her about what we talked about last night?"

"I really don't feel like talking anymore right now." He got up and jumped off the Leo.

I scrambled over to the edge to look at him.

"I'll see you at home." He said and he walked.

"Bye!" I called after him, he didn't turn back or even look over his shoulder. With a groan I turned over I lay down on my back, looking up at the large lights suspended from the ceiling. I was startled when suddenly someone climbed up onto the Leo right next to me. I sat up and frowned at Landon's grin.

"So that was the mister?" He asked.

"The one and only."

He nodded appreciatively. "Yeah, if I was gay I'd tap that ass too."

"Shut up!" I warned him, but my face broke into a stupid smirk regardless. I looked back but Heero was already out of sight. "You just get back to work."

"Right back at ya." He walked over to the feet of my Leo, from where he could climb onto the head of his own and make his back to the cockpit.

As I continued work on the Leo's, I thought a lot about the job in itself and the opportunities and the limitations that it represented. I felt like such an indecisive asshole, but I really didn't want to continue to do this. I tried to imagine what it would be like to do this everyday, for the rest of my life. It honestly scared me. Even Landon himself had confided in me that the job was actually mostly uneventful and that he had been grateful for the malfunction in the Leo's boot-up procedure, as it gave them a more significant task to occupy their time with. Normally, the regular day consisted of keeping the delicate systems dust free, systematically testing the controls of all the Mobile Suits in an endless loop, and replacing rusty panels as the bunker that stored them had suffered a leak a few months prior.

I realized that my transfer had made no actual change at all. The size of everything may have been upgraded in comparison to what I did previously, in Grid One, but was still repetitive, unchallenging work and after the second day it became difficult to discern between the two jobs, Grid One versus Grid Five. The only substantial difference being the friendliness of it's employees,
but I didn't join the Preventers to make friends.

After work, instead of going home directly and send Une another unenthusiastic email, I opted for the personal approach. I said goodbye to Landon and circled around the building to the main entry. The fresh air in the lobby was a relief and contrast to the smothering heat outside. The full brunt of the summer was nearing and each day the whole atmosphere just seemed to become thicker and hotter and more humid.

"Hello, how can I help you?" The receptionist asked me as I approached her desk. She eyed me up and down in dismay and I realized the process might have been aided if I had changed out of my overall, not that it was dirty, in most ways my work of the day could be compared to sitting at a desk typing away at a computer.

"Yeah, I was wondering if I could see Lady Une for a moment."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I'm sure she'll meet me."

"What is your name?"

"Duo Maxwell."

With a sigh she rolled her desk chair over to the telephone and pressed one of the speed dials. She offered me a forced smile, tapping her long fingernails on the desk as she waited for her call to be answered. "Hi, Joseph? Is miss Une still at the office?" There was a pause. "She just got out of a meeting? Do you know if she has some time available?"

I rolled my eyes, why was she beating around the bush, just tell the damn assistant who was here.

"Yes, I have a Don Maxwell here for her."

"Duo." I corrected, "Du-o."

"Right, I'm sorry," She said unapologetically, "a Du-o Maxwell... Oh? Okay. Yes, thank you." She hung up the phone and turned to me with dead eyes. "Hand me your employee access card."

I obediently produced the card from the depths of my pocket and reached over the high reception desk to give it to her.

Without saying anything, not even looking at me, she rolled her chair over to the telephone and pressed one of the speed dials. She offered me a forced smile, tapping her long fingernails on the desk as she waited for her call to be answered. "Miss Une is expecting you. I've upgraded your card for single access to the control floor, Miss Une's assistant will be waiting for you at the elevators. Just swipe your card in front of the blue light in the elevator and it will take you to the desired floor automatically."

"Thanks." I didn't bother informing her that I was well aware of the procedure. I stepped into one of several elevators and swiped my card.

Joseph was indeed waiting for me, impatient as ever, even very unsubtly looking at his watch as I emerged from the elevator. He stormed in the direction of the command center and I followed him.

I was feeling a little bit nervous. I felt like I had disappointed her. She had been so kind and accommodating and I kept changing my mind. I wasn't being very grateful, but I saw no point in
doing a job just to show someone my gratitude.

"Hey there. Working late?" I said as I found her behind her desk, delved into another tall stack of folders once Joseph had wordlessly deposited me at her door.

"Duo." She greeted with a smile and looked down at her watch. "It's actually still early for me. Come in."

"I'm sorry to bother you again."

"Not at all, not at all. Don't worry about it. How do you like your re-assignment?" Her eyes beamed but as she recognized the discontentment on my features she went: "Oh..."

"I'm sorry." I breathed and dropped down in one of the chairs opposite of her. "I just can't seem to find my place." The frustration was obvious in both my face and my voice.

"Duo, I don't mean to discourage you, but I must be honest, working as an MS mechanic seems to be the best thing I can offer you if you still refuse to become an agent."

"I was worried you would say that. I've been fearing the same thing myself."

"I'm sorry." She said genuinely. She looked away in thought briefly. "I can make some calls, see if any of the supervisors in other departments have an idea but... nothing comes to mind."

"I know. I'm really sorry about this. I wish I had a clearer idea myself but it's all so confusing and so much. Sometimes I feel like I've been thinking about Heero so much, my brain just doesn't have any energy left to sustain any different way of thinking. I'm stuck." I sat back and threw my arms in the air, frustrated.

"I know what you mean..." She trailed off, looking pointedly at the many folders. "The day crew has already left for the weekend, but I'll arrange a meeting Monday morning with some of the department heads, see if we can figure something out for you and maybe Heero too. I have to be honest, I may run this place on behalf of the director, but I don't know of every possible function in the agency." She offered me a smile that was meant to be encouraging, but I just felt bad for making her go through all that trouble.

"I really don't want to be a bother. You're busy as it is."

"It won't cost me much time." She assured me. "I'll just get them together, throw the idea on the table and have them figure it out. Their thoughts are much less dispersed and preoccupied than mine, they'll be able to give the issue better focus. I'll make sure they know of all of your talents, so you won't be wasted."

I didn't know what to say, I was moved by her generosity. "Thank you... Thank you so much."

"No problem. So I guess I should tell the coordinator that you won't be coming back Monday?"

"I could, but I'd rather not, I don't want to get too involved knowing that however things turn out, I won't be staying long." It did cross my mind to stop by briefly to personally inform Landon of my decision. We didn't know each other well, nor did we know each other long, but it just seemed appropriate.

"I understand. I'll send him a notification."

I rose and we shook hands as we always politely did. "Again, thank you so much... You are
amazing."

Une chuckled. "Could you round up some cute, single guys and tell them that?"

I smiled kindly. "I'm pretty sure a lot of people already know."

She seemed relieved and flattered. "Thank you. Have a nice weekend. I'll call you Monday evening."

"Thanks. Don't work too much."

I left her office and found my way back downstairs to the train station and eventually, home. All in a numbed, disinterested haze, watching the landscape pass me by.

"How was work?" Heero inquired upon my entry. He was sitting at the dining room table thoughtfully reading through the menu of our favorite Chinese take-out restaurant. He looked freshly showered, he had probably returned from the gym only shortly before I got home.

I put my bag down by the door and pulled my arms out of the sleeves of the overall, tying them around my waist again. Matter-of-factly, I answered: "I quit."

Heero looked up, unable to hide his perplexity. "You quit?" He verified.

"Yeah." I sat down across from him and took the menu out of his powerless hands, studying it. My casual approach seemed to confuse Heero. "Why?" He asked.

I sighed and put the menu away. "It wasn't working out. Even that was just too... automatic. It's hard to explain. But I don't want my work to be something that I can do on automatic pilot, you know?"

"What are you going to do now?" He flatly asked.

"I'm not becoming an agent if that's what your thinking." I looked up at him sharply, but it seemed he hadn't been thinking anything, he just looked confused and a little concerned. "Une is going to talk to some department heads Monday, see if they can find a place for me." I said it with a hopeful tone to my voice, but I didn't have much hope at all.

"She is being very helpful." Heero observed.

"Yeah, well, she's a friend." I shrugged. "And she probably still wants me to join as an agent."

"You think she's just humoring you?"

I shook my head. "But I think she would like me to change my mind, become an agent after all."

Heero didn't respond, maybe to avoid getting into the same issue as yesterday.

"Let's just order." I said and I stood up to get the phone, effectively bringing the conversation to a definitive end.

The dark of the night settled upon us again, accompanied by it's every lasting quiet. The apartment was so silent, it seemed like my own thoughts were being screamed in my ear. Heero was in front of the television, but he had turned the volume way down, aware of how much I disliked the constant news reels. It was considerate of him, but not exactly what I wanted. As he grew stronger physically and mentally even more determined to fix his mistake, I prepared myself for the
inevitable; at least one upcoming mission. But I didn't want to admit to Heero that I was caving to his perseverance, so I secretly did some research on the matter behind my computer. A quick search yielded convincing results. It was clear action needed to be taken and yet a part of me - the part that wants the house and the other mundane fruits of life - resented him for making me do this. Even though he wasn't making me do anything, it had been my own decision to offer to come with him, but he left me no other choice.

I jumped up when Heero was suddenly standing in the doorway to our office, calling out my name. The living room beyond him was pitch black. The screen of my laptop was turned away from him but still I couldn't fight my hand reaching up and tilting the screen down to the keyboard a little. Not wanting to make myself look anymore suspicious, I casually tried: "Yeah, buddy?" I cringed at the awfully misplaced term.

"I'm going to bed."

"Oh, okay. Go right ahead, this won't take long." I assured him, knowing that however stealthy I was, I would wake him when I would go into the bedroom.

He nodded and disappeared from sight.

I sat at my desk with my shoulders slumped for a little while, then I closed the screen of the laptop all the way and the light on the side changed from blue to red as it switched to stand-by. I shut off all the lights in the office and then headed towards the bedroom. The door was ajar and warm orange light poured out. Apparently Heero hadn't gone to sleep yet. I swung the door open and was taken aback by the sight that was revealed to me. Heero had again chosen to rest, face down, on my bed rather than his and had switched on the small light on my headboard. A soft glow settled on his skin, he was entirely undressed, not even wearing underwear. He turned his head, the pillowcase rustling with the movement, to look back at me. My eyes traveled up his long legs, over the curve of his ass and across his defined back to his brilliant blue eyes staring at me.

"Heero..." I whispered. It was obvious what was being offered to me - he had even already put the lube and a condom on the mattress next to him-, I just didn't understand why he was offering. Our relationship had been lacking the carefully constructed closeness for the past few days and I found this to be an odd and abrupt way to recapture it, though I couldn't deny that at the sight of him my fingers instantly ached to caress his skin.

He raised himself up on his elbows, looking at me over his shoulder. He didn't offer any explanation more elaborate than: "I want you to make love to me again."

Any attempted effort to resist would be hopeless, I already felt my feet taking me over to the foot of the bed. I toed off my shoes and crawled over him, straddling his thighs. After the shower I had taken earlier that evening, I had changed into sweatpants and a T-shirt and immediately decided to rid myself of the T-shirt when my body quickly grew hot. More in awe of him than sexually aroused, I massaged him first. Starting at his shoulders and then moving down to his sides.

Heero rested his head back on the pillow with a sigh.

My hands moves lower, firmly dragging down his sides, my touch grew more demanding in a sensual way as I began to experience a shift in demeanor myself. I leaned forward, my spine curving, and I placed a light, almost reverent kiss on the small of his back. Just touching his skin and hearing him breathe was enough to make me want more of him; to make me want all of him. I moved my hands further down and lightly let my fingers explore his buttocks. I smiled when the feather light touched drew shivers out of him. "I've missed touching you." I whispered against his skin, followed by a breathy chuckle. I hoped that he understood that I wasn't only referring to the
sexual. I dragged my tongue all the way up his spine before moving over to nibble gently on his earlobe and then spent a long time kissing his neck as my fingers lightly teased him below. "Are you sure?" I asked, even as I sincerely hoped he would not back out as my whole body felt alight with flames.

"Yes." He moaned, burying his face in the pillow.

I suddenly realized why he had chosen for this position. Not only did it settle the top versus bottom debate, most importantly, in this position he would easily be able to hide his face. But at that juncture I couldn't let that deter me, I wouldn't let it. I pushed all thoughts away that might lead to a difficult conversation. I sat up, on my knees, between his slightly spread legs and firmly took hold of his hips, pulling him up on all fours. I pushed down my pants just far enough and heavily leaned into him when I reached over for the lube and condom.

As I prepared both of us, I was struck with an unwelcome feeling, that we weren't about to make love, but that we were merely going to have sex. We both seemed to be fighting against every emotion and every thought which are normally necessary to transcend the mere sexual aspect. It felt like a strange physical act after the awkwardness and the confusing emotions of the past few days that seemed to occupy us both. I pushed the thought away, I wasn't about to engage into a serious discussion because of a feeling that may turn out completely unjust. Maybe in our relationship we just had to think less, or me at least. I fussed over every little detail and I could feel that it wasn't doing me any favors, each night when I tossed and turned in bed.

I took hold of his hips again and released a throaty moan as I pushed into him. I could see Heero gripping his long fingers around the sheets and he let out a shaky breath. I leaned over and kissed his ear and one of my hands disappeared between his thighs to distract him from the initial pain. "Are you okay?"

A soft, trembling moan was Heero's only response but I took it as an affirmative answer.

We quickly lost ourselves to a steadily building rhythm. Heero gripped the sheets tighter and started to moan with each thrust as I seemed to have found an angle that was particularly satisfactory to him. He had yelped when I discovered it. I was enthralled by the sight of myself disappearing into him and was somewhat taken aback by the double meaning of that. More thoughts were purposefully neglected.

My hand ran up his strong back, his skin was slick and aglow with a smooth sheen of sweat, my fingers played with the frayed hairs at the nape of his neck. It bothered me that I could not see his face, again. Heero was - stubbornly, I imagine - looking down at the pillow, or maybe at his fists nearly ripping the sheets. Even in the throws of passion it worried me that he was so adamant at keeping his face hidden and decided, that rather than being understanding once more, to push him out of his comfort zone.

My hand slipped from his neck to his shoulder, grabbing it firmly, my fingers digging into the flesh. The first tug was more encouraging than physically pulling him up, I was hoping he would take the hint and sit up on his own accord, but either he didn't notice or he chose to ignore it. I adjusted my grip, strengthening it and pulled him up, my hand shifting to wrap my arm over his shoulder and across his chest as I pulled him against my chest. I kissed his other, exposed shoulder and trailed kisses up to his ear, which I teased with my tongue, effortfully slowing the movements of my hips.

Heero turned his head to the other side, avoiding me. One of his hands grabbed my wrist over his chest and the other covered my splayed hand high up on his thigh, like he was trying to get a hold of me. Maybe he was afraid that I would stop if I didn't get from him what I wanted; something he
was reluctant to give.

"Turn your head." I whispered into his ear, my lips brushing the outer shell. "Look at me."

"Nn no." He replied with almost a plead and twisted his head even further away.

I stopped moving all together, just holding him tightly against me. I wasn't any longer preoccupied with my own satisfaction and lust, I was more curious and also worried. There it was again, worry. Always worried. Through my arm across his chest, I could feel the wild beating of his heart and every sharp intake of breath. "Please look at me." I repeated. "I want to see your face."

"No." He meekly said in return again. "No. It's embarrassing."

It was one of the possibilities I had expected and I greatly preferred it to the other: that it wasn't so much a problem of me looking at him, but rather of him looking at me. I was relieved that at least one of my major worries - my boyfriend doesn't want to look at me when we make love - didn't become true. "Don't be embarrassed. It's hot. I want to see your beautiful face; your expressions; your reactions."

Heero remained completely still, his head hanging to the other side.

Quite ready for us to continue and find our release, I moved the hand that was on his chest. With lingering fingers Heero eventually let go of the wrist and allowed me to move it up to his face and take gentle hold of his chin. With careful, gentle pressure to which there was little resistance, I urged him to face me. I leaned my head over his shoulder and finally Heero looked back at me, his big blue eyes unsure. My hand buried itself in the pandemonium of Heero's dark hair. I kissed his mouth, shallow explorations with my tongue, focusing mostly on his soft, open lips. He responded timidly, but favorably, his tongue darting out to meet mine. Eventually, the kiss naturally deepened and we fervently kissed till our lungs burned.

"Hmmm. Ready?" I wrapped my other arm around his waist and both of Heero's hands moved to take hold of it.

He barely nodded.

I started slowly, focusing my eyes on his face as I made long, deep, leisure thrusts. Aside from a concentrated frown, Heero's face was impassive, he was fighting every expression of pleasure, still too embarrassed, but I was cockily confidant that he would give in eventually. And I was right. As I picked up the pace, Heero opened his mouth to emit short pants and his eyebrows started to relax. His deep blue eyes peered at me from underneath lowered lids. When I moved my hand out of his hair, assured that he wouldn't turn his head away, and lightly touched the palm to the tip of his erection, his eyes slid closed and he let out the softest moan.

"Keep looking at me." I beckoned and a jolt of electricity went through me when his passion clouded eyes settled on me again, peering from underneath thick, black eyelashes.

When I managed to find the right angle where each inward thrust touched his prostate, the stimulation of which he seemed to thoroughly enjoy, Heero couldn't be bound by his inhibitions any longer. The building pressure that we both felt, bringing us closer and closer to orgasm, had his features succumbing to the pleasure as his lips spilt passionate moans.

He looked beautiful. Sensual.

This time it would be my bed to be soiled as with a couple of accompanying strokes of his arousal Heero came on my sheets. I followed him into the state of bliss shortly after.
Exhausted and no doubt overwhelmed, Heero leaned back on all fours when I let go of him. He panted heavily, trying to catch his breath. He waited for me to pull out of him, hissing as I did.

I tied the end of the condom but my legs weren't steady enough to carry me to the bathroom to dispose of it in the nearest trash bin, so I youthfully thought "To hell with it" and dropped it onto my T-shirt that was on the ground. It was better to stain a cheap T-shirt that could either be washed or discarded, than the carpet. I rolled onto Heero's bed and pulled him along with me. My sweatpants were still low around my thighs but I simply didn't have the energy to go through the process of taking them off.

"Are you okay?" I asked. It had only been his second time, so maybe I should have paused to stretch him with my fingers first, as I did the first time.

"Hnn." He groaned sleepily, making me chuckle.

I held him close to my chest and grinned when I noticed the glistening stains on my sheets in the orange light of the small lamp. I looked down at his face, his eyes were closed, his features were relaxed, he looked peaceful. And I wondered, though maybe I shouldn't have wondered aloud: "Heero, do you only like to have sex with me because it makes you forget temporarily?"

His eyes opened, they were unreadable, but his face no longer looked peaceful.

"Never mind." I quickly said. I shouldn't have asked, I shouldn't have asked a question to which a possible - likely - answer was one that made my heart ache as it did now. "Never mind. Forget it." I wrapped my arms around him even tighter. Maybe it was my own fault, maybe I had let the sex happen too quickly between us. If he wasn't ready for all the emotional and physical aspects of love making that I want him to enjoy, than it seemed only natural he would focus on the one pay-off of it that he understood and desired. I shook my head, burying my face in his soft hair, I shouldn't think about it, I should just forget it. I shouldn't have asked.

"Duo, I love you." He firmly said, his breath spreading across my bare chest, realizing his error.

"I know." And I did, I really did. I knew it didn't mean that he loved me less, but it was still painful. There was only love and everything else was so twisted and fucked up that love and heartache constantly fought in my chest. But there was another truth, one that settled the argument even though heartache was winning: "I love you too. So much."

Needless to say, the atmosphere spanning the length of the weekend was loaded. Heero was aware that his inability to immediately dismiss my answer as ridiculous and it was clear that he struggled with it and felt extremely guilty. Whereas I was just trying to forget that it ever happened. An effort that was of course in vain. I knew I wasn't expecting too much of this relationship, but I expected things too soon. There were a lot of things Heero wasn't ready for, it showed on his face each time he avoided an emotional issue, I could see him withdrawing into himself, pulling up shields and barriers. I don't think he purposefully shut me out, he was just trained so well to protect himself from pain that the process was instinctual. Each time I inched closer inside him I set off a landmine that hurt us both and all he could do to spare himself of that pain in the future, was to erect tall walls. Leaving me only shallowly inside. He was trying, but it took him considerably more effort to take down a wall brick by brick than to build one.

But I had faith in him, there was no other option for me, I had to have faith in him or else I would be lost. Over the course of the last few months, Heero had been making such great progress, I shouldn't let these last few set-backs deter me. I hoped they didn't deter him. I hoped he was still as devoted as I was to take down those walls, brick by heavy brick and even though it would be hard and it would be painful, at least we would get closer and closer still. He needed to open up to his
emotions, even the hurtful ones, because beyond them was the possibility of happiness, and a true
closeness of body and spirit that I yearned for us to share.

When he went away for his session with Nettle come Monday I cleaned the apartment in his
absence, dusting off all the empty bookshelves and other surfaces. I longed for pictures of happy
memories and being confronted with the emptiness of our home - maybe just a house - was hurtful
but I couldn't expect Heero to burst through barriers and simultaneously neglect to do so myself.
Besides, I desperately needed means to occupy myself. Every so often my gaze would dart to the
phone on the wall by the front door. I knew Une wouldn't call till later that day, till evening, but
each time my ears tricked me into hearing the familiar ring, whenever I turned on the vacuum
cleaner or put a plate loudly in it's place in the cupboard.

My life needed more purpose than fussing over Heero could bring me and I knew me having
something else to focus on would thankfully ease the pressure currently put on both of us. I had no
idea what to expect of this "new purpose", I didn't think I should expect too much of it at all, I just
knew that it was necessary. I was losing myself and I can't help Heero find himself if I don't even
have a clue where the true me has gone. Over the course of a few short, though mostly blessed
months, I've gone from a warrior to a worrier. It was time to find a comfortable middle ground.

I was working in the kitchen, doing the dishes from last night's dinner, when the front door opened.
I walked over to greet him in normal fashion. "Hi." I rubbed a cup dry in the dishtowel in my
hands.

"Hi." He responded. His face looked hesitant and apologetic and his eyes quickly moved to the
floor to avoid mine.

His behavior immediately alerted me. I remained in the kitchen, not wanting to impose myself on
him. With soft sounds and slow movements I put the cup away, allowing him some time. I closed
the cupboard and turned to see him have neared the coffee table. He had something in his hand,
something small, his fist clenched around it. "What's wrong? Did it go okay with Nettle?" I asked,
trying to keep my tone neutral though my curiosity had piqued.

He didn't say anything. His hand moved. Whatever he was holding, it rattled as it was turned. He
put his hand down on the surface of the dinner table, spread his fingers and retreated his hand. He
finally looked up at me, but this time I didn't look at him.

My eyes were drawn to the object he had deposited on the table. It was a small, white box, only
about four inches tall. I couldn't possibly read any of the small lettering, but it was the kind of box
you just recognize. It was the kind of box the pharmacist packaged their pill bottles with. "What's
this?" I asked, resorting to my play-dumb strategy.

"Nettle gave it to me." His eyes were fixed on me now, intently, but my face was too dumbstruck
blank to reveal any information.

I walked up to the table and draped the dish towel over the back of one of the chairs. I leaned over,
looking at him briefly, and reached for the small box. Its contents rattled again. I brought it close
to my face. A sticker was wrapped around one of the corners and read Heero's name. On one of the
other sides, vertically printed on the box itself, was the pharmaceutical name, one I could read but
would probably have some difficulty pronouncing. PROTRIPTYLINE++. And underneath: A New
Generation Tricyclic Anti-Depressant. With wide eyes I looked up at Heero. "It's an anti-
depressant." I said stunned, as if he didn't know that already.

Heero looked uncomfortable, his eyes shifted between my face and the box in my hand.
I frowned, beginning to feel the fraying edges of anger. "She thinks you need an anti-depressant?" I said "anti-depressant" as if it was the most disgusting, offensive thing in the world. And to me it was. How dare she prescribe this to Heero? I already blamed her for failing the challenge of talking to Heero and instead resorting to the easy "solution". My anger only increased when I remembered warning Une not to let that shrink pull stunts like this. We stood amidst the headstones of bravely passed soldiers and agents and I told her not to let Nettle give Heero signs like this, not to make him question himself like this. I felt like the trust I had put in her that day was violated, but my anger only lingered with Une briefly, before returning to Nettle. That damn woman. I plucked the lid of the box open and turned it upside down. With a few shakes the orange bottle with white pills dropped down onto the table and a shake later a substantial information brochure followed.

I was completely blown away by this turn of events. Glaring at the offensive bottle on the table was all I could do to stop myself from flushing each and every pill down the toilet and ripping that brochure with tiny, tiny lettering to pieces. How could Nettle possibly think that this is the solution to Heero's problem? He has to feel more, he has to open himself up to feelings! Now she is prescribing him drugs to numb and bury what little feelings he has allowed to surface? I couldn't fathom how this could be a good idea. It seemed simple enough, Heero is hurting, his emotions hurt him and like the doctor that she is, she gives medication for the hurt. However, this is like treating a bullet wound with a shot of morphine and a band-aid! As soon as the morphine wears off, it starts hurting again and then you would have to give more morphine, more morphine, ever more morphine, to numb everything, maybe even give the patient a nice feeling. Meanwhile, beneath the surface, the bullet is still slowly killing him. To cure him, actually cure him, you have to extend the wound, open it up, however painful that is, extract the bullet and expose everything that has been damaged, so you can fix it one by one.

Heero's damage, though not physical, is much like this. Those painful memories won't go away, the drugs will only hide them, hide them so well he'll never want to stop taking those pills, he'll never want to feel them again. But in order to deal with them and to get rid of them, he has to feel them, he has to confront them and find his peace with them. I thought this is what we had been working towards all this time, one step at a time, one wall at a time. The look in Heero's eyes was like a slap in my face. I could tell, I could tell from just briefly looking at him that he didn't feel as strongly about the drugs in a negative way as I did.

His meek comment confirmed my sickening suspicion. "Maybe they can help. She said they could help."

"Yeah, well, of course she says that! Makes her job a hell of a lot easier, doesn't it?" I spat. "How can you believe this bullshit? You can't honestly think that popping a pill will make all your troubles go away!" I was getting angry at him, I couldn't help it. Nettle wasn't hear to scream at but I needed an outlet and the more angry I got with him, the more I felt he deserved it. He should have never taken that damn bottle with him, into our home. He should have given Nettle the same mouthful as I surely would have given her and he should have walked away.

"But what if they can help?" He argued. It seemed he was getting impatient with me as I did with him.

"How can this possibly help? You want to bury yourself? You want to numb yourself? I understand the benefits of these drugs to other people, to people with depression. But you are not depressed, you are having a hard time and you are looking for the easy way out."

"What if I am depressed?" He challenged.

"In your case I'd say that's a good thing, at least that means you are capable of feeling something
real, something deep." I lashed out, glaring at the hurt expression on his face, trying to be immune to it. "You can't even cry. You have to shoot your own partner in the head and you can't even cry, not when you do it, not when you talk about it, not when you visit his grave... You tell me about those puppies, as part of your training, I was crying, but you were holding everything back, like you always do! You don't need this this," I pointed angrily at the bottle, "the Soldier is doing a fine job suppressing everything on his own and I don't think it's a good idea for you to aid him in that process! If you let him do this, if you help him do this, where will that leave you? You won't even be yourself, you'll just be a numbed, drugged up, fake version of who you think you should be!"

He was taken aback by my biting words, he literally took a step back.

I didn't know where all this anger and hurt came from. But I resented him for betraying me and for betraying us. We've been working so hard, together, I thought that would be enough, I thought he would think so too. Now he's trying to escape from it all. And I realize he has been trying all along. He doesn't want to feel, I want him to feel, because I know that only then will he truly be himself, will he truly be a complete and full person. I needed him to be that person, because I needed him to complete me, as only he could. But Heero just wants to forget and in his efforts he has been chipping away at himself. These pills were the final straw for me. If he would take them, I didn't know where that would leave us, I only knew that it would leave us facing in completely opposite directions.

I continued, feeling hurt overwhelm the anger: "I thought you knew by now that getting drugged up, getting drunk and getting laid," I paused briefly to swallow a lump in my throat, "aren't solutions. The feelings and the memories are always going to come back and they are always going to have this devastating effect on you if you don't work to understand and accept them!" I raised my voice as if that would make him understand me better.

Heero suddenly snapped back at me, his face hateful, his fists balled: "Don't you understand? I did so many horrible things and now I have to live with those for the rest of my life! I wasn't supposed to live long enough to see peace. I wasn't supposed to live long enough to see myself! But I got selfish, I wanted to survive. I didn't know it was going to hurt this much!"

I blinked, as the only perplexed reaction to his outburst.

"I just want to hate myself a little less! Maybe then I'll be able to be normal! When it stops hurting like this!"

A tremble just went through me and instead of feeling sympathetic towards him, which maybe I should have been, I only felt enraged, a rage fuelled by my hurt. I screamed back at him: "Don't you think I hurt too? I have a past too, but I dealt with it! And I know that hurts but at least I didn't chicken out and take the easy escape! And do you think it has been easy for me? Seeing you like this? Seeing you struggle and hurt, only to retreat back into yourself, away from me?"

Heero didn't say anything.

"I don't love you any less." I continued, my voice a little softer, but still filled with painful emotions. "I will never stop loving you. But sometimes I'm afraid this love isn't enough, it's not enough when there is no openness, when you keep distancing yourself, then this love is just... painful." I let out a shaky breath, all of the worries and feelings that had been haunting me for months now, flooded me. The exhaustion of having to take care of him and worry about him constantly, crippled me. "Every day I love you, everyday I am with you, is hard for me. You make it hard."

Heero looked hurt, with a deep, confused frown. He looked away, he couldn't look at me anymore.
He probably didn't understand what was going on, he was probably shocked. He left Nettle feeling like he would be cured and now we stood across from each other, only injuring each other further.

"I didn't mean..." I tried. What didn't I mean? "I love you, but it's hard. It weighs on me. Sometimes so heavily that I feel like I'm breaking and becoming someone I'm not."

Heero suddenly looked at me, challenging: "Then why are you still with me?"

"Because I can't be complete without you." I sighed. "But this is not what I wanted. This isn't what I want our relationship to be like. I can't handle this distance you keep. It's difficult to be this close and see you holding back and withdrawing yourself from me."

"I'm not withdrawing..."

"Yes you are." I snapped. "When you don't cry, even when you - should - want to. When you want to flee to a mission. When you don't want me to see your face when we make love. When you want to take pills. That's withdrawing."

"I'm trying to be different. I'm trying to be normal."

"I don't want you to be normal Heero. I want you to be yourself. And you can't be normal and be yourself, your life has been too screwed up for that, as mine has been."

Heero stood there silently.

Recognizing that the discussion was over, I made use of the opportunity, reaching for the pills. "I'm going to bring this back to Nettle." I said decisively. I stuffed the extensive paper with warnings and information in one of my jeans pockets and the bottle in the other. I took a step towards the door, but then Heero called:

"Wait!"

I turned around and glared at his hesitant face.

He bit his lip nervously and then said: "Can't we just give the pills a try?"

I started to fume again. I dug my hand into my pocket and retrieved the bottle. "After all that, you still want this?"

His face was sad, incredibly sad and defeated. "You are right. I can't open up. I just can't, everything hurts too much and I can't stop myself from shutting it back out. I can't even cry. If I can't do these things anyway, why not take the drugs? At least then it won't constantly hurt anymore. And maybe then we can just be happy together." His voice died down to a mere whisper. "Why can't we just give it a try?"

"Because these pills may numb your hurt, they won't numb mine. And I don't want you to be anyone other than yourself. I can't be with you if you're not yourself." My breath hitched at that. "I love you." I emphasized the last word. "I can't love your shadow." Something warm rolled down my cheek and when it reached my lips I tasted salt. I stepped back towards the table and softly put down the bottle. "If you want them so much, by all means, take them. But I'm not going to stay here and watch you give in to the Soldier... and J." I looked at his face one last time. Sad but tearless.

I walked away, out of the apartment. "Please don't leave-" I heard Heero say, but I ignored him and closed the door behind me.
I started running. I flew down the stairs and burst through the front door of the building. I ran away from our apartment. Did I make the wrong decision? Did I say the wrong things? I ran away from those questions too.

I didn't know where I was going, for a long time I didn't think I was going anywhere, that I was just running. My tears streamed down my face. The distance between me and the apartment grew greater and greater but I couldn't escape the hurt. My heart just ached more with each step that led me away. I couldn't be without Heero, but I couldn't be with him like this either.

Why did it all have to go wrong? Everything seemed to be going so well, every hurt, every setback, only reminded me of my hope. Hope that one day he would allow himself to be himself, in all his perfections and imperfections and then we would both be cured of our hurting. Nettle had crushed that hope. She should have never given him those pills. If she hadn't, he would have never even considered the possibility. We would have continued our life the way we had, one step at a time, going forward. She had poisoned him and in doing so she had poisoned us. I could feel the nauseating effect of her venom. What a snake. What a snake!

I stopped, finally, panting heavily. I leaned my hand against the wall, bowing forward slightly. For a moment I felt like I was going to throw up, but I didn't. A sharp sound made me aware of my surroundings. With a substantial detour, my feet had carried me to the train station. More specifically, I was at the platform for the red train, bound for Kennedy Space Center and the Preventer HQ, which had just come to a screeching halt.

I didn't think too much about it. I hurried over and made it through the doors just in time. They automatically slid closed behind me and I seated myself before the train would start accelerating out of the station. My heart pounded, not so much due to physical exertion, but due to anger, anger and anticipation at the inevitable confrontation.

As I sat down I felt the little brochure in my right pocket. I had some time to kill, so I pulled it out. It was nothing more than a few sheets of thin paper stapled together and folded up multiple times. But the print was very small, there was a lot of information. I unfolded it. The front read the name and the slogan.


I scanned the introductory section. Apparently Protriptyline++ was the revised version of the original Protriptyline, which had been used to medicate people with depression and other psychological problems for decades. The revised version was stronger and was claimed to be effective in the treatment of major depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as well. The biological working of the drug was briefly explained of which I didn't understand much. Effectively, it boiled down to a leveling of emotions, eliminating the peaks of high and low. For some reason I envisioned a heart rate flat-lining.

I read the next section, dosage: "25 mg administered twice daily, in the morning and in the evening, during the preliminary phase. After consulting a physician (usually after a timeframe of 2 to 3 weeks) administration can be changed to a three times daily dosage of 25 mg, which can
eventually be compacted into single dosage of 75 mg per day. If desired, dosage can be increased to a maximum 100 mg per day, pending consultation of a physician. Always contact your physician when making changes to your dosage or combining the Protriptyline++ with other medication.

And with an ill feeling I reviewed the long list of side effects, including cardiac arrhythmias, dizziness, disorientation and confusion. Most of which were to lessen after the month of use, if not, the brochure referred back to the personal physician, for an adjustment of dosage.

I stopped reading when my gaze fell on the next header, Risk Of Overdose. I folded the bundle back up and stuffed it into my pockets, but I couldn't tuck away that sick feeling that I experienced.

The train stopped at the Kennedy Space Center station and I bolted out the doors. The information had only fuelled my anger at Nettle.

I stomped into the lobby and disturbed the receptionist who was on the phone. I forced her to hang up.

"How can I help you, sir?" She seethed.

I showed her my employee pass from the garage and demanded to talk to Nettle.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm sure she is expecting me." I snapped.

She eyed me suspiciously for a moment, but seeing as I was an employee of the agency and it was Nettle's job to see us and maintain our mental well-being, the receptionist eventually consented. She asked me for my access card so she could upgrade it in the scanner to allow me to operate the elevator up to Nettle's floor.

As it was supposed to, the card got the elevator working and brought me back up to the floor that I remember from a previous experience. I veritably stampeded through the elongated, narrow hall, all the way to the back, where I remember spending a long time waiting as Heero had his first session. It disgusted me now, if I knew she was only going to add insult to injury I wouldn't have idly sat by.

I practically crashed through the door into the chestnut haven that was her outdated office. The woman deserving of my wrath sat behind her desk, looking only mildly surprised. She might have received a call from the receptionist in the meantime. To my left, sitting on one of her hideous couches, was an older man, not old, just older. Gray, thinning hair and lines all across his face from a lifetime of worrying.

"Hey!" He protested, looking at me angrily.

"Duo, I am in session. You are free to wait outside." Nettle said calmly and her thin, bony hand gestured back to the door and the hallway beyond that.

"I am not going anywhere." I declared.

"This is my session!" The older man argued, rising to his feet.

"Well whatever is troubling you, you're just going to have to get over it till next time." I barked at him and my menacing glare reduced him back into a seated position.

His eyes were shifty for a while and he finally stuttered, getting up again: "I'll... I think - I'll wait
outside." He looked at Nettle.

"That's fine, Graham, why won't you wait outside. This won't take long."

"You're damn right it won't." I spat. "All I need to say can be said with four letter words. With the exception of bitch."

Graham pulled the door shut behind him, enclosing Nettle and I in the space.

"There is no need for such language, Duo." She said in her calm, therapeutic voice.

"Yeah there is. Heero just showed up at home with a bottle of anti-depressants." I plucked the accompanying papers out of my pocket, partially ripping them in the process and slammed them down on her desk with my palm. "Leveling out emotions? Side effects? Risks of overdose? What kind of a shrink are you?"

"A good one." She answered curtly. "But not the kind that can benefit Heero. As there is no such thing."

I snorted. "You just can't admit that you're not good enough."

She brushed a wrinkle out of her blazer and gestured for me to sit down on the couch.

"Oh no. I'm not one of your patients. I'm not going to let you psycho-fuck me. This isn't how this conversation is going to go. You are going to tell me why you just completely fucked up Heero's chance to come to terms with his emotions."

"You have it backwards. I actually created that opportunity for him." She sighed, folding her hands together on the surface of her desk. "Look Duo, I wasn't really getting anywhere with Heero-"

"You're damn right-"

"You're damn right."

"I thought you came for an explanation?" She interrupted strictly. "Well, this is it, so listen."

I bit back another four or five letter word and nodded my consent.

"I wasn't getting anywhere with Heero, just having him talk. Usually patients feel relieved when they talk and the process puts their emotions into perspective and I can offer my professional help in further breaking it down, getting to the root of the problem and then dealing with that root appropriately. Talking did nothing for Heero, it only made him feel pain at reliving the memories and the hardship that it caused him to share. And I couldn't get through to him. There was a blockade, an attempt to protect himself from the depth of his feelings. The exact same depth I have to get to in order to help. Seeing as traditional methods were ineffective, I had to make the decision to adjust my approach. The human brain is very alike a machine, Duo, it requires a certain input to function desirably. This input is a combination of chemicals and neurotransmitters in the brain. When there is an imbalance in the input, as caused by Heero's traumatizing past, medication can offer a relieving solution, to restore the balance."

Nettle reached for the information papers that had been crumpled in my pocket before I had slammed them on her desk and her slim fingers moved to straighten the papers, fussing over the tear. "The Protriptyline++ can take the edge off his hurtful feelings and allow him the opportunity to experience the positive in his life. I never intended this as a long term solution. What I want is for him to take the medicine long enough so he can start to feel comfortable with himself. Because right now he isn't, he is torturing himself. It will help him become more confidant in his ability to deal with his emotions and he can focus on the good things in his current life. Those two aspects
can help him later on, when we resume our therapy and start eliminating the use of medication."

I shook my head and sighed. "This is not one of your regular patients you are dealing with. This sends a completely different message to Heero. If you give him pills, he is going to think he is sick, sick in a way that only the pills can help him. He is giving up on everything else. Now he just wants to take the pills and live like that, in denial. Now I don't say I blame him, he's had a hard life. It's tempting to accept this kind of resolve when offered... I blame you. Because you should have never made him think like that. If you so insisted on giving him the pills, you should have told him what you told me, which you obviously didn't. Now he has the whole wrong idea of himself and the medication!"

"I take it you two had an argument regarding the matter?" She calmly inquired.

"Look lady," I started, feeling my anger rise again, "I've been by Heero's side for months, no years, because I was there during the war and I saw what he saw. We have been working together to cure ourselves from that past life and to come closer together and closer to our true self. And then you sweep in with your drugs and false promises of taking away the pain and you knock all that I have done on it's ass. We would have been fine without you." I pivoted on my heels and started to walk away, but Nettle stopped me dead in my tracks with an innocent enough question.

"Do you really believe that?"

I turned back around, seething with anger. The little God of Death in the back of my mind was already killing her. Luckily for her, I wasn't that dark character anymore. Though sometimes I really still wanted to be, against better judgment.

"I haven't discussed this with Heero, yet, because he obviously cares for you immensely. But in my professional opinion, neither one of you benefit from your relationship."

"What the fuck do you know!" I erupted.

"It's like you said, Duo, you saw what he saw. You shared that "past life", as you call it, a past you are now both working to escape." Nettle passively explained. "But you can never truly shed that part of yourself as long as you are together. You constantly remind each other of that time of pain and suffering. I especially think it is taking it's toll on Heero."

"Fuck you!" I pointed an angry finger at her. "Fuck you, you don't know anything! Heero and I love each other, that is one thing you can't render moot with your words and your pills!"

"I'm not denying the love between you. You obviously love Heero and Heero, as became apparent during our sessions, loves you. But you are a living reminder of a time Heero prefers to tuck away and never think of again. Don't you agree that it would be much easier for him and he would feel much more comfortable if he was with someone who didn't live that war with him, who doesn't know of his brutal training, who doesn't know of exactly the things that cause him shame and discomfort? Then he'll be free to explore the other parts of himself."

"And then what?" I retorted, "Then he would be in a relationship with someone who doesn't even have the slightest idea who he is. And he would always have to live with the fear that this person might not love him anymore, once the truth about him is revealed. At least with me he knows he will always be loved, because I know everything and I love him still."

"Maybe." She said ambiguously. "But what else do you have to offer him? Do you really think you have all the emotional knowledge to help him? And what about you?" Nettle continued relentlessly in a flat tone. "Wouldn't you be better off with someone else? It must be difficult being in a
relationship with Heero. He is closed off, socially inept, still drawn to a part of him that is
dangerous to himself, because at least that is something he knows. It's consuming you. It must be
draining you, never knowing if he will ever reciprocate all of your feelings, not just love, but trust
and openness. I image you have been so focused on Heero, you have been neglecting yourself. I
think you would be in a much better place right now if you were with someone who allowed you
the time to explore yourself."

I took a few steps towards her and leaned over her desk, staring angrily into her eyes. I saw her lean
away from me slightly. "I was in a perfect place, till you came around and made a mess of the hope
that had been carrying both Heero and I through." I walked away.

But again she stopped me halfway to the door.

"You should take this with you." She was holding out the information that had come with the
Protriptyline++. "Heero should really read this before he uses it."

"He won't be needing it." I said adamantly. I didn't know how I was going to convince Heero of
that, but I knew I had to.

"Shouldn't you let Heero decide that for himself?" She countered.

I stopped. With my back turned towards her, I experienced a moment of hesitation.

"Duo, whether he decides to take the medicine or not, he is going to need all of the information to
make a well-informed decision."

I sighed. A few moments later I turned around and I walked back to her desk. She held the papers
out towards me, her face was one of a strong-willed woman. I snatched the papers out of her hands
and carelessly tucked them back in my jeans pocket. I glared at her.

"If you or Heero have questions, you can always contact me."

"But your advice is always going to be: take the drugs?"

"For now, yes."

I walked away and slammed the door shut behind me.

Graham was looking at me with big eyes. I stared back at him briefly and then walked off without
saying anything. Leaving him to his faith.

Unannounced and unwelcome, her words started gnawing at me. Were Heero and I better off
without each other? I loved him too much to ever be able to step away, but maybe that was selfish.
I had so confidently refuted her claim, but inside I wasn't nearly as sure. I had had a nightmare
about the very matter, with Heero staring at his own reflection in shallow water, screaming in
horror as I neared. Am I the best person to help him through this? The idea that he'd be better off
with someone who was kept in the dark about his past was utterly ridiculous to me. But that person
and I myself, are two extremes on opposite sides of a spectrum. Maybe there was someone in the
happy middle of that spectrum more suitable to guide him.

This thought pained me, it didn't change my feelings towards Heero, only towards myself. I didn't
want to be selfish, I wanted the best for Heero. I just wanted to be that best.

I couldn't go back home. Not yet. I felt awkward and confused and knew that should not be the
place I should be in when I confront Heero again.
I got out of the train and instead of walking home, I walked over to the adjacent bus station.

Absently I got out a few stops later and I lingered at the entry of the retirement home. I felt guilty for coming to Sookie. Another flood of selfishness hit me. She had been taking care of her grandmother, probably worrying about her and I hadn't been the supportive friend that I should have been, the supportive friend that she always was to me. And now finally I am here on her doorstep, only because I needed help with my own troubles yet again. I almost walked away, back to the bus stop, but I needed to talk to her. I knew that she could bring structure to the jumbled mess in my head.

Selfishly, I walked up to the front door of the apartment where I knew she lived with her grandparents. With empty eyes I stared at the colorful ceramic owl that hung from the wall next to the doorbell and when I rang the bell, it was actually the hooting sound of an owl, rather than a ring or a buzz. At any other time I might have found it to be comical, but I wasn't in the mood to be easily amused.

The door opened and my friend's face beamed when she looked up at me. "Duo!" She pulled the door wide open and surprised me with a tight, impromptu hug. When she released me and looked more closely at my face, her eyebrows furrowed together in a concerned frown. "Are ya okay?"

"I'm sorry to bother you..." I said.

"Not at all! Come in. I'll take ya to my bedroom, so we can talk." She wrapped one of her arms around mine and escorted me inside.

We shuffled to a narrow, tiny hallway that led to a small, cozy and cluttered looking living room, filled with owl memorabilia. In the middle of the living room, between the couch and the coffee table, facing the television, was a hospital bed. The old woman laying in it smiled and paused her program, with feeble hands operating the remote, to greet me.

"Hellooo." She said with a weak, scratchy voice.

"Hello, misses Shaw."

The old lady chuckled delicately. "Rutford." She corrected. "Shaw is the name of that rotten man who corrupted my daughter." In spite of her words, her face kept the kind smile. She straightened out folds in the sheets that covered her, maybe self-conscious about her disheveled appearance in the presence of a guest.

An old man came out of the kitchen, with small footsteps. He was holding a tray with trembling hands, the tea cups shook rattled dangerously, nearly spilling some of the tea.

"Let me get that, Grandpa." Sookie said and she took the tray out of his weak hands and walked it over to the sitting area, placing it on a small table by her grandmother's bed.

"Who is this fine young man?" The grandfather asked, now free from the task that previously cost him so much concentration that he hadn't even been alerted to my presence.

"Grandpa, Grandma, this is Duo, my friend from school." Sookie introduced me.

"Ahh yes. Wonderful! My my, our Sookie warned us you'd be tall." The man commented with a warm smile, looking all the way up at me as he weakly shook my hand. "And that is some long hair you have! Are you a gay too?" He wondered without any sense of judgment or resentment.

"Grandpa!" Sookie hissed, but she chuckled.
"As a matter of fact I am, sir."

"Wonderful!" The old man commented, slowly making his way to the couch. "Lovely people, the gays. My wife's hairdresser is a gay, you know. Wonderful young man. Wonderful. Oh!... Maybe you know him!"

Sookie lovingly patted him on his shoulder as he heavily sat down in his seat. "We've been over this Grandpa, not all gay people know each other."

He mumbled something incoherent and then continued with endearing enthusiasm: "Well then maybe he should meet him!" He looked at me with gleeful small eyes. "He is a wonderful young man. You'd like him!"

"I'm afraid I'm spoken for, sir." I said with a bittersweet smile.

"Wonderful!" He exclaimed and he smiled so brightly you could see he was missing some teeth. He looked at his wife, who stared back at him with warm eyes and he mused: "Nothing more wonderful than being spoken for." He briefly touched his wife's hand with his.

"Duo and I are gonna head to my bedroom. Now ya holla if ya need somethin', right? Dun go hauling heavy stuff around yerself." She kissed him on his cheek and then took me by the hand, taking me to the back, down a short hallway. She opened the last door to the left and just as she closed the door, sounds from the TV started drifting again.

"They are nice." I commented truthfully.

"Yeah. Silly old lovebirds..." She spoke lovingly.

"Is your grandmother going to be okay?"

"Oh yeah, she's gonna be fine! Operation went perfect, justa couple'a weeks more bed rest. She's a tough cookie." She plopped down on her bed and reached over across the empty space of her terribly small room to pull her desk chair out to face her. "Sit."

I obediently sat down. I briefly looked around the room, taking in the colorful walls, the many pictures and small figurines. On a magnetic board mounted on the wall just above her desk were newspaper clippings, small pictures with small articles. Local newspapers reporting children championships at soccer, hockey, lacrosse and tennis. A very young Sookie was in every picture. "You looked cute."

"I still do, Duo." She said with a smirk.

"Was this from when you were still living with your parents?"

Her features became forlorn. "Yeah. My dad especially made a point of buying every local newspaper after a match. He'd get really pissed if they didn't mention me in the article."

I smiled sadly. "He was proud of you."

"He was, yeah. My mom sent them over a few months after they moved me here. Said he didn't want them anymore." She shook it off, reforming her smile. "Whatcha doing here? Ya looked like a beaten up puppy just now, standing at the door."

I nodded. "I am."
"What happened?"

After a sigh and a brief pause to organize my thoughts, I started telling her about the crazy day I had had. As I talked, I could feel the emotions overwhelming me again, reawakening my anger and hurt feelings. I tried to relay the fight I had had with Heero in as much detail as I could and even though partially I felt awkward sharing something that had been so heavy and, in a way, intimate, it felt good and reassuring to occasionally look up at the understanding and sympathy on her face. I concluded my epic tale - it sure seemed epic to me - with the discussion I had with Nettle and what she had said about Heero and I not being right for each other. At that, Sookie did exactly what I needed her to do.

She scoffed and exclaimed: "Nonsense!" It was the first thing she had said, she had been quiet and attentive throughout my entire story, for which I was very grateful.

Once I was done, I felt a little deflated and tired from experiencing all the emotions all over again.

Sookie let the silence exist for a little while, letting me calm down. When enough time seemed to have passed, she reached out a hand and placed it on my knee. It felt warm and comforting, almost like a mother's touch. I realized all too well that aside from Heero, she was the closest thing to family that I had. It was a nice, but scary thing at the same time. When you have something, you have something to lose.

"Sounds like ya had a hell of a day."

"Yeah." I breathed in response.

"Look, we could sit here all evening and all night discussing this, but ya know what I think? I think ya should be with Heero."

I looked up at her. Not surprised, but the prospect just seemed so daunting. My heart started aching at the mere idea. I didn't want to get into another fight and I didn't want to see that hurt, desperate look on his face again. I didn't want to lose myself to emotions again and say exactly the things that made that expression appear on his face.

"I'm not tryin' to get rid of ya, I'm just sayin'."

"I know. And you're right. It just feels awkward. I feel like we are at a stalemate. Everything seems futile, everything that can be said and done. I feel like at this point, we can only hurt each other further."

"This isn't a chess game, Duo, this is life. Ye're not gonna forfeit the game by making a move." She spoke reassuringly. "If Heero really wants to give that Protriptyline-stuff a go, than ya must let him. I know it's not what ya want and I dun think it's what Heero really wants either, but how is he gonna know that? Ya hafta be supportive of him. So far ya only know how to support him by telling him whatta do. For once, try to be supportive of him finding out things on his own."

"Are you saying I'm a control freak?" I asked, offended.

She shrugged. "A bit, yeah."

"Oh..."

"Those drugs might not be so bad anyway. Nettle's a bitch, that's a given, but sometimes medication can really help a person through a hard time and give 'em the energy to fight back."
I remained hesitant. Medication just seemed so radical. Medication is something you give to someone who is sick and though I knew Heero to be deeply troubled, I refused to think of him as sick.

Sookie sighed. She bit the inside of her cheek a moment or two and then got up. For a moment I thought she was going to leave, but she opened a closet full of colorful clothes and kneeled down on the floor in front of it. She stretched out her arms and reached deep into the back of the closet, retrieving a shoebox decorated with stickers and glitter. She walked it back to her bed and sat down with the box in her lap.

I watched curiously.

She pulled off the lid, placing it on the mattress beside her and revealed the chaotic mess of contents. I could make out stacks of pictures, two old stuffed animals and a stack of sealed letters, but there was much more in there, that mostly just appeared to be random junk - meaningless tidbits from a childhood - to me. With her black fingernails Sookie started digging in the mess. Her hand came up holding an orange bottle that rattled. She pinched it between her thumb and forefinger to show it tome. It was a pill bottle much like the one I had held today. The sticker with personal information was illegible, most of the ink had worn off. About one third of the pills were still inside, rattling noisily as she moved it.

"Citalopram." She said, with a bittersweet smile. "It's not as strong as what Heero was prescribed I suppose, but boy did it make me gain weight." With her free hand she held up one of the pictures from the box to show me.

I recognized her face, though fuller and rounder, but her figure was drastically different. I knew her to be slim and athletic, in the picture she would definitely be considered chubby.

"Docs prescribed this to me a few months after my parents dumped me here with Grandpa and Grandma." She confided. "I wasn't "coping very well"." She actually added air-quotation-marks to the expression. "I went through two bottles of this and then with the third, this one, I just decided it was time to stop. Sometimes I blame myself for being too weak, but it helped me and some other times, I'm actually proud of myself for daring to take this step and accept help. It allowed me a break from all the resentment and anger and hurt that I was feelin', long enough to get to know and love my grandparents, long enough to make friends in school, long enough to forgive my parents, long enough to forgive myself... And then I knew, I was strong enough to stop and face the feelings that had been hiding underneath. And I really was strong enough Duo, it was hard but I never looked back and everything fell into place."

I was shocked by her confession, but also in awe of her, she must have felt so vulnerable sharing this with me, yet she did it for me. I started to realize how much of a jerk I had been, to Heero as well as her, so inconsiderate. I knew so little yet I had pretended to know so much, only to justify my sudden, intense sadness and anger.

"Every person is different, but if Heero wants to give it a go, wouldn'tcha want to allow him at least that? To at least try? Don't you want that for him? A break from all the hurt he's been putting himself through?" She leaned forward and meaningfully looked me in my eyes. "Duo, I think these drugs are only going to get the better of him if ya leave. If ya stay, he'll realize sooner or later that you and him together are strong enough and he'll quit like I did. If ya leave, yeah, then the drugs will be all he has and he might get lost in 'em, butcha can stop that from happenin'. By just being there, like Grandpa and Grandma were here for me."

I let out a shaky breath. I didn't know what to say, I was overwhelmed into silence. In all honesty I would still prefer it if he wouldn't turn to the drugs at all, growing up on L2 and being trained by
G, you learn real quick that many pathways to death or oblivion are paved with either prescribed or illegal pills. But Sookie was testimony of a positive outcome and I could not ignore that fact, could not ignore that that might be a possibility for Heero. I’ve been waiting and standing by his side for so long, maybe I could wait just that little extra while, the time it takes him to realize that he could still live a full and open life, long enough for him to be strong enough to let go of the relief of medication. And she was right, my presence could make the difference. I would be there for him no matter what.

"I still really have to talk to him though. Because right now he's not thinking like that, he thinks he should just take those pills forever, he thinks they are going to numb him into normality."

Sookie nodded fervently. "Of course. But this time, stay calm. It sounds to me like things got heated right off the bat. Why not allow yerself some more time too? He doesn't hafta to decide right away, right? Let 'em think about for a while, let 'em make his own decision. Maybe when it's carefully explained to him what the drugs really do, that they don't mean he's sick beyond healing, he might not even want them anymore. It seems that right now, he's just intoxicated with the possibility that he can simply drown everything out and leave it at that."

"I hope he will give it some extra thought." I looked at her apologetically. "Not to demean your experience, but I really would prefer it if we could do this on our own. I guess, I guess the pills just also sent a bad message to me, that I hadn't been doing good enough and all I want is to do is be good enough for him."

"Don't sweat it. Like I said, everyone's different." She offered me her brightest, kindest smile. "Just let him make up his own mind."

I promptly got up out of my seat and reached over to wrap my arms around her in a tight, thankful hug. "Thank you." I whispered gratefully in her strawberry blonde hair.

She let me comfortably hug her for a while, recognizing that I needed the contact momentarily. After a short while, she patted my back and with a grin to her lips she said: "Come one ya big teddy bear, I'll take ya home."

We walked back out into the living room where the two grandparents were still watching TV.

"Oh, oh!" With effort the grandfather got out of his seat, his balance wobbly. "Will Duo be joining us for dinner? There is enough split pea soup for everyone!" He rubbed his hands together enthusiastically, seemingly pleased at the opportunity to entertain a guest.

"Not tonight, Grandpa, Duo has to get home."

"Oh. Maybe some other time then?"

I couldn't say no to his smiling face. "Sure, I'd like that." I wasn't really sure if I would keep myself to this engagement, but he sure seemed happy at my answer.

"Wonderful!" He shuffled back to his seat, muttering excitedly to himself: "Maybe I'll make my chicken pot pie then..."

"Grandpa?" Sookie interrupted his planning of the dinner. "Is it okay if I use the car to drop Duo off at home, so he won' hafta take the bus?"

"Yes, yes, that will be fine." The old man waved his hand.

"Thanks." She gave them both a kiss and then guided me back outside, snatching her coat and a
jumbling collection of keys on her way out. On our way to the parking lot, she explained: "He's not really supposed to drive anymore, but he can't say goodbye to his little car."

She wasn't kidding when she said "little car". It was a car in every right, but looked more like a handicap vehicle. It sounded more like one too. The electric engine started with a pitched whine and continued to buzz as she steered it onto the road, with us packed into it. The rear seat was ridiculous, suitable only for the transportation of small dogs or children, I supposed. The little thing also wasn't very fast. Acceleration after a red light was unnoticeable, just a steady, undetectable increase of speed to a maximum of thirty miles per hour, when the engine buzzed really loudly with effort.

As we got closer, I grew more hesitant. I didn't really know what to say to him and I was sure he wouldn't know what to say either. I hated awkward moments like that, but we would just have to get through it. And Sookie was right, I shouldn't have been so judgmental, I should have been more supportive. The whole situation still left me with a knot in my stomach, but I felt more hopeful and optimistic after Sookie had told me that everything would turn out okay, with or without the drugs, as long as I am there to support and love him.

On the way there, which at the speed we were going, certainly took long enough, I tried to map out my words, searched for the perfect things to say to make everything alright between us. But those words eluded me. As we neared the apartment, I finally decided that at first I shouldn't say anything, I should just hug him, as that is all I truly wanted to do. All I ever want to do. To hold him near me, to feel his warmth and the steady beat of his heart through his chest. For some reason, holding him always brought me comfort.

I hoped it offered the same for him.

The buzz died down as Sookie turned of the engine with the little vehicle parked in front of the front door of the apartment building. "Here we are." She announced the obvious. "Don't worry, ye'll do fine."

I took in a deep breath and asked her if I could ask her for a huge favor.

She answered lightheartedly: "With the risk of sincerely coming to regret this: sure. Shoot."

"Will you come up with me? Will you tell him what you told me? That the drugs helped you through a specifically hard time and that once you were strong enough, you quit?" I was hoping she would, I knew that once I'd be in there I'd be too useless and likely too emotional to talk sensibly. More importantly it seemed only logical for Heero to be receiving this information from the source. Even though Heero had trouble accepting strangers into his life, maybe for this once he could acknowledge the value of Sookie's presence and her offering of personal insight in the situation.

I had expected her to be doubtful, but she wasn't, she answered directly: "Of course. Okay."

"Okay." I nodded. "Thanks."

We simultaneously got out of the excuse of a car and headed through the front door. Waiting for the elevator, Sookie smiled at me. "Heero is lucky to have you, no matter what Nettle says."

"Thanks. Tell him that?" I jested.

She replied seriously: "I'm sure he is well aware."

I smiled back at her.
Feeling more confident and a little eager to see Heero again and make everything alright, I didn't delay us, guiding us to the front door as soon as the elevator doors opened on our floor. Standing at the door, the keycard in my hand, I suddenly dumbly wondered if I should knock, to alert him that I was there. But I argued that it would only add to the awkwardness of the following conversation, so I decided against it and swiped my card through the lock. The green light flashed and I pushed the door open.

All the lights in the apartment were off and, most notably, so was the television. It wasn't dark yet, but shadows were cast in the corners of the living room and normally we'd start turning on lights at this hour, with the sun on the other side of the building. I wondered with increasing worry if he had left somewhere, or just... left. My heart pounded. "Heero?" I called. When there was no response, no movement, I felt a very real sense of panic.

"Don't worry." Sookie said behind me. "Maybe he's in the shower?"

I couldn't hear the shower running, but I welcomed that possibility. I took a large step inside but froze when my eyes incidentally fell on the bottle of pills on the dinner table. The cap was screwed off and lay over to the side. My mind reeled. He had already started taking them? I took another large step, passing the corner that previously obstructed view from the kitchen. In the corner of my eye I saw a dark form lying on the kitchen floor and my heart dropped.

Just lying there. Completely still.

For what seemed like an eternity, I couldn't make myself turn my head to look, as if I could control reality that way. But I couldn't simply deny it and make it untrue by not looking at it, so I turned my head and my eyes fell on Heero's unconscious body, lying on the floor, on his back.

Even though I knew before I looked, it was still a shocking sight to be confronted with. I called out his name and rushed over to him. Sookie screamed when she followed me and saw him too.

I knelt over him, my hands shaking terribly with fear. With two fingers on his throat, I checked for a pulse. The vague, irregular pulse that I detected was a relief. I noticed the phone lay by his body, he probably dropped it right before he passed out. I threw the phone at Sookie and ordered her to call for an ambulance. I saw her dial with barely any control over her fingers. Her shaking hand brought the phone up to her ear and shortly after, she started talking in a rushed, scared voice, but I didn't pay attention to what she was saying.

I looked back at Heero. His face was very pale and there were slight gatherings of white foam in both corners of his mouth. His skin was slick with sweat, his chest was barely heaving with breaths.

I was feeling many things, but those had to be sidetracked. I couldn't wallow in them now, I needed to do something, I needed to help him.

I didn't know how to respond to an overdose of this specific drug, but there was really only one thing I could do and it was worth trying it. It would take a while for the ambulance to get here and I was determined to get the poison out of his system as soon as possible. I reached up and strongly gripped the handle of our cutlery drawer. I ripped the entire drawer out and it fell to the floor - narrowly missing Heero's head - with a loud bang and the metallic rattle of the spoons, forks and knives. My hand aimlessly reached in and took out a spoon.

I cupped the back of Heero's neck and pushed a knee under his torso to tilt his body onto his side, away from me. Lifting his head revealed a smear of blood on the kitchen floor, he must have fallen hard. I supported his weight against my legs and brought my left arm around his neck, effectively
supporting his head on my lower arm, but leaving my hand free to work his mouth open. With my right hand I held the spoon and brought it to his mouth handle first. I leaned over him to see what I was doing, carefully inserting the back of the spoon deeper into his mouth till I finally successfully evoked a gagging response.

I quickly retreated the spoon and tilted him a little further, so he could vomit without the risk of it pooling in the back of his throat, creating a risk of him choking on it, but after a few gags and coughs, nothing happened. I brought the spoon back into his mouth for a second attempt. This time he threw up, mostly a yellow, reeking liquid that foamed white, he obviously hadn't eaten anything all day. To make sure he would empty the entire content of his stomach, I repeated the procedure and he threw up more of the retched liquid. When I did it again, he only dry-heaved, satisfying me that everything was out. But I knew this alone would not solve it, would not cure him. There was nothing else for me to do but wait.

"They're on their way." I barely registered Sookie's voice. "They'll be here in a few minutes."

I didn't acknowledge her. I rolled Heero onto his back, carefully supporting his head with my hand. I wiped his mouth clean with the end of my sleeve. His sweaty skin was starting to turn a sickly color. "What did you do to yourself?" I whispered to him hoarsely. I ran my hand through his hair, it was greasy and I felt cold, dried blood on the back of his head. "Please don't die." My voice was barely audible. I lay my hand over his throat again. The weak pulse was the only thing that could bring me some reassurance. His skin was cold and moist to the touch. Laying limp in my arms, barely breathing, he looked lifeless, like a rag doll that had been thrown around too many times. He looked so tiny and vulnerable and all I could think was that I hadn't been there to protect him.

Sookie knelt by him too and she took hold of one of his chill, pale hands. "It's gonna be okay, Duo, the ambulance is coming. Help is coming." After a few uneasy minutes, she announced: "I'm gonna wait for them downstairs, okay? So I can let them into the building as soon as they are here. It's gonna be alright, Duo." She briefly touched my shoulder and then ran out the door.

I paid her no heed, I was completely focused on Heero, cradling him in my arms. "Please don't die." Is what I kept whispering to him. I looked at his closed eyes, praying for them to open, for them to look at me, but he wasn't waking up, he was locked away somewhere deep.

"I-" I struggled with the words. "I lo-" It was hard to say them, it sounded too much like a goodbye and I didn't want to say goodbye, but I knew I had to say the words. It could be the last time. Even though he was unconscious, I hoped he could hear me, because after our fight that afternoon, when I threatened I couldn't be around him if he wanted to take the drugs, I needed to remind him, I needed to eliminate all doubt, I needed him to know. "I love you." I finally managed. My body started shaking uncontrollably.

A tear appeared in the corner of Heero's eye. It lingered briefly and then trailed down his right temple, into his hair. I watched and another one appeared and trailed down the same way. "Heero? Heero?" I slightly shook him, there was no reaction. I lay my head down on his chest, listening to his heartbeat and feeling his shallow breaths. Nothing seemed to have changed, but he was crying, so he had to be awake! I raised my head back up and noticed that his T-shirt was stained dark. With a sinking feeling I became aware of the wet trails down my face, to the point of my chin. It had been my own tears landing on his face, deceiving me. For some reason, that made the tears pour more freely.

It hit me all at once. I could lose him. I could be forced to live without him forever. Did he do this to us on purpose? I hoped not, not just for the obvious reason, but also because Heero had the tendency to succeed in most things he attempted.
"Please don't die." And then I changed my plea to: "Please don't want to die. Please don't want to die."

In the back of my mind, I heard a voice not unlike my own saying: "Are you just suicidal or are you in love with me?" "I know you're not suicidal." Did I?

Finally I heard the sound of footsteps approaching fast and just before Sookie and the paramedics came bursting through the front door, I told him again "I love you." and I kissed him on his cold, sweaty forehead. It sounded like a goodbye and it was, I knew I had to, in case they would take him away and I wouldn't get the chance once... once it was time.

I was lost in a numb haze when the paramedics took him out of my arms and lifted his body onto the gurney. All I could remember was that feeling, that feeling I had at the end of every shared mission with Heero. That fear that I would never see him again. As I always did, I hoped I would be proven wrong.
Part XXXVI - Before the dawn

I have never been fatally wounded. Now, during a time of peace after a lifetime of battle, I have finally learned what it feels like... to die.

In the hospital reigned a silent sense of solitude as Death wandered through the stretching corridors, curiously peeking into rooms and startling hopeful family members and loved ones in their vigil with his sudden cold presence. When the patients time has yet to come, he moves on and he leaves people relieved. When it is time, he leaves them heartbroken.

In this way every hospital is alike, all over the world and even the colonies. The inventive hand of the architect is strong as he designs and draws different lobbies, different hallways and different hospital rooms, creating marvels with charcoal and paper first, then with concrete, iron and glass. But the hand of Death overpowers his creativity and fills those lobbies, those hallways and those hospital rooms with the same mortality and fear. Rendering all hospitals akin building as he renders all hospital-goers - patients, loved ones and staff - akin.

Death stains the crisp, clean whiteness of the hospital. He stains it with dark shadows and falling tears.

Silly thing for the God of Death to be fearing Death. "God of" always alluded to me having some sort of superior, controlling power over this universal entity of Death. This self-proclaimed title was misleading, deceptive to others and eventually - I realized, deceptive to myself. During my days as the God of Death it is true that I had some control over who dies; the corrupt senator, the destructive engineer, the faceless soldier in the disadvantaged Mobile Suit. The power to decide who wasn't going to die, was never mine; the homeless boys on the streets of L2, the generous priest of the orphanage. It is a bitter sweetness that accompanied me in watching many people exhale their last breath. People who I could not save from Death, people whose death I could only avenge with more death. This, as it now dawns on me, does not make the God of Death, but his puppet and as much at his mercy as any other soul.

The fear of losing someone, someone so important to you, is like experiencing a death within yourself.

I could not keep myself from dying and I could not keep the person I love most from dying. Certain powers are just not supposed to lie in mortal hands. Now my hands are empty.

I stared at them. I stared at my useless hands.

The hospital waiting room was silent except for the hum of the air conditioning and the clicking of a keyboard in the nurse's station. I was alone except for a single other man. He was seated far away from me. He had been there since I arrived, though I didn't remember how many minutes or hours ago that was. He was a mirror image of me, as defeated and helpless as I was. His fingers are entwined, as one would position his hands in prayer. With dull and sore eyes I watched him and wondered for whom his prayers were intended.

I frowned at rays of sunlight creating shapes on the tiled floor. It took a long time before there is the realization: it is morning. Stupid thing is, the next thing that was brought to my attention,
amidst the scattered thoughts crawling through my mind, was that I was thirsty. So I stood on legs that trembled with weakness and cramps from spending a night in that plastic chair and with effortful steps I walked over to the water cooler, pouring myself a drink in one of the provided plastic cups. I got a second cup, filled it and walked it over to the man seated near the windows, whereas I had preferred a seat close to the back door, leading into the hospital, beyond which they had taken Heero.

My throat was still dry so my voice croaked when I said: "Here."

He looked up, his eyes tired, as tired as I imagined mine to be. He expressed his gratitude with a courteous nod and accepted the cup, taking a tiny sip.

I walked back over to my own seat. I looked at the doors to my left, through which they had taken Heero, hours ago. I wasn't allowed to with him, male nurses stopped both me and Sookie from following his lifeless body that they rolled to the back on a gurney, an oxygen mask covering his mouth and nose. It was explained to us why we couldn't go back there, something about the hospital being temporarily understaffed. My response had been something along the lines of "fuck you", that didn't make them more sympathetic to my cause. I was instructed to "wait here" and was deposited in the exact same seat in which I was still sitting.

Sookie stayed with me for a long time, trying to draw words or any sign of consciousness out of me, but all I could do was stare into thin air. As it started getting really late, she told me with a pained voice and obvious reluctance that she had to go, her grandparents needed her, especially her grandmother, it had been her responsibility to take care of her while she was mostly incapacitated, as her grandfather was too weak to be of much help.

It was the first time I had said anything. I told her it was okay. I told her to go.

She stayed with me for several more minutes, troubled by the thought of leaving me all alone in the quiet hospital, waiting for some sort of news, but eventually she knew she had to go. I remembered her kissing me on my cheek and telling me that everything would be okay and that she would come back as soon as possible.

I thought I could handle it by myself, but as the night had crept on, I realized I couldn't. Doctors and nurses were ignoring me and I couldn't find the right words to express my urgency to see him, or to at least hear how he was doing. All anyone could tell me was that they were understaffed and that they would keep me updated, but no one ever gave me update about anything. Getting angry wasn't the solution either. When I had started getting rude due to frustration with an elderly nurse a security guard had approached me from behind and threatened to escort me out of the building if I didn't settle down. I started cursing at him too, so angry that no one would listen to me, no one would talk to me. My fists had been white knuckled at my side and the guard must have seen them and recognized them as the threat of violence they were. The big man had grabbed me by my arm and dragged me out through the main entry of the lobby. He seated me on a bench outside and warned me I would be arrested if I tried to come back in. Then he left me there.

I had no intention of giving up, but even in my clouded state of mind I had recognized I'd best calm myself before attempting to go back in. I would be doing no one a favor if I ended up spending the night in jail.

Five minutes later a young nurse with a pink cardigan wrapped around herself had walked up to me and kneeled before me and she was to first to see and acknowledge my pain, making its way down my cheeks in the form of tears. Upon promising I would stay calm, she had guided me back inside. I had settled back into my seat and she had knelt before me and asked: "Is there anyone I can call?"
To my surprise, I had answered: "Yeah."

I closed my eyes, the bright sunlight created a stinging pain in my tired, red orbs. I wish I could sleep but I knew only nightmares awaited me. When images started flashing behind my closed eyelids, the vision of Heero lying limp on the kitchen floor, the smear of blood and his pale, yellow complexion my eyes shot open. I squinted at the light. The tall glass facade of the lobby allowed no protection from the brightness of a new day. But I would prefer dark and ominous clouds and strikes of thunder, to echo the mood and despair within myself.

The automatic doors slid open with a whir and my eyes were immediately drawn to the activity.

They appeared as three black silhouettes at first and for a while they didn't even seem real, their footfalls so soft on the tiled floor, but when they neared I could see their faces and the compassion and worry in their expression. The shortest of the three quickened his pace, leaving the other two behind as he rushed towards me. I rose out of my seat just in time to have him practically fall against me and hug me tighter than I have ever been hugged. The others caught up and I felt two hands on my shoulders in a comforting gesture.

"I sorry." I whispered into blond hair. "I didn't know who else to call."

"Of course! I'm glad you called... I mean... You should know we will always be here for you!" His arms, wrapped around me, gave me one final, tight squeeze before he let me go and took a step back. Quatre's face was riddled with concern and his eyes wet with imminent tears. Trowa and WuFei were two pillars of strength standing on either side of him and even though their eyes held worry, seeing them in their ever tall and strong form gave me the first spark of confidence since last night.

"I'm so sorry about the things I said and did last time." Quatre apologized with rushed, breathless words.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry too. Don't worry about it." This is the way it had always been between me and Quatre, even Heero had managed to notice. We could yell and make angry eyes at each other, but for some reason none of the hurtful things we could say to each other was ever insurmountable.

He seemed relieved but he could muster no smile, considering the situation we were in.

"Where is everybody?" WuFei asked with his strict, deep voice, looking around himself and spotting only one nurse and the man by the window still working on the cup of water I had given him.

"I don't know." I expressed desperately. "They said something about the hospital being understaffed, but I couldn't really focus on what they were saying."

Quatre laid a hand on my shoulder. "Of course, don't worry about it." He turned to Trowa and asked him: "Will you please ask around, see what is going on exactly?"

As stoic as I am used to seeing him, Trowa only nodded and then walked away towards the nurse's station. The nurse hadn't been very receptive to my questions but the vision of a new attractive face paired with the sheer length of his physique drew her attention to the window. I couldn't hear what they were saying but Trowa, though his face remained entirely impassive, revealed himself as quite the ladies' man, reducing her to giggles and giving him all the answers he wanted.

"The woman has no shame." WuFei commented and looked away as if embarrassed for her.
Quatre ignored the entire scene and kept his attention directed at me. "Do you know anything?"

I shook my head. "They haven't told me anything." I sat down, remembering how tired my body was.

Quatre sat down next to me. "What happened?" He inquired carefully.

I sighed and buried my face in my hands.

"You don't have to tell me." He assured kindly and sympathetically.

"No, it's fine, it's just... hard." I looked at him poignantly.

Quatre nodded and placed a soothing hand on my knee.

"We had a fight." I started. "Heero has been seeing a Preventer psychologist for a while now and yesterday she gave him a bottle of anti-depressants to take. I completely overreacted, I was just upset and... I didn't think any of it through... I just started yelling at him." My voice was filled with self-loathing. "He still wanted to take them, he thought- he hoped they could help with his pain. I was so selfish, all I could do was blame him for not being good enough. And even though he begged me not to, I left..." I looked at Quatre desperately. "I left." I emphasized.

There was no judgment to be found in Quatre's aquamarine eyes.

"When I came back, after talking to a friend of mine who made me realize how goddamn stupid and selfish I had been... I found him lying on the kitchen floor..." I sniffed, feeling tears welling up even though after a night of crying I didn't want to cry and didn't think that I could. "Passed out... I don't know how many pills he took but he took too many... He tried to kill himself... Because of me, because I'm such a jerk!"

"Couldn't it have been an accident?" Quatre tried. The hand that lay on my knee trembled lightly, reflecting the quiver in his bottom lip.

Trowa, in the meantime, had joined us again but he waited for me to finish.

I snorted. "It's Heero, Quatre... he doesn't do accidents." I wish it was an accident but over the course of the night it had started to dawn on me that that possibility was too slim for me too hope for.

He looked down, maybe realizing the same thing. He released a breath and then looked up at his boyfriend. "What did she say?"

"Apparently there has been some sort of high speed train crash a few miles North and most of the doctors, nurses and paramedics have been sent on site to deal with the injured." Trowa dutifully relayed. "Only a small amount of the staff has stayed here. All non-critical cases have been redirected to other hospitals but they still have their hands full, they don't have the man-power to look after visitors."

"This is just ridiculous." WuFei exclaimed, his fists clenched at his sides. "They should at least make time to let us know how he is doing." His voice was seething and he cast a glare over his shoulder at the nurse in the station. She promptly shut the frosted window.

Trowa nodded. "That is exactly what I said. The nurse was understanding, she has paged Heero's doctor for us. I am hoping he will be here soon with news."
Quatre reached for Trowa's hand. "Thank you. You are amazing."

"Yeah, thanks man." I echoed with a hoarse voice.

"No problem. You have been waiting long enough." He said adamantly.

"Hell, I've been waiting long enough and I've only been here for five minutes." WuFei spoke impatiently.

Quatre turned back to me. "I'm sorry it took us so long to get here."

I shook my head. "I am actually surprised you got here so soon."

"Well, Trowa and I were on L1 for business, so it was a shorter flight and WuFei was already on his way to earth for Preventer business. We ran into each other in the parking lot outside."

I nodded, I felt lucky that they had been relatively close by. If Quatre and Trowa had been on L4, they wouldn't have been able to come here for a long time, with only two or three shuttles leaving L4 for Earth everyday and the spaceflight itself being close to fourteen hours. I was also glad Quatre had taken the initiative to contact WuFei as well. I had never really built any sort of relationship with the fifth Gundam Pilot and so I didn't know how to contact him, but it was good to have him here, to support Heero. Heero always spoke of WuFei with great respect, leading me to think he might appreciate his presence here as well.

Trowa settled in the seat next to Quatre and I could see them holding hands. I was happy for them, but at the same time a needle-sharp pain stung my heart.

WuFei remained standing, with his arms folded across his chest, glaring at the decorative exotic plants and the modern art on the walls, occasionally averting his eyes to glance at his wristwatch. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I had, that all that stuff is just a facade which fails to hide that this is just another hospital where some people come to be healed and some people come to die. The impressive arching steel structure that supports the towering glass panes of the lobby has no impact on Death, nor do the plants imported from South America.

We waited together in silence. Waiting for the doctor to appear. All of us were lost in our thoughts, hopes and prayers, wishing the news that we will receive will be merciful.

When a doctor came, he approached the man at the window. His lips moved with whispers that were inaudible at the distance.

Suddenly, the silence was broken.

The faint sound of a plastic cup hitting the tiled floor and water spilling, spreading across the floor, like tears spread across the man's face. His whole body started shaking and then the sobs came, almost violently.

The doctor stood in front of him, his coat a crisp angelic white even though he was a bringer of bad news, the news of death. He made an awkward attempt to consolidate the heartbroken man, placing a large pale hand on his shaking, slumped shoulder.

"How...? How...?" The man tried to ask through his streaming tears and overpowering sobs and eventually he settled on a wailing: "Why?"

The doctor shook his head, he had no answer that could offer any comfort. He waved the nurse over, the kind nurse in the pink cardigan that had been crushing on Trowa only minutes before. Her
face was compassionate and reflected the man's pain. Slowly she guided him out of his seat. The poor man could barely stand, let alone walk, but he managed with tiny steps, his whole posture hunched over, his limbs trembling. She directed him around the puddle of water, so he wouldn't slip and led him through a door next to the nurse's station to a more private place.

His cries kept echoing back to me.

After a moment of regaining his composure, the doctor turned and walked towards me.

I felt frozen and I couldn't feel my heart beating anymore.

I am next. I thought.

My stomach churned with each step that he took towards me. He seemed to be moving in slow motion, going slower and slower still as he came near me. My eyes darted to the door through which the man had disappeared. The cup and the water was still on the floor.

The grip of Quatre's hand on my knee strengthened, he too felt the tension of fear.

With only a few more steps between the doctor, myself and heartbreak - I imagined - Quatre turned back to me, looked at my pale face, drenched of all blood and color and told me in a soft: "Everything is going to be alright." Even though I could read in his eyes that he was miserably unconvinced of his own words.

"Duo Maxwell?" The doctor scanned our faces. "Is one of you Duo Maxwell, who brought in Heero Yuy?"

Sookie must have been sane enough to tell the staff our names when we got here last night. Just as she had been the one not too much out of her mind to think to bring the bottle of pills so the doctors knew exactly what and how much he had taken. The doctor produced the bottle she had handed to him from the depths of the pocket of his coat.

I couldn't say anything. Let him think one of the others is Duo Maxwell and let him offer him his meaningless apologetic looks and rehearsed hand on their shoulder.

But Quatre, though free of ill-intentions, betrayed me. He patted my shoulder and said to the doctor: "This is Duo. We are also here for Heero, we're his friends."

He looked at all of us and blinked nervously underneath the strength of WuFei's glare.

"Well?" WuFei demanded impatiently. "We have waited long enough, don't you think?"

I was just the mute shrinking in his seat. Suddenly I no longer felt the rush that I had felt before. It dawned on me that it might be much more merciful to leave me unknowing in the waiting room, than to obliterate all hope. Denial was a good friend of mine.

"Yes of course." The tall doctor turned towards me. On his ashen face the tiniest of smiles appeared.

"I have good new for you." He said.

This is when my heart started beating again.

"Your friend is going to be okay." The doctor said to all of us and Quatre audibly sighed next to me.
He reached out his hand and handed me the bottle of pills.

I didn't take it from him, I didn't want to hold it, I didn't even want to look at it. My breaths were shaky on inhale and exhale and I tried to calm the myriad of feelings that overwhelmed me. He is going to be okay, I repeated to myself. He is going to be okay.

Quatre reached out and accepted the bottle on my behalf, cradling it in his hand in his lap, as I heard the rattle of the pills again as the bottle was moved around, I felt sick to my stomach. I vaguely registered WuFei inquiring demandingly: "When can we see him?" He asked it in a tone to which only the answer "right away" would be suitable, but the doctor disappointed all of us by informing we would have to wait a little longer. I imagine it was WuFei's intense glare that made him promise to send a nurse to escort us to Heero's room as soon as one had some time to spare.

The doctor pivoted on his heels and started to walk away, leaving us all quiet and dazed. But I suddenly rose out of my seat, at about his fourth or fifth step, ignoring the feeling of light-headedness. To the back of his head I said: "There is something I have to know."

The doctor turned back to face me, his eyebrows raised in expectation. He was going to make me ask.

I stepped up to him, feeling uncomfortable voicing my question any louder than I would absolutely have to, even though there was no one else present in the waiting room to overhear. I swallowed, staring into his eyes. His eyes were tired too, but a different kind of tired, a kind to which I was not sympathetic. As I tried to form words, the image of Heero on the kitchen floor assaulted me and I could still feel his dried blood on my hands even though in the night Sookie had returned from the bathroom with moist paper towels and had dutifully and attentively cleaned it off. I have never had worse blood on my hands. I would not soon forget what it felt like.

I saw the impatience in the doctors eyes as I struggled with words and sentences and I realized I would have to be quick or he would leave me without answers again. I wasn't really sure if I wanted to know the answer - I had a strong feeling I already did - but I finally voiced my question: "This was a suicide attempt, wasn't it?"

The doctor seemed only slightly taken aback by my blunt choice of words. He started very politically correct: "It is impossible to exclude that possibility."

I felt Quatre's presence next to me, but I wished he had left the bottle of pills in his seat. I had heard it rattle as he walked up to me and the sound just had a physical effect on me.

"However," the doctor surprised us all by continuing, "I presume this incident to be an unfortunate accident."

There was no thought in my mind other than: Is he lying to me? I was just too shocked and understandably pessimistic to instantly take his words as true, even though they offered a welcome escape for the torment I had been going through.

As to be expected, Quatre was the one, of the four of us, to voice our thoughts. "An accident?" He wrapped his arm around mine, either offering me support or seeking it, I didn't know. His tone of voice was shocked but hopeful at the same time. Personally, I feared I couldn't afford to be hopeful anymore.

Diabolic as it may have been, I sincerely expected the tall doctor to laugh curtly and say: "No, no, I was just kidding. Man, you should have seen your faces! Of course he tried to off himself!"
I blinked to erase his mocking expression from my mind.

In reality, this is what he said: "Protriptyline++ is a very tricky drug when it comes to dosage. As a particularly strong anti-depressant and a tricylic anti-depressant on top of that we see a lot of accidental overdoses and aside from your surprised reaction I have no reason to believe this case is any different."

"That doesn't mean anything to me." WuFei expressed with apparent annoyance. "What does that mean?"

"I'm sorry. Let me explain: the fact that it is a strong anti-depressant usually calls for a preliminary phase in which the dosage is set quite low. During this phase a person is desensitized to the effects of the drug and then the dosage is increased to a more helpful dosage, this is necessary to avoid a too strong, toxic reaction at the start of use. This is the case with Protriptyline++. Also, all tricylic anti-depressants have a narrow therapeutic index, meaning that the therapeutic dose is very close to a toxic dose." The doctor reached out his hand "Would you please give me the bottle so I can show you?"

Quatre placed the bottle in his hand.

The doctor squinted at the tiny print on the label and then turned it over to show us.

The label bore the name of the pharmaceutical company, the name of the drug and it's slogan, Heero's name and a brief description of dosage.

"You see, where it says dosage, it says 75 milligrams to 100 milligrams per day. Though this is correct, this information is not complete. This dosage is only to be taken after the initial preliminary phase, so after desensitization. We examined the remaining contents and it appeared that - according to this label - mister Yuy took an appropriate dose of 100 milligrams. However, he did not go through the desensitization first, so this dosage was too high. Most drugs require a quite severe increase of amount to elicit any serious overdose symptoms, but because the therapeutic index is so narrow with tricyclic anti-depressants, it takes only a small extra amount to become toxic. An amount as small as 25 milligrams extra, or the prescribed dosage without desensitization is toxic."

We were all shocked.

I started trembling.

"If he had just read the enclosed information this would have all been clear and this probably would have never happened. It clearly states that first time users should take only 50 milligrams, divided into two equal doses in the morning and in the evening. Instead, mister Yuy, sadly, immediately ingested 100 milligrams. Because he was not desensitized this was a toxic amount which caused confusion, disorientation, respiratory problems and cardiac arrhythmias. If he hadn't been found in time he would probably have gone into cardiac arrest." The doctor seemed to be lecturing at this point, intentionally scaring us. "It is really quite a problem in our modern society, which relies quite heavily on the intake of medicine, that people neglect to read the information enclosed with the prescription."

My eyes stung with tears. My heart just stung. My hand, that shook controllably reached into my jeans pocket and pulled out the thin sheets of paper with fine print. I could feel everyone looking at me. My fellow pilots didn't quite know yet what it meant, what I was holding, but realization dawned on the doctor's face.
"What's this?" Quatre wondered innocently.

"I had it with me the whole time." I said and then a sob escaped me. "I was angry. I didn't even think!"

Quatre recognized the pharmaceutical name on the bundle of papers and bit his lip. He tried to consolidate me. "It's okay... It's not your fault."

"Not my fault?" I snorted darkly. "I almost killed him!"

"That is not true." Quatre said strictly. "It was just an unfortunate chain of events. Heero should have known better than to take drugs without reading the information first." He turned back to the doctor and urged: "Can we please just see him? We really just need to see him."

"I'll see what I can do." He replied curtly and then walked off.

"I need to sit down." I said. If I didn't sit down soon, I would either pass out or throw up. "Fuck!" I exclaimed as I lowered myself back into my seat.

Quatre hurried to my side and rubbed my back soothingly.

"There is no way you could have known things would turn out like this." Trowa tried.

I suddenly started crying again, silent tears spilling from my eyes, streaming down my face. I kept shaking my head. "He begged me not to leave." I said and tasted the salt of my own tears. "He begged me not to leave and I left."

"The important thing is that he is going to be okay."

I kept shaking my head. It was all my fault. It was all my fault! If I just hadn't gotten so caught up in my own, selfish emotions! I shouldn't have yelled at him. I should have known better, with his eyes pleading and his voice wavering. And I shouldn't have left!

Barely able to see through my tears I straightened out the papers in my lap, just to have something to do with my hands and distract myself. The last page I had read, in the train on my way to yell at Nettle, was still on top, a noticeable tear in the top corner that separated the "Risk" from "of overdose". Blinking away the salty water that blurred my vision I briefly read the section underneath the header in bold print. It was almost exactly what the doctor had just told us.

I vividly saw myself standing in our apartment. Heero's sorrowful eyes focused on me. I could feel the rough denim of my jeans grazing my skin as I had reached into my pocket and produced the bottle. I hadn't been at that moment, but now I was acutely aware of the papers folded up in my other pocket. I see myself walking to the dinner table and place the bottle on the surface. I start to turn and I want to scream at myself, but history is not something that can be altered.

"Please don't leave me." Is what Heero tried to beg. But I slammed the door shut before he even got to finish his sentence.

"Duo," Trowa started mildly, "You are obviously missing the silver lining here. At least this means he didn't do it on purpose."

"Heero wouldn't take something without checking it thoroughly first!" I snapped. "At the very least I was such a big asshole that I drove him to do something reckless and dangerous." I shut up when I saw a nurse approaching us.
"Doctor Gellar asked me to take you to mister Yuy's room."

I shook my head again, feeling my disheveled braid coming loose. "I can't see him." I blurted with a mumble. "I can't see him like that, knowing that I did that to him."

"Maxwell!" WuFei growled, drawing all eyes to his impatient face. "You've made a mistake. Don't make another one. Now let's go see him."

I blinked up at him, his face stern and uncompasionate, but righteous. And right he was. I straightened my back and ran a hand through my hair. I got out of my seat and nodded. "You are right." I told him. "Please take us to him." I requested the nurse.

"Of course, follow me." With a card on a keychain around her neck she opened the door I had been guarding diligently all night. They swung open with a hiss of air. Just inside, we waited for the doors to automatically close again, before she opened the next set of double doors, leading down a long white corridor with doors on either side. A nurse and a doctor were at the end of the hallway, looking and pointing at a chart, their voices hushed. The hall was filled with the sound of beeps - in the rhythm of slow heartbeats - and respirators, drifting through the open doors of the rooms on either side.

RECOVERY an overhead sign read.

The nurse flipped the cover page of the chart she had been carrying, pressed against her chest, away and trailed the words with her finger as she informed us: "Mister Yuy arrived at two past six, presenting with respiratory difficulty and cardiac arrhythmia due to an overdose of tricyclic antidepressants. Shortly after arrival the patient stopped breathing, requiring intubation. To absorb the remaining medicine out of his system he was administered activated charcoal through a nasal tube. He received a total of six stitches to the back of his head, a CT scan ruled out any internal damage such as a brain hemorrhage. If your insurance does not cover these procedures the hospital has a payment plan."

"Not necessary." WuFei ensured, glaring at the insensitive nurse. "He is insured with the Preventers. They will take care of everything."

"Very well."

I heard the click of her pen and then she appeared to be writing something down.

All of a sudden she stopped and declared without any sort of intonation: "Here he is." She sidestepped through an open doorway into a room on our right and waited for us to follow.

I had some difficulty crossing the threshold, but I managed.

Like he had appeared to me on the floor of our kitchen, he appeared to me in his hospital bed, drowning in the white. Machines on his left beeped and hissed, a computer screen visualized his heartbeat, steady and strong, the only relief in this situation. He was lying stiff on the mattress, his arms by his sides, almost as pale and white as the sheets. His eyes were closed, black lashes curled against white cheekbones. His lips around the tube that supplied him of oxygen, were cracked. His nostrills and the skin directly underneath was stained black, some charcoal that had been spilt when the nasal tube had been removed. In spite of everything, he looked peaceful. But the sight offered me no peace.

"When will the tube be taken out?" I heard Quatre ask the observing nurse.

"Shortly. Doctor Gellar went home after a twenty-four shift, Doctor Hapland, who is currently
supervising this hall, is currently busy with a more critical patient."

"There is no one else to do it? It looks so awful." Quatre continued, worry evident in his voice.

"It's kept him alive." The nurse dryly replied. "There is no harm in leaving it in a little longer. We have sedated mister Yuy, there is no risk of him waking up for a while."

"Could you maybe give us a little privacy?" WuFei wondered.

"No." She answered adamantly. "The rules are clear and they are firm. All visitors of unconscious patients must be supervised by a member of the hospital staff." She sighed dramatically and I felt her looking at me, still standing in the middle of the room, far away from Heero's bedside. "I only have fifteen minutes." She announced, making sure we understood that we, too, only had fifteen minutes.

I felt Quatre's hand on my shoulder.

"Duo, we'll give you a moment alone with him, okay? We'll be right outside in the hall."

"Yeah. Okay..." I heard their shuffling footsteps as they vacated the room. I eyed the nurse uncertainly as she, in turn, watched me like a hawk, only infrequently and briefly averting her eyes as she continued to update Heero's chart. Reminding myself that I had only a short while before I would be required to leave him again, I stepped up to the bed. The bed that seemed too big for Heero. After a moment of hesitation, I took hold of his limp and cold hand. The hand that seemed too small to be of the Perfect Soldier. A white bandage was wrapped around his head, obscured mostly by his dark bangs and thick wayward strands of his tousled hair. He was dressed in a light blue, paper hospital gown. The clothes he had been wearing were in a plastic bag on the nightstand.

Holding his hand, supporting him, guarding him, I felt like a fraud. My misguided doings were the reason he was lying there, a patient once more, reduced to a fallen soldier, sick and broken. What is the point of fixing something when you are only going to break it anew?

The question was inevitable. As ruthless as it was relentless in it's innocence and simplicity.

Is us being together, harmful to us as individuals?

Our fingers are entwined and our palms fit together so perfectly. Am I being deceived? His hand is cold now, but I remember its warmth. I remember its warmth as it slowly and sensually dragged up my chest, or down my back, short nails softly grazing skin. Fingertips callous but innocently curious, tracing a truth that only he knows, chasing a heartbeat dedicated to him, through my veins under my skin.

Would his hand be lifeless now if he had been with someone less tainted than I am? Someone with more real-world knowledge, someone who would have seen the good and the potential in the thing that only scared me?

Emotions welled and I gripped his fingers strongly.

He should know by now that I love him, love him more than words have yet managed to express, but there is something I had yet to say. "I'm sorry."

I was joined by the other pilots. They gathered around his bed, respectfully quiet. Quatre obsessed over straightening and smoothing the sheets that covered him till Trowa took gentle hold of his hand and guided them back to his side. One he kept holding. He clutched it as strongly as I did
Heero’s.

The nurse scraped her throat loudly and obnoxiously, interrupting the moment. "It's time to leave."

"Duo, it's time to go." Quatre said in a more gentle and understanding tone.

"When can we come back?" I wondered miserably, my voice cracking with unshed tears.

"The hospital should be fully staffed by noon," The nurse started, "then the regular visitor hours apply. Noon to three PM and in the evening, seven to eight PM."

I was about to object but Quatre assured me it was for the best. "You should go home and get some sleep anyway, you've been up all night. And we can pack some things for Heero to bring back to the hospital later." He suggested.

"What if he wakes up and no one is here?" I shuddered at the mere thought, envisioning his pathetic, abandoned expression, sympathizing with all the things he would be thinking and feeling in that moment.

"No need to worry about for now. We will keep him sedated for at least a few more hours."

"Isn't it possible for us to stay with him at all time, when the hospital is fully staffed again? Or at least Duo?" WuFei tried.

"We only extend that privilege to blood relatives and spouses." She spat and walked to the door and tapped her foot impatiently. "Now please..." She gestured for us to leave.

"Fine." WuFei spat at her. He stomped out of the room, mumbling something that made the nurse glare at him as he left.

"Let's go, Duo. Let's go now and we'll be sure to be back here at noon." Quatre put his hands on my shoulders and guided me away.

I was too numb and detached from my body to protest. All the fight had been drained from me last night. I tore my gaze away from Heero's impassive face but I held his hand till the last moment, till it slipped from my grip as Quatre led me further away from him. As our hands parted, I felt a moment of panic and all of last night rushed back to me. But as quick as it flooded me, it ebbed away and then I was back in that docile, tired state, constantly occupied with the sense that any moment now I would rip myself free of Quatre's grip and run back to Heero, but I never did. I recognized there was nothing I could do for him. More importantly, I realized bitterly, I had done enough.

"Never mind what that power-obsessive bitch said," WuFei raged explicitly, "I'll make some arrangements. There will be an extra bed ready for you in his room when we get back at twelve o'clock and she will not be bothering us."

I was too out of it to even thank him, even though I was certain he could and would make it happen.

Through the doors, as we were led back to the lobby, we heard shouting.

"Don talk to me like I'm stupid jus cuz I talk like a hillbilly, ya wee little woman! I wanna see my friend!"

The second set of doors opened and we spotted a curly blonde looking down at the short nurse
with the pink cardigan, shrinking under her furious glare. She became aware of our presence and turned, instantly visibly relieved to see me. She ignored the meek nurse who vainly tried to defend herself against the verbal onslaught she had suffered and hurried over to us, ignoring the other pilots who surrounded me as she was completely focused on me. "DuoIwassoworried!" She exclaimed in a single breath. "Is Heero okay? This useless woman won tell me anythin'."

"They said-" I scraped my throat as my awkward voice registered. "They said he is going to be fine."

"OhthankyouJesus..." She exhaled and then promptly hugged me. When we parted she blinked confusedly at the three young men looking at us inquisitively.

"Sookie, these are my friends."

"Hi, I'm Quatre." My other blond friend was quick to say and he politely shook Sookie's hand. "This is Trowa and that is WuFei. Are you in school with Duo?"

"Were. Yeah..." Sookie answered suspiciously, eyeing them with scrutiny.

"We know Duo from a long time ago."

Suddenly Sookie's eyes became large and full of understanding. "Oh! ... Oh! Right!" She shook all their hands enthusiastically as she had connected the dots correctly. "Wow, wow. I cannot believe I'm meetin' all of ya. May I just say: Imma big, big fan."

Quatre cast a look my way. "I'm assuming from her reaction she knows how me met?"

"I do, I do know!" Sookie answered for me. "Don worry, I won say a damn thing to anyone."

"We would appreciate that."

"But uh... what are you guys doin' here? In the lobby rather than with Heero I mean."

"We were kicked out." WuFei said with a poisonous tone. "They are understaffed and they don't have the time to let us stay with our friend."

Sookie nodded. "I heard about the train crash. It's all over the news. They actually think it was a bomb that caused it and specifically targeted Preventer employees."

"Oh my God..." Quatre brought a hand up to cover his open mouth.

WuFei sighed and admitted: "I knew. The accident is the "Preventer business" for which I came down to Earth. I didn't say anything because I thought it would be better not to cause everyone even more concern."

Quatre nodded. "You're right, we shouldn't really worry about that right now, we have to focus our thoughts on Heero. But WuFei, why won't you go to the head quarters and make sure everything is alright?"

He nodded. "I was going to go there anyway. I figured Une would have some strings to pull in this hospital, that would ensure we would not have to abide by these stupid rules. I'll meet you back here." Before he left he looked into my eyes meaningfully, as if trying to communicate without useless words that everything would be okay. Then he turned and walked away.

"We should get a cab and get to Duo's place. He needs to rest. We need to be there for Heero and
we all need our strength for that."

"Oh, ya don have to get a cab, I'll take ya. Yeah, I got my grandpa's car."

Five minutes later we were all stuffed into the tiny vehicle. Quatre and Trowa were in the backseat, their knees practically tucked under their chins. I was quiet and withdrawn, as the others appeared to be as well. No one said anything. Luckily, Sookie knew better than to ask questions for which we were not in the mood to answer.

The front door of our apartment building was not a welcome sight to me. Normally I would just be overwhelmed with this sense of being home, a sense that I had never had before. Now, it was just like any door and I half expected to find horror behind it once more.

When we entered the abandoned apartment, we were all hit with the foul smell, coming from the kitchen. The liquid that Heero had vomited had filled the space with a bitter, pungent smell. I looked at the smear of blood on the floor and flexed my fingers. Though my hands were clean, I could have sworn I could still feel the dried blood on my skin.

"I'll clean it up." Quatre declared, blocking my vision of the kitchen with his concerned face, his aqua eyes looking deep into my eyes. "Don't worry about it."

The mess hadn't been exactly what I was worrying about, but I could form no words to express myself. At Quatre's beckoning Trowa took me by the arm and took me to the bedroom. I could already hear Quatre getting the cleaning supplies out of the kitchen cabinet under the sink and Sookie asking if she could help.

"Do you want to shower first or sleep first?" Trowa asked, closing the bedroom door behind us.

"I don't think I can sleep." I said slowly, just standing there with my arms heavy at my sides. "But I would like to lie down for a little while." But I didn't move, I didn't do anything, I waited to be directed. I was so numb, my body felt like a shell that I had barely any control over.

"Okay." He said. "Let's get you out of that shirt first." He reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it up.

"Why?" My dead voice came muffled through the fabric as the shirt was pulled over my head.

"No reason." He stated blandly.

I would later discover there was blood on it.

I remained frozen in the middle of the room as Trowa walked over to the closet. I watched him get out a dark blue shirt and stopped him. "That's Heero's."

"Oh." He exchanged it for a dark grey shirt from another stack of clothes which was mine.

"It's just that... his clothes are a bit too small for me..." I explained dumbly.

"Right." He helped me into the clean shirt and afterward he guided me to the bed, but I stopped him again.

I pointed to Heero's bed and said: "That is my side." I didn't know why I lied to him, perhaps I was afraid he would judge me for childishly desiring to sleep under Heero sheets, rather than mine. The sheets were clean, hadn't been slept on yet, so you'd think it wouldn't matter, but for some reason it did. To me at least.
Trowa walked me around to the other side of the bed and covered me with the sheets once I had laid down. "I just wanted to say... I know you are hurting right now, but don't forget that Heero's is going to be okay and you will have all the time you need to make up for your mistake."

"Yeah, thanks." I croaked and I pulled the sheets up higher, suddenly cold. I noted, bitter sweetly, how much Trowa had changed since the war. I wondered only briefly why, before the answer dawned on me. Quatre. Quatre is the reason why. Obviously Quatre had had more success with his silent soldier than I had with mine. Quatre and I were very different and maybe therein lay the problem. With the analogy of the two bolts from our respective Gundams, I had been fooling myself. Fooling myself into thinking only one of us was damaged, whereas the other escaped unscathed. I had been damaged too, maybe not as badly as Heero, definitely not in the same way, but things have been hurt and broken within me, that affected my way of handling myself in the war positively, but affected my life in peacetime negatively. And I can grin and joke all I want, I can't pretend that scar tissue isn't there. I could make Heero believe it, but I could no longer make myself believe.

My past experiences were what caused me to react so angrily and offensively to the medicine. Someone without those experiences could have been more supportive, wouldn't have yelled at him, wouldn't have left him... wouldn't have nearly killed him.

Nettle's words ghosted through my mind like unwanted fingers pressing buttons of self-destruction.

I stared at the wall. I became very aware of the distance between me and Heero and I grew uncomfortable. He was so far away, with people I didn't know, I couldn't trust - people he wouldn't trust. I had left without a fight but I started to realize that I should have fought. I had succumbed to a very deep rooted sense: Being with Heero is hard. The last time I succumbed to this, he almost killed himself.

Being with Heero is hard. Being with Heero is hard...

It's a truth I've known all along, but only recently started to feel. Maybe because now, finally, after months and months of keeping my head up and giving answers to questions that confused me, I realized: Being with Duo is hard too.

Is it right for two people to be together when it's this hard on both of them? When I cringe and heartache each time Heero pulls back within himself. And when I confuse and scare him and make him feel like he's not good enough? But Nettle was wrong. Nettle was dead wrong. "Dead wrong" as in: I'd die before I'd say she's right. Heero and I are perfect for each other. The problem lies in the fact that we are imperfect people, ruined by a twisted past in which we still, self-loathingly, linger, never able to develop beyond that.

And there surfaced that tic tac torpedo of a thought again. We may be perfect for each other, but is us being together, harmful to us as individuals?

Whatever the answer was, it didn't matter right now, not for a little time to come. Right now, all that mattered was that Heero was alone in a hospital after almost losing his life. He should not be alone. Unconscious or not, aware or not, someone should be there to hold his hand.

I kicked the sheets away from me violently and jumped out of bed. I stepped into my shoes and left the laces untied for a moment as I walked out into the living room. Quatre was in the kitchen, still furiously scrubbing the floor, even though it looked clean to me in spite of the memory of blood and vomit that was so strong, the image flashed on my retina. Sookie was standing idly by, holding a bucket with water and soap but Quatre wouldn't let her help. She didn't seem to mind, she looked very troubled and appeared deeply lost in thought. Trowa was on the couch, hunched over towards
"Not you too." I grumbled and they all looked at me in surprise, previously unaware of my presence. "Heero can't stop watching the news either."

"Well listen to this." Trowa said and he aimed the remote to the television to turn up the volume.

"...have not confirmed the rumors going around this morning, that the explosion was caused by a bomb, not by a technical malfunction of the train itself. The explosion was so powerful that people in towns miles away from the site called emergency services to report it. As you can see in these aerial pictures, the entire train got derailed. Our own sources have assured us nothing accidental could have caused catastrophe like this, but the authorities are keeping their lips sealed and refuse to bring train traffic to a halt, except for the affected track. Our correspondent Nancy Wortworth is on site. Nancy, can you describe the situation for us at the moment?"

The image shifted to a blond to a backdrop of wrangled metal and a chopper climbing into the skies. "Well Drew, the scene was crawling with emergency personnel to help anyone who was lucky enough to survive this devastation, but now most of them are starting to leave, returning to their respective hospitals that have been running on skeleton crews since the crash yesterday, at a little past five PM. It was a massive, coordinated effort of central Florida's five biggest hospitals as part of the ESHC plan that had been put into action for the first time since in was instated last year. Preventer Investigators were also quickly on site. The agency has not yet released any statement, but the dominant presence of these men and women in uniform and the fact that the train was loaded with Preventer employees trying to get home, makes it appear that this particular train was not a random choice. If foul play is indeed at work, it seems that the perpetrator chose this train on purpose, to kill and injure as many Preventer personnel as possible."

Quatre and Sookie had come to stand beside me as we all watched the news, adding to the uncomfortable numb daze we already felt.

"An inside source has informed us that the Preventers have already identified one of the unrecognizable passenger, using DNA and though the agency upholds its standard of secrecy, it seems they are considering the remains to be of the bomber. This leaked information has not been confirmed by the agency and Kelly Mitchell, president of the Highspeed Train Company still maintains and stresses it was not a bomb but a technical mishap. Interestingly, the first man, so quickly identified by the Preventer Forensic crew, appears to have been Ethiopian. His nationality is surely curious and significant, as only a few months prior to this incident, the Ethiopian government accused the Preventer agency of an attempted assassination on president NgGasi. Thus far, the Ethiopian representative refuses to answer our questions as well. But it seems increasingly more likely that we are indeed, dealing with a terrorist attack targeting the Preventer agency where it would hurt the most: their devoted employees."

Oh my God, I thought. Even though nothing had yet been confirmed, to us former pilots it immediately appeared obvious that the Ethiopian president had recruited someone to execute revenge on the agency.

The journalist put her finger against her ear, probably focusing on the information being fed to her through her earplug. Her face turned grim. "I have just been informed of the most recent death toll. So far thirty-three deaths have been confirmed. Over one hundred and fifty other passengers have been transported to several hospitals with injuries ranging from minor to possibly fatal and the last of the passengers has just been freed from the wreck and airlifted to the nearest hospital, almost 18 hours after the crash. Almost all passengers on board were Preventer employees on their way home from work. President Une has postponed the agency's first official statement regarding the matter
"to later today. Until then everything will remain speculation, but one way or another, the agency has suffered a terrible blow today."

"Wait," I started and I reached over the back of the couch and grabbed Trowa's shoulder to get his attention, "What was the route of the train?"

"Uhm," Trowa searched his memory, "Charleston to Miami."

"Oh no..." I breathed and my shoulders slumped and then chuckled darkly.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" Quatre demanded to know.

"That train goes through Jacksonville."

This didn't mean anything to Quatre, so he could only frown.

"I- I know- I have a friend who makes the commute from Jacksonville to Kennedy Space center each day. He's a Preventer mechanic, his name is Landon Jones."

"Oh my God... Duo I'm so sorry. Maybe he's okay though! Maybe he was on a different train, maybe he is one of the passengers with only minor injuries..." He tried, not wishing to upset me anymore than I already was.

I shook my head. "With my luck he was the first to be pronounced dead." I straightened up and took a deep breath. "I want to go back to the hospital. I can't sit around here. I need to be with Heero."

"Won't ya jus get sent away again?" Sookie wondered with pitiful eyes.

"No," Trowa said, "He is right. We'll go. I'll call WuFei on the way, see if he has made any progress." He patted my shoulder and added with quiet voice: "I'll ask him if he can find out some news about your friend as well."

I nodded, the lump in my throat was too big to allow for words.

Quatre and I hurried to pack some of Heero's clothing and necessities and after spending no more than an hour at the apartment we forced our way back into Sookie's grandfather's tiny car and headed back towards the hospital. Trowa was in the back seat with his cell phone glued to his ear, a stern and determined look on his face. I noticed Quatre holding his other hand in his lap.

"WuFei," I heard him say relieved, "I'm glad I finally got a hold on you. How are the negotiations with the hospital going?" He met my eyes in the rear view mirror and told: "Everything is taken care of. Une gave them a call."

I exhaled with relief. The woman was a miracle worker. I had to remind myself to tell her so.

"How is it going at the agency- wait, I'll put you on speaker."

We all looked at Sookie briefly, thinking maybe she shouldn't be hearing all this, but I think we all came to the same conclusion, that we trusted her and Trowa set his phone to speaker.

WuFei's voice was tinny but clear. "They are putting up an impressive facade, from the outside you can't tell that anything is wrong. But I talked to Une and shit has definitely hit the fan, I'm literally quoting her on that one. Nothing is being confirmed, we don't want to cause panic before we have a handle on this situation. Unfortunately we have a rather prominent leak. I'm not sure what you
have heard on the news so far, but it was a bomb and we are assuming it was indeed purposefully planted to harm as many Preventer employees as possible. With the headquarters itself being a veritable fortress, the soft target was their only way to hurt us. We've identified the remains of the bomber as Kaamil Haroun, he's from Ethiopia."

"Do we know him?" Trowa asked, raising his voice to be heard over the hum of the engine.

"Yeah- wait, where are you, what is that noise?"

"We're on route back to the hospital."

"Okay. Yeah, we know him. It's not good though. He's a fanatic supporter of NgGasi and has been on his unofficial employee list since the man was just a sick and scheming Senator. It would be one hell of a coincidence if this turned out not to have been planned by NgGasi as revenge on the agency... and you know how I feel about coincidences."

"Any more information?"

"Our investigators are inspecting the bomb right now, I'm overseeing, it seems pretty unsophisticated. Probably had to make it right here in the RUSA and with such a strict control on all sorts of materials that could be used to make a bomb, he defected to a mix of some temperamental ingredients. He probably boarded at the train stop right after Kennedy Space Center, right before it blew, no way he could have made it far with this thing."

"WuFei, we are almost at the hospital, I need to ask you another favor." Trowa started and our eyes met in the rear view mirror again, briefly. "There is a chance a friend of Duo's was on that train, could you try to track him down."

"I'm not sure how accommodating the agency is at this moment to pursue this, but I will definitely try."

"Thanks, his name is Landon Jones, he's a mechanic."

"He works in Grid Five," I added, "he's an MS mechanic."

"Well, that certainly narrows it down." WuFei said. "I'll get back to you as soon as I know something. Good luck."

"Same to you!" Said Quatre.

Trowa put his phone into his pocket just as Sookie found a parking space.

"I can not believe this is happening." Quatre whispered to Trowa as they followed me inside with hastened steps. "This is the first time the Preventers have been attacked on their own turf. What does this mean?"

"It means the Preventers have got to end it." Trowa replied ominously.

I paid them no heed, simply because I couldn't. Tunnel vision guided me to the double doors that were locked to anyone without an employee's pass. It was immediately obvious much of the staff had returned from the crash site. Doctors and paramedics came in through the lobby doors and scattered through various hallways leading into the depths of the hospital. A lot of them wore dirty clothes, dirty with blood. Three nurses manned the nurse's station and handed out charts. Through the shouts I heard that none of the patients of the crash had been transported here but several critical cases had come in during the night who needed immediate attention.
I waited by the doors as Trowa walked off, trying to get the attention of one of the nurses who could open the doors for us.

"Are you worried about your friend?" Quatre asked, keeping me company.

"I guess but... everything is overshadowed." From the corner of my eye I caught his slight nod.

"We have to wait a little while. They are busy now." Said Trowa's voice who had joined us.

All of a sudden the anger that I had felt that previous night resurfaced and I slammed my fists against the locked doors. The reinforced glass panes rattled as the doors shook but did not open.

"Fuck this! Fuck this!" I screamed and I kicked the doors for good measure.

"Take it easy." Trowa's strong hands gripped me and pulled me back, so the doors were safe from my kicking feet.

"I can't stand being this fucking helpless and dependent!" I exclaimed, struggling in his hold, but I would not be able to muster the energy it would take to break free. "Open this goddamn door!" I shouted to random hospital staff who just eyed me tiredly.

"Sir?" A nurse approached us with a stern expression. "If you don't calm down this instance I will have you removed."

I was about to give her a colorful earful when Trowa calmly spoke up: "We are here to see Heero Yuy. If I am not mistaken miss Une contacted you."

She pursed her lips. "I will have to see your ID's."

We showed her our ID's - our fake ID's - she inspected them with scrutiny, it didn't matter, they were indistinguishable from the real thing. If it could get Trowa and Quatre through inter-space customs, certainly a nurse wasn't going to be able to tell. She got on my nerves when she declared that no one had mentioned "the young girl" and therefore she was not allowed to accompany us. I was about to throw another fit when Sookie calmed me.

"That's fine Duo. I should pro'ly get back to my grandparents anyway. Good luck okay." She rose to the tips of her toes and kissed my cheek. "I hope Heero will better soon and I hope yer friend is okay too."

I nodded dumbly and watched her go.

My whole body flinched when the nurse swiped her card in front of the scanner and the doors opened with their familiar hiss. She guided us back to Heero's hospital room and then left as she had probably been ordered to do so by Lady Une, in spite of the rules that were previously strictly enforced.

Nothing seemed to have changed. Heero still lay lifeless in the white bed. But the tube that had been supplying him of air was gone and aside from the rhythmic beeping, the room had been left empty without the loud exhales of the respirator. I approached him slowly and took hold of his hand again. It was still cold. I sighed. It was a sigh of relief. Relieved to be with him again, relieved to be by his side, able to defend and protect him. Relieved that he hadn't been visited by Death in the meantime.

Quatre put the duffel bag that we had packed on the night stand by the bed and pulled a chair from the corner of the room towards me, but I didn't sit down. My entire body felt stiff, I felt like a statue, vigilant at his side. I didn't want to sit down, I was afraid that if I did, I might fall asleep and
I didn't want to, even though my body craved it with an incessant throb in my head and an imbalance to my legs.

His hand started to become warm as my own heat transferred.

I heard some rustling as Quatre had curiously taken Heero's chart out of the holder at the foot of the bed and started leafing through it. Trowa peered at the sheets over his boyfriend's shoulder, a look of complete concentration.

Quatre whispered to his lover: "They took the respirator out an hour ago and gave him another sedative. He won't wake up until later tonight." Quatre looked apologetic as he realized I had heard him. The two of them remained quiet after Quatre put the chart back and kept me company.

After a century of silence, I wondered softly: "Has he always been this small?"

"Heero is strong, Duo. He'll be fine, the doctor said so too." My blond friend tried to assure me.

"I used to believe that..." I muttered. "I used to believe he is strong. Now I have my doubts."

"It was an accident Duo." Trowa reminded me.

"But still!" I exclaimed and looked at them desperately. "Would you carelessly take a large dose of anti-depressants without good reason? Heero knows better, he does, but I drove him to that! I think..." I shut my eyes. "I think I make him weak."

"That is not true. And you know it. You have it backwards. Heero used to be weak. You made him strong. Your love and devotion gave him strength." Trowa spoke adamantly.

"What do you know?" I spat.

"I do know." Trowa laid his hands on Quatre's shoulders and looked at me meaningfully. "I do know."

"Duo," Quatre started, "I know that at this moment it's hard to envision anything but the bad memories, but I beg you, remember the good. Remember the good and you will see how much you've helped Heero. Remember Relena's ball? How hard he laughed? He was happy Duo. He was happy, thanks to you."

"Well, he doesn't look very happy now, does he? He's so unhappy that he felt he had to take drugs! I did that!"

"Goddammit, Duo!" Quatre stomped his foot and caused us all surprise. "Are your really that stupid? Do you really not know any better? J is the one who made him unhappy, the war is what made him unhappy. You can't expect to be enough to change all that single handedly. But you did make a change, you helped him be himself and you helped him acknowledge that he could not continue living the way he had during the war! You gave him the opportunity to be happy, now what you have to do is follow-through. You started this, you made him smile and yes, you made him cry too. But it's all for the better, you know this!" He took a deep breath and looked shameful. "Look, I had my doubts. I had the wrong impression of him and I made stupid, wrong judgments based on that. Remember how angry you were at me for making those assumptions? For assuming Heero could never be changed? That he could never be all he is supposed to be by just being with you? Don't make that same mistake! Because I was wrong and now you are!"

I blinked, shocked by his out of character outburst.
"I'm sorry." He hurried and he seemed to deflate. Trowa squeezed his shoulders reassuringly.

"No, it's- it's fine." I stumbled. I looked back at Heero's impassive face, lost in thought. I did remember the night of Relena's ball and of course I remembered his laughter, I would never forget. But it seems so long ago and so far away that sometimes it seems to be no more relevant than an incoherent dream. Even though it happened, even though it was real, everything since has changed and the hope that the memory sparks seemed false.

The silence was awkward as we all thought about what Quatre had said, looking at our unconscious friend with forlorn eyes and we all jumped when a monotonous ring tone coming from Trowa's jeans interrupted the quiet.

With quick but ever elegant movements he retrieved his cell phone from his pocket. "Hello WuFei, you are on speaker." He said.

"Right." Came a tinny version of WuFei's deep baritone voice. "Duo, I found your friend. He was in the train, but he's fine."

My heart skipped a beat. I looked at the other two pilots in surprise, checking the expressions on their faces to make sure they heard it too.

"I understand why you like him," he emphasized "you" and made a point to snort loudly, "he is as incessantly talkative as you are. But you should really pick your friends more wisely, for future reference. I mistook his scream for a little girl's when they set his shoulder."

"Wait. Set his shoulder? He dislocated his shoulder? I thought you said he was fine."

Even though I did not know WuFei very well, I could vividly imagine him rolling his eyes. "Well, what's a dislocated shoulder, really? Other than that he is fine in the civilian sense of the word as well."

I released the deep breath that I had been holding. "Where is he?"

"Turns out he was right here, at the Preventer head quarters. They brought some of the passengers with minor injuries here so they could immediately answer some questions that could aid the investigation. He saw the bomber, the drawing a sketch artist made based on his descriptions definitely looks like Kaamil Haroun's headshot. Turns out Haroun had brought the bomb with him in a baby stroller, probably because it was so volatile, it had to remain level. When Haroun entered the train at the first stop after Kennedy Space Center, your friend moved to another part of the train because he thought the baby might start to cry. His aversion to infants saved his life."

A smile broke the gloom on Quatre's face and he looked at me with aqua eyes that dared to sparkle. "Duo, this is great!" He patted my shoulder.

I did feel glad Landon was fine, but still everything was overshadowed by worrying thoughts of Heero and anger at the attack. I imagined all the people who would not be receiving good news. In my minds eyes I saw the poor man at the windows again, his fingers going limp causing him to drop his cup of water, the fluid spilling hopelessly on the floor as his hopes and dreams did. I could only nod in response.

"How is Heero?"

"No change." Trowa answered.

"But he is going to be fine." Quatre added with strong emphasis.
"Good. I'll be with you as soon as I can, but for now I would like to help a hand here."

"Of course."

"I should be there at around six or seven or something. We could all get something to eat." WuFei suggested, his voice sounded distracted and some of his words were drowned out by noises in the background. "I'll keep you updated on the situation here. Let me know if there are any changes with Heero."

"Will do. Good luck, WuFei."

"You too."

The line disconnected.

Trowa pocketed his cell phone.

"You know, why won't we go get some lunch?" Quatre carefully suggested. "You haven't eaten since yesterday. You need to take care of yourself."

"I'm fine. I want to stay here." I replied stubbornly.

"Duo-" Quatre started in his concerned tone, but he fell silent when Trowa grabbed his arm and they shared a quiet look.

"We'll go eat something and smuggle you back a sandwich." Trowa said and already headed to the door.

"I'm not hungry." I sounded childish but I couldn't be bothered.

"We will force-feed you if necessary." With that Trowa guided Quatre out of the room and shut the door behind them.

The beeping of the heart monitor continued incessantly with a dull, slow beat. I watched the green iridescent line than snaked across the black screen. Blood pressure and other values were noted in the top corners. The blood pressure was low but within normal range, so the digits were green. Green meant no immediate danger, no immediate risk, still I felt like I could lose him any second. I don't know why I felt that but it's a fear I remember from long ago, when every day a thought would cross my mind; "Has he died?". Ever since I first met him, he's been in my thoughts. At first his presence was unwelcome, I'd toss and turn in my bunk bed, angry with him, picturing the mangled, stripped image of my so beloved Deathscythe. That anger did not last. It becomes harder to dislike someone when he saves your life, even if he has to be a total arrogant asshole about it. The anger became impossible when he risked his own life to save mind yet again.

I still remember his face lighting up white in the beam of the freight train. And then he squeezed his eyes shut tightly and we fell into the shadows of the railroad bridge.

So I remembered when I stopped disliking him. However, it eluded me when I started to love him. All I knew is that since it started it has grown exponentially, multiplying within myself to replace every fiber of my own being. Every organ, every cell, every atom was devoted to him. That sounded like a cliché an abundance of movies has discussed in it's most romantic, glorified detail, but it is actually a horror. It was a horror for the eyes, meant to look at him and only him, to see him lifeless like this. It was a horror for the hands, meant only to touch him and only him, to hold his cold hand. But it's the kind of horror film you can't help but watch and get involved in, even though you have no idea who is going to be dead when the end credits start to roll.
I touched his face, it was cold too, especially the tip of his nose. I touched the fine black dust that stains the skin underneath his nostrils, the substance in which it had been suspended had dried up and evaporated. It stained the tip of my finger black. I looked around myself, searching for a tissue to clean my finger and his face, but I found nothing. I knew there would be a roll of toilet paper in the small adjoining bathroom of the private hospital room, but I dreaded the idea of letting go of his hand so much that I decided against it. So I pulled out the end of my sleeve and used it to clean off the remainder of the activated charcoal.

With my free hand I pulled out the brochure that was folded and crumpled deep into my pocket and stared at it. My eyes were too exhausted to focus on the fine print. I exhaled and put it away, placing it on the nightstand, by the bottle of medicine, where it should have been all along. I placed my hand on the plastic back with his clothing, it slowly deflated under the weight and when I pulled my hand back the plastic briefly stuck to my sweaty palm. I searched the room for something to occupy my thoughts with, but everything was white and bland, the hallway that could be viewed through the window in the door was equally eventless. Only occasionally a doctor or nurse would pass by with complete disregard to the trauma in my heart.

"Here we are again..." I mused, a bitter smile appeared on my face as in a hospital, our story began. Only this time I could not pretend to save him and he could not save himself. If possible, this situation was even more fucked up than that one time. Even though that time he jumped out of fifty story high window and didn't open his parachute till the final few yards to the beach below. We were both completely helpless, this wasn't a rescue mission, this was life and life can't be solved with a knife and a parachute. Nothing is able to cut the things that tie you down in life. And nothing is able to keep you from falling in life.

One of the first things G taught me - and J taught Heero and the other mad scientists taught the other pilots - is what equipment you need to get out of any situation. There is a list of items that I could recite even in the depths of sleep. We took it with us everywhere as we were required to do and indeed, with the addition of some impromptu creativity, there wasn't a single situation that we were not appropriately equipped for. I wished life worked like that. That there was a list of things, albeit inanimate objects or acquirable skills, that would prepare you for anything and save you from any form of harm. But life doesn't work like that. Even when you think you have a list figured out, you find yourself neck deep in trouble or heartache, with none of your tools able to vamp an escape.

I hated that.

You'd think you'd get the hang of this; life and peace. You'd think that after as many months that have passed, you would have learned something, you'd be wiser, more prepared, you'd have answers to the questions that used to dumbfound you. But the hard and ironic thing about life that I have discovered, since that night in suite 102 in Luxembourg, is that the error message remains the same, no matter how good you think you have gotten at fixing things.

No standard solution available...

No standard solution available...

No standard solution available...

The door opened and the sudden sound startled me. I twisted my head around and watched Trowa and Quatre walk into the room. Quatre handed me a simple sandwich with sliced meat and salad that he retrieved from the pocket of his coat, double-wrapped in cellophane.

I knew better than to argue with him and I knew better than to think Trowa was only joking when
he mentioned force-feeding earlier, so I took slow bites and with paced progress managed to eat most of it. My two friends tried to alleviate the tension and described in detail the cafeteria: giving me directions, listing the main items on the menu and describing the interior. They knew it was all irrelevant and insignificant, but contrary to WuFei's apparent belief system, sometimes it just helps to talk, even when it makes no sense and your words have no importance other than to fill the silence.

"I would have brought you something to drink but they only had glasses and I couldn't see myself getting that out of the cafeteria in the pocket of my coat without some serious spillage. I had already used all of my cellophane to wrap the sandwich, so..."

"You had cellophane with you?"

He started to fidget with an elastic chord at the hem of his open coat. "Just a few pieces. Just in case."

Trowa shrugged and took Quatre's hand, to stop him from plucking at the string. "You can never be too prepared. You never know." He said, directing a sympathetic look at Quatre.

I understood it to be part of his obsessive compulsive behavior, so even though it made no sense to me to bring cellophane with you to random occasions, I made no comment. It was good to see Trowa be so supportive of Quatre and to try to help him overcome his difficulties. I wished a simple touch of mine could help Heero, but then I realized Trowa's touch didn't really solve the problem either. Maybe I was indeed expecting too much of myself.

"I uhm..." I started awkwardly. "I never really got the chance to tell you, Trowa, but... I'm really happy for you and Quatre." I said, even though it hurt, because my lover, who's hand I was also holding, was unconscious in a hospital bed after being on the brink of death. Jealousy, was probably a more apt description. However, jealousy or not, bitter or not, it did not change my sentiment. I was happy to see them together and to see the positive effect they had on each other.

"Thank you."

Quatre suddenly looked very uncomfortable. He pulled his hand free from Trowa's and stuffed both his hands deep into his pockets, where I could tell his fingers were fumbling with something.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, confused by the sudden change in demeanor.

"No! No, not at all." Quatre claimed.

I looked back at Trowa and the secretive expression in his eyes confirmed there was something they were not telling me. Becoming a bit angry at the possibility of all the things they could be hiding from me, I said demandingly: "Come on, I can tell there's something. Tell me!"

Trowa looked at Quatre, as if to confirm or ask permission, but Quatre just furiously shook his head and forced a smile. "There really is nothing!" He started to bite the inside of his cheek.

"Quatre," I glared at the pair of them, "you are worrying me and you are pissing me off. Tell me!"

Trowa interjected: "It's just that we feel this might not be the right time to share the news with you, considering the situation."

"What news?" I demanded and I gripped Heero's hand more strongly. The last time Quatre had news for me he accused my boyfriend of cold-blooded, violent murder and revealed that he had been keeping a big and important secret from me.
They shared another look and when they broke gazes, Quatre took a deep breath and pulled his left hand out of his pocket and held it up for me to see.

I squinted and noticed a silver band with a row of small emerald stones on his ring finger.

"Trowa and I are getting married." Even though he was embarrassed to say this in the presence of Heero's unconscious form, he could not fight the smile.

I stared at them. For an awkwardly long period of time I could not say anything or make my face express anything but shock, I could not even form a coherent string of thoughts. The ring gleamed in the sunlight that poured in through the window and the stones resembled the shade of Trowa's eyes. The first thought my mind managed to form was how I had not previously noticed it's sparkling presence on Quatre's hand, but of course I had other things on my mind and hadn't been very observant.

The look on their faces became concerned and guilty. Quatre resumed to bite the inside of his cheek and started to nervously play with the ring encircling his finger.

"Oh my God."

They blinked at me, waiting for me to add something to that exclamation to make it less ambiguous. My sudden and unexpected smile startled them, but instantly relieved them of their tension.

"Congratulations." I said honestly.

Quatre rushed towards me and hugged me. "I'm so sorry about the timing."

"No, that's fine. That's fine..." I breathed as we parted.

Enthusiastically Quatre said: "He proposed last week. He had suggested to elope and just hold a small ceremony with my sisters and the other pilots, but when he actually kneeled before me," Quatre looked over his shoulder at Trowa, "I decided we were going to do this big. No more hiding. I plan to invite the entire board of directors. Screw them if it makes them uncomfortable."

"Wow. That's great. That's really great." I looked at Trowa. "Can't believe you actually kneeled... Who would have thought you to be such a traditional romantic..."

Trowa shrugged innocently and aloofly, but his eyes sparkled.

"That's great..." I repeated. I looked back at Heero's face. I could feel Trowa's and Quatre's pitiful gaze on the back of my head, but I did not acknowledge them.

Marriage is something I never thought to wish for, for Heero and me. I guess in that regard I had managed to stay realistic. The other things I wished for, may have been equally unwise to dare to hope for. I may never get them. He may never be able to truly open up and cry, I may never get that fixer-upper somewhere downtown, Heero might never be susceptible to the romantic antics one usually engages in on the anniversaries of important events and we may never have embarrassing candid pictures to grace our walls and shelves. I've always known this. I've always known I might not get that, I might not get what I want. Though never before did it dawn on me, that however greatly I desired those mundane aspects of earthly living, I did not need them. All I needed was Heero. I couldn't fathom when I started to believe he wasn't enough. But standing at the side of his bed, covering his hand with my own, still trembling with the fear of losing him, I remembered.
I could only hope to be what he needed.

According to Nettle, I wasn't and that still gnawed at the already frayed edges of my heart.

True to his word, at six thirty, the door to Heero's room opened and WuFei stepped inside.

Quatre and Trowa had taken a seat on the small couch underneath the window. Quatre had fallen asleep against Trowa's shoulder, but woke instantly, as if he sensed his arrival. I was still standing by Heero's bed, his hand in mine, the chair unused.

"Hey." He said as he joined at vigil at Heero's bedside. He looked at Heero and he looked at the monitor, still displaying the heart rate, it had picked up over the course of the day, as well as the blood pressure. "He seems to be doing good." He noted.

"A doctor checked him a little while earlier and said he's doing fine. The sedative should wear off in a few more hours." Trowa explained. Quatre listened intently, as he had slept through the doctor's visit.

"Good." WuFei turned to me. "How are you doing?"

I looked into his black eyes, honest and strong. "I'm fine."

"What's in the bag?" Quatre wondered with a voice still groggy, he nodded at the paper bag in WuFei's hand.

"Dinner." He announced, with a rather proud tone. He walked over to the window and put the bag down on the small table by the couch.

Quatre inhaled greedily as delicious scents from the bag drifted through the room that had just smelled sterile and of a lemon cleaner before. He made a lot of appreciative noises as WuFei started to unpack a variety of choices. "Oh you are a good, honorable man." He commented as he accepted a plastic plate.

"How did you get all this past the wardens?" Trowa questioned, pointing at a cardboard box to indicate his choice of dinner.

"I brought a pretty convincing negotiator with me." WuFei stated mysteriously.

Right at that moment the door swung open once more. Tired eyes were offset by a sympathetic, genuine smile, as her professional, impeccable suit was offset by a pair of beat-up sneakers. "Good evening everyone." She greeted with a long exhale, closing the door behind her.

"Une." I stated the obvious, left in utter surprise again that day.

"Duo." She walked up to me and gave me an awkward but heartfelt hug. "How is he doing?" She asked as she released me.

"They said he'll be fine and should wake up later tonight." I answered with a bitter taste in my mouth, still aware of the fact that I was to blame for his hospitalization.

"Why won't you have something to eat?" Quatre reached a food container out to her.

"No thank you," She declined politely, "I'm only passing through. I'm giving a conference at eight. I just wanted to see Heero and how he is doing. And how you are doing." She looked at me with evident concern.
Instead of answering with the usual lie "I'm fine", I told her: "I'll be okay." And I hoped dearly I would be.

She nodded in understanding.

"How is the investigation going?" Trowa wondered between bites.

She released a deep sigh and by force of habit she nervously straightened her suit. "Good, but... it's not good. As WuFei already informed you, it was a deliberate attack and the ties with NgGasi are too strong to ignore. So basically I have to go on national television in little over an hour and lie my ass off."

"Why's that?" Quatre innocently inquired.

"If I confirm the rumors that this was a terrorist attack organized by the president of Ethiopia, to retaliate against a supposed assassination attempt executed by the Preventers, there is a very strong possibility our two nations will officially be at war before the night is through. And war is exactly what our agency is designed for to prevent."

"What will you do?" The former pilot in me resurfaced, it was a process that I could physically feel happening.

"We'll deny everything as long as we can and when we can't anymore, we'll lie about the identity of the bomber. Then we'll have to let enough time pass to avoid suspicion and attempt another assassination on NgGasi."

"I want to do it." All eyes turned to me at my declaration, wide and shocked. Especially Une was surprised. "Duo, I thought- I assumed you had decided differently. And I have an alternative option for you."

"I'm not saying that this means I'll become an agent, but I want to do that mission. I want to make sure that it is done right." I spoke with a determination that even surprised me. I wanted to avenge the death of the Preventer employees. Odds were that I knew a lot of them, at least by face, Heero too. I didn't mind being the puppet of Death once more time.

"Duo, you don't have to." Une reminded me.

"No, I want to! This fucker thinks he can get away with this? Putting a bomb on a train and killing innocent Preventer employees and civilians? A friend of mine was on that train. Friends and family of other people were on that train. I want this coward dead. This is not the peace that we," I gestured around myself with my free arm and held onto Heero's hand tightly, "risked our lives for. We have all been fucked up so we could do this, so we could bring peace. I'm not going to let that asshole make all of that in vain. It's bad enough that he fucks with his own people, but if he wants war, then he is going to have to deal with one fucking pissed off soldier."

Une looked at the others, unsure of how to respond. She has never been face to face with "God of Death" before.

"Look, we have to wait a few months anyway, till all of this blows over and we have the benefit of the doubt." WuFei started. "When the time comes, we'll contact you and if you still want to do it, then the mission is yours. Agreed?"

Une nodded. "Yes."
"I'll still want to do it."

"That's fine, then you will. But let's, for now, forget about world peace and just think about our friend. And have some dinner because I'm starving." WuFei dryly commented.

We all smiled and nodded.

We practically attacked the food that WuFei had brought. WuFei joined the couple on the couch and they quietly talked. Most of the words I overheard were in reference to the food. I was still at Heero's side, where I would be for a long time to come, as I couldn't imagine ever being ready to let go of his hand. I wanted him to know that I was still here, that I was supporting him and that I could be supportive, even of the things I did not understand or even did not agree with.

Une stood next to me. She had quietly been looking at Heero for a long time, she had a small, though sad, smile on her delicate lips. She seemed lost in thoughts and memories. "I'm sorry I never called." She suddenly said.

"Hm?" My mouth was full pizza.

"I was supposed to call you yesterday, but something came up." She let out a breathy, nervous chuckle.

"Yeah, for me too."

"I had gotten my managers together yesterday morning, to discuss any possibilities for you within the agency. At the end of the meeting they all felt pretty strongly about the fact that your talent could be used somewhere other than the engine bay." She said with a soft, foreboding smile.

"Yeah?"

"The agency employs good men. Good agents. Good soldiers. But let's face it, none of them will ever be able to match you and the other pilots in any area. This was already abundantly clear for the space faction, which WuFei now practically runs. I'm not saying they could ever be as good as you guys are, but you could definitely make them better."

I frowned, not sure what she was hinting at. "What do you mean?"

"You could train them. You could train our agents, our soldiers and our pilots. As you've noticed when you worked in grid one, most of our common soldiers and even some of our special agents, do not know how to take proper care of their rifle, or fix it in emergency situations."

I scrunched my face. "That's sounds rather boring."

"Well, yes, but that would only be one part of the job. You could also teach them combat, sniping, piloting and navigating. Heero became an active agents because, as he truthfully pointed out, we need guys like the Gundam pilots on payroll. You could train them to become better, to take on the missions that right now only you guys would be able to complete. So when the next NgGasi asshole needs to be taken care off, we have agents suited for the job. I'd have to come up with some sort of title, but you'd be something like a Preventer Special Skills Instructor."

"Wow, Une..." I didn't really know what to say, I was overwhelmed. I really liked the idea, it didn't ask for direct violence, but it would still allow me to put my violent skills to good use and to matter to a greater cause, which is what I had wanted. "That sounds really good." I was taken aback, honestly I had begun to lose hope that I would ever find a purpose that would suit me.
"And the offer applies to Heero as well, if he is interested."

I looked back at his still, pale face, then back at her. "Thank you." I said genuinely.

"You're welcome. You'd be doing the agency a great service." She looked at her watch and her face turned grim. "I have to leave. I'm sorry. Keep me updated, okay? I'll see you guys. Bye." With an encouraging pat on my shoulder she left, her sneakers squeaking in contact with the floor.

Quatre approached me and came to stand at the opposite side of Heero's bed. "What did you two talk about?"

"She offered us a job as Preventer trainers."

"Wow, that sounds pretty cool."

I nodded slowly. "I hope it is. I need something to do with my life, you know? Like you, like WuFei... You guys do important stuff, you make a difference. I want that too."

"What about Heero?"

I shrugged, not sure of the answer to that question. "I know he wants to matter too. I'm just not sure if this Trainer stuff fits his idea of what it means to matter."

Quatre seemed reluctant to ask his next question, but after momentarily biting the inside of his cheek and fumbling with his engagement ring, he decided to ask: "What if he insists on remaining a field agent?"

"I won't like it. I'd be worried. But I will accept it. And we'll make it work." I smiled as I realized I truly meant that. "I need to be more accepting and supportive. I haven't really been those things lately and that has led to some pretty disastrous mistakes. I don't want Heero to have to nearly die twice for me get the message and make up for my mistakes."

"And what about the pills?"

"If he wants to take them, that'll be fine. All I need is for Heero to be okay, to be safe and happy. If that means I need to be open-minded about stuff that I am reluctant to accept, than that is just what I am going to have to be. And if it means he needs me to leave, so he can forget and grow, then I'll just have to do that."

Quatre sighed. "You're not still on that, are you?"

"Look, what if that psycho-psychologist is right? What if we need to be apart to be able to grow as individuals? It's possible, right?"

"Yeah, but-"

"I just want Heero to be able to open up, to experience all of his emotions. According to Nettle, my presence makes that hard on him, because I remind him of the toughest time in his life. To avoid experiencing that pain, he buries everything, all of his emotions, because he is afraid bad things will surface if he doesn't fight it. It's an automatic defense mechanism, he said so himself. It might be easier for him to allow himself to feel, if he's not with the person who constantly reminds him of all of those painful memories."

"Duo, this all sounds very logical. But we are talking about emotions, so logic does not apply."
"I just want what is best for him Quatre. And I have to admit, sometimes, I don't know what exactly is best for him and I end up making mistakes."

He kindly and sympathetically looked at me. "But Duo, don't you see what a big change you have just made? Don't you see how much you have already grown? The fact that you would leave him if it is what is best for him, in spite of how much it would hurt you, shows that you have let go of your expectations and demands of Heero and you are ready to accept him, flaws and all."

"He nearly had to die, for that change to happen. And I don't know if somewhere down the road these misguided expectations are going to sneak up on me again and fill me with disappointment... and then what? He has to have another near death experience for me to re-learn the lesson?"

"Duo-" Quatre started.

I shook my head and stopped him. "I really don't want to talk about it anymore, okay?"

He frowned. He had many concerns but he decided to heed my request and not voice them. He took Heero's other hand in his and looked at the pale fingers contemplatively. "I'm sorry about what I said before."

I was about to reply to Quatre's quiet apology, when I looked at his face I realized he wasn't talking to me. His pained, guilty gaze was directed at Heero's closed eyes.

"I was wrong to think you incapable of being anyone other than the soldier. I'm sorry." He stared at Heero's face for a few more moments, spent in silent thought. Then he nodded and with a final pat he released the limp hand, delicately placing it on the sheets beside his still body.

"Mind if I turn on the TV?" Trowa interrupted. Without waiting for consent he started searching the two drawers in the nightstand by the bed and quickly found the remote.

WuFei rose from the couch and stood on his toes to press the ON button of the television that was suspended down from the ceiling.

"What channel?" The tallest of all of us wondered, his fingers ghosting over the digits of the remote control.

"Any I imagine." WuFei offered and he joined us by the bed so he could view the screen.

Without much effort Trowa found an appropriate channel. The camera's were aimed at a crowd of journalists, the drone of their accumulated voices had been muted as a narrator with a boring voice described the scene of anticipation. On the bottom of the screen white letters in a blue band running from left to right read: Preventer press conference regarding terrorist attack. The image changed to the podium with a backdrop of a cobalt blue curtain with the black Preventer logo centered and gleaming with indestructible pride. Photo camera's started flashing when Lady Une stepped onto the podium and approached the microphone. The high heeled shoes she had changed into clicked on the wooden boards, it was the only sound to be registered along with the sound of shutters closing rapidly.

"Good evening." Her voice was magnified crisply through the microphone. "Thank you for your patience. Late yesterday afternoon, at five fifteen, tragedy struck. A high speed train derailed after what has been described as a forceful explosion, on the railroad track just outside of Orlando. This event injured most of the nearly three hundred passengers and sadly has, so far, claimed forty lives, a number that keeps rising. The admirable men and women of all major hospitals in center Florida and the Preventer Agency, have worked around the clock to minimize victims and to find answers.
However, both take time and careful work. As of yet we have no meaningful results to exclude the possibility of a simple, albeit tragic accident.

The crowd started murmuring and the camera's started flashing again, perhaps hoping to catch the lie on her expression.

Une was unfazed as she continued: "Mere moments after the crash, witnesses and the media have been speculating. Rumors of foul play have surfaced. Rumors that evidence has been uncovered of a terrorist attack. Rumors that the person responsible has already been identified. These rumors remain rumors. Preventer investigators and local authorities are still processing the scene. So far this search has yielded no proof of a planned attack. I wish I had more information to share at this juncture, but I'm afraid I share your questions, to which I have no answers. Out of respect for the families of those who have perished, or been injured, I ask you not to cause panic with biased speculations and instead let the investigators do their job. I would also like to commend the work of the gathered emergency staff of Tampa General Hospital, Orlando General Hospital, Orlando Emergency Medical Center, Palm Bay East Hospital and Lakeland Hospital. Whose combined effort has saved many lives, in the first ever employment of the Emergency Situation Hospital Coalition. They have proven the value of cooperation and have saved many lives with their combined effort that allowed for a swift and controlled rescue operation. I feel for all the remaining families and loved-ones who have received bad news today. I hope that in the very least, I will be able to offer answers in relation to this tragic event in the near future. Thank you. I have time to answer some of your questions."

The crowd burst with screams and black microphones were thrust into the air.

She nodded at a man in the front.

"This is the New York Inquirer." He said hastily. "Do you really expect us to buy this? A source from your own agency has already spilt the details that it was not an accident and that a bomber has in fact already been identified."

"An unconfirmed source." Une calmly corrected. "I understand the public's need for answers, but do not believe everything you hear. Several untrustworthy sources have been claiming to have new information, their statements are false and only cause fear."

"But."

WuFei had walked over to the television and had promptly switched it off. "We don't need to see the jackals attacking her."

"It didn't seem like they were buying it..."

"They are just looking for a juicy headline for tomorrow's edition. This will quiet down soon enough. We'll plant some more, untrue leaks and expose them, that will discredit all the previous unofficial claims."

"I just can't believe this." Quatre said, looking at all of us with concerned eyes. "This is the first terrorist attack on the RUSA since it's reformation. Isn't that just crazy?"

The others slowly nodded, but WuFei defended: "Something like this was unavoidable. The combined population of Earth and the colonies is seven billion and amongst all those people there are still bad guys who can keep a secret. When I last checked, the Preventer force counts less than six thousand agents and soldiers. Even the smallest country in the world has a bigger army than that. Even with the help of the RUSA army and the South American Alliance and Europe, bad
"Things will always happen."

"Don't be so pessimistic." Quatre urged.

"I'm not a pessimist, I'm a realist. This too is part of peace time. Peace means a lot of rules and not everyone can get what they want by playing by those rules, so they are going to rebel and make their own. During the history of our species there have always been individuals or groups of people who want things they cannot reasonably have."

We all fell silent, I presumed we were all overwhelmed by the sad truth of his statement.

He sighed, the truth only seemed to frustrate him, being confronted with it on a daily basis. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to raise my voice like that." He seemed to be talking to Heero's unconscious form, quietly laying in the bed.

They all retreated to different corners of the room, preoccupying themselves with their own thoughts. I couldn't be bothered with the problems of the world at that moment. For some reason, personal conflicts just feel so much more severe, even though it affects far fewer lives. I guessed everyone was just unavoidably selfish like that. It seems only logical. It's much more logical, our hearts are designed to love people and even though we experience heartache at the hurting of others, it is never quite like this. Watching natural disasters happen on a television screen, watching war conflicts transpire a world away, never quite feels like holding your lover's cold hand, your ears filled with the hollow, sharp beeping of a machine that is the only distinction between life and death, as he lies barely breathing and his skin white as the sheets.

Standing at his bedside, is like standing at the very edge of cliff. You can only hope to be able to tiptoe back to safety and leave heartache behind, but one step forward and you are falling. One step forward and you are not standing vigil, you are in a waiting room, your cup of water at your feet, a doctor with a grim expression looking down at you, Death mocking you over his white clad shoulder.

It's just not the same. It's just not the same as the news anchor giving you death tolls. The numbers lose meaning - a hundred, five thousand, two hundred thousand - we cannot even begin to fathom that kind of loss. It's unfair and it's selfish, but we would sacrifice any number of lives for that one person. Even though that person would probably beg you not to.

The hour started to become late. Another doctor graced us with a brief visit; a routine check-up. The sedative had worn off but Heero did not appear ready to wake up yet. She left without giving us any real answers, her white coat rustling in the haste of her steps.

"Duo?" Quatre cautiously approached me. "It's getting really late, WuFei, Trowa and I really need to get some sleep. As you should too. We were thinking about checking into the hotel down the street." He hurried to add: "But if you want us to stay, we will stay."

I shook my head, loose strands of my disheveled hair moving around my face. "No, that's fine, you go. I'd prefer to be alone with Heero for a while anyway, especially when he wakes up."

"Of course. Okay."

Trowa and Quatre hugged me goodbye. WuFei offered me a formal handshake, but I knew with it he meant to convey the same kind of support and compassion as Quatre's tight embrace and Trowa's awkward hug. They promised to be back first thing in the morning and smuggle in some breakfast. Quatre pleaded me to make use of the extra bed two nurses had rolled into the room earlier. He noticed the tremble in my knees. He must have thought me crazy for standing at Heero's
bed all day. Or maybe he didn't, maybe he understood.

When they left for the night, the hectic day rampaged through my mind. So much had happened, it was difficult to comprehend. It felt crazy, surreal and apocalyptic in a sense. So much had changed. Things that could never be undone. Things that changed the future and even managed to change the past.

The reality of everything wouldn't hit me until much later. Which was a good thing. My shoulders and heart were bearing an impossibly heavy load as it was.

The hallway went quiet and the lights were automatically dimmed. Through the window the bright white disc of the moon could be viewed as it viewed the Earth. It was a solemn and serene sight but offered me no comfort, only one thing could and that was the sight of Heero's eyes when he would finally wake.

At that moment, Heero's hand twitched in mine and after several moments during which my heart failed to beat, his fingers curled around mine in a weak but unmistakable hold. For the first time since late that morning, my knees buckled and the chair behind me gratefully caught me in my slow descent. I couldn't stand any longer. All the feelings I had experienced since I encountered him on the kitchen floor imploded within me and crumbled the core pillars of my strength. It felt like I would collapse and shatter at cellular level.

Strangely, at this first sign of consciousness, I was most confronted with the fear that that moment may have never come. The thought that possessed me was: what if his hand had never twitched?

"Heero?" I was shocked at the weakness of my own voice.

His eyelids started to flutter, a pained frown appeared on his forehead and his lips became a taut line of discontentment. His fingers became stronger around my own, encircling them tightly, desperately.

His brows furrowed even deeper and then, in the single light by the bed, two lines of cobalt blue appeared under the black eyelashes.

I gripped his hand tightly and the action drew his half-awake gaze towards me. His eyes opened completely, but there was little understanding in them. His expression was vague, slightly confused. His eyes shifted to examine the room and worry dawned on his face when he realized the bed he was laying in was not his own and this was not our bedroom. There was a brief moment of panic, but memories rushed back to him. He blinked away any shock there might have been for me to see. Even as the answers came to him, he asked me with a coarse voice:

"What happened?"

"You're in the hospital. You are going to be fine." That didn't really answer his question, I just didn't know yet how to answer him. A lot of things were unclear to me too, after all, I was only there to witness the aftermath of what had happened. We would have to exchange information before either of us really understood what exactly had happened. I distracted him with a question of my own. "How are you feeling?"

He considered this momentarily and then replied: "My throat hurts."

I nodded. "You were intubated, so that may well be the cause."

He sat up in bed and reached his free hand up to touch his throat, as if his fingers searched for the memory. He looked to the side and spotted the orange bottle of pills on the nightstand, beside his
bag of clothing. "Right." He croaked.

"You took too many." I said, my voice feigning a strength that my heart did not have.

This didn't seem to concern him, but a slight frown of disbelief did appear. "I took exactly what it said." He argued and this was not a lie.

"The information on the label is incomplete. You were supposed to read the brochure before you took anything. For a first dose it was too much."

He didn't say anything. He tore his eyes away from the bottle and aimed his gaze back up to my face. He had a pathetically apologetic look on his face that wrought my heart.

I returned the look in kind. After all, if it hadn't been for my carelessness, he probably would have read the brochure, if I had only been in the right state of mind to leave it there with him.

We didn't say anything, even though we both had many things to say. I felt a shaking in my palm. Whether we were both trembling, or just me, or just him, I didn't know. But did it really matter? It may not be true in the most literal sense, but when he trembles, I tremble too. When he hurts, I hurt equally. There is no "him" or "me" between us, the individuals have dissolved into one another, into a being no longer distinguishable, into an "us". It was a kind of merging I presume anybody to long for. Being tethered to someone, experiencing life with an extra heart and an extra set of eyes. As wonderful as it was, it was terrifying. Terrifying because maybe neither one was ready of the responsibility of this link, of this connection. There was a lack of trust between us. Heero didn't trust me with the full brunt of his emotions. And I didn't trust him to ever fully accept my heart and my love, too afraid of his emotions.

I did not voice any of this, not yet. I had the feeling that we should hug or kiss, it seemed to be what couples in love always do in those movies I endlessly watched, upon their reunion. Dramatic but uplifting music is the background for their proclamations of love and the proceeding sounds of their intimate kisses. But this "us" that had taken refuge into this hospital room was far more complicated than that. There were feelings between us that could not be adequately dealt with and solved during the running time of the average gentle comedy blockbuster. Our movie is one of angst and suffering, being consumed by a love that you desire more than anything else, regardless that it may not be the best for either of you. It's the kind of movie they would relentless add sequels too and will never truly have an ending.

So no, we didn't hug or kiss. I held onto his hand but let go of his gaze, my eyes trailing down to my own lap where my free hand fidgeted.

I hadn't expected him to speak, but he did.

"I'm sorry." He said and his voice held an unmistakable honesty. "I didn't mean to put you through this."

As socially inept as he may be, he must have found the exhaustion in my eyes, the emotion in the dried trails of tears down my cheeks. His claim struck a sensitive chord, one that reverberated a deep trombone in my chest and vibrated my heart. "Is that true?" I wondered with raw voice and I looked at him.

He blinked, but even though he pretended not to know what I was referring too, that slight, confused frown of his that I had come to adore, was missing. Being as unfamiliar with emotions and the expression of them, he could hardly fake them.
"Was this really an accident?" I asked bluntly. "Because I have been going over this again and again and I just can't see you doing something this reckless."

His words were strong, his voice monotone but genuine as he responded: "I did not try to kill myself." His nostrils flared, his upper lip quivered. It seemed like his eyes were starting to water, but he blinked and it was all gone, or hadn't even been there to begin with. "When you left... I thought you had left for good. I was..." There was that frown, as he searched for words to describe his feelings, "it hurt so bad. It hurt so bad that I thought that if I wouldn't be able to make it stop hurting, I might-" He stopped and instead his eyes just locked onto mine and they finished his sentence without words.

End it all, is what I knew he was going to say.

"I didn't want to do that. I wanted to preserve hope that you would come back and that we would be together. Everything just flooded me and I wanted to keep that flood away from me, to prevent it from crushing me. I know I shouldn't have taken the pills without further information, but I just couldn't stand it."

I let out a shaky breath.

"I didn't try to kill myself." He repeated. "But when the drugs started to make me sick I... I thought that maybe it would be better if I did end up dying. I sort of resigned to it, but as I started feeling worse and worse, I realized I really didn't want to die, all I wanted was for you to forgive me and I knew that if I died I would only hurt you and make you resent me." His eyes were pathetic and begging. "I tried to call an ambulance, but I couldn't think straight anymore, I couldn't even remember what number to dial... and then I got dizzy and light-headed... I don't remember anything after that. But I never meant to hurt you! I only wanted to stop my own hurting!" His eyes pleaded me for understanding and forgiveness.

These I could not deny him.

This is when we hugged, but it was awkward and far removed from out happy ending.

I didn't know when to release him. I usually wasn't this self-conscious in an embrace, wrapping my arm loosely around any set of shoulders that I predict won't shrug me off, but it was the most emotionally laden hug I had ever given and in this territory, beyond the fun and the carefree, I too was inexperienced. I held on till I felt something melt, in me, in him, or in both of us. And all of a sudden the hug wasn't awkward anymore, he wasn't stiff in my arms anymore and my arms weren't stiff around him anymore. I guessed it took us that time to let go of our guilt and just enjoy our connection for what it was, rather than burdening it with all these conflicting and confusing things we were feeling.

However, even though I felt better once I released him and sat back in the chair, keeping his hand clutched in mine, the hug did not change anything. I was still Duo, the Duo who had demanded too much, the Duo who did not know what to do and he was still Heero, the Heero who could not open up or cry, the Heero who was broken. I didn't know how we had made this fit in the past and I didn't know how we could make this fit in the future. If Nettle had not been a woman - and I had not been a gentleman to the best of my abilities - I may have punched her in the face. However, I realized now there was a basis for the arrogant sparkle that I had caught in her eyes, so did that really leave me with the right to punch it off? How can you pair someone with unrealistic, uninformed expectations, with someone who can not open up about his emotions and live up to those expectations? How can you pair someone who has no solutions, with someone who is broken and needs help and guidance?
At the core of our relationship was a mismatch we have been ignoring. It really is true what they say: love is blinding.

So, I started to think, Nettle could be right. Maybe we could benefit from spending some time apart. The thought frightened me like nothing ever had, I'd gladly trade this feeling of despair with staring down the barrel of a gun. Leaving him would be the hardest thing for me to do. Living without him would be like trying to breathe in outer space: trying to make do without something that is so vital to your very existence and feels so natural and right. However, if he agrees with Nettle, if he thinks this is something we must do, than we will do this. I will do this for him. I will breathe where there is no air. There truly isn't a request impossible for me to achieve if it comes from him.

I just didn't know how to share this with him. Looking into his big blue eyes, lost in the sight of them, my fear only grew stronger, my resolution weaker. I worried he would take my suggestion the wrong way, that he would interpret it as a sign that I no longer wished to be with him, that I no longer loved him, that I am not up for the task of loving him and growing with him. I wouldn't want him to think that, not even for a split second. I didn't want to hurt him anymore.

"You look like you have a lot on your mind." Heero astutely pointed out, his face expressed a slight kindness but in his eyes reflected my own fear.

"Good call." I chuckled nervously.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No!" I answered immediately and I held his hand tighter, looking into his eyes. "That is exactly what I need you to understand, I don't blame you and I am not angry with you, not for what happened and not for you wanting to take the pills." I spoke strongly. "It is me who I am angry with, for being so goddamned stupid and ignorant and selfish!"

"I'm not angry with you." He stated softly and his hand sweetly covered my own.

"Well, you should be. I was an ass." I retorted dryly.

"Let's just go home and forget about this." He suggested, sounding eager to get out of the paper gown and more importantly, out of this house of sickness and weakness and death.

I shook my head fervently as my mind raced to find the appropriate words. "There is something I think we should talk about first." I saw intense fear dawning in his beautiful eyes and my heart clenched. I love him so much, I thought. That thought stung and I felt something gather in the corner of my eyes. "After I left, after the... after..." I sighed and shook my head, frustrated that I couldn't even make myself say the words. "Just after... I went to see Nettle."

There was surprise on his face as the conversation headed into an unexpected direction.

"I was looking for anyone to blame but myself and after you, Nettle seemed like a viable option." I continued with a quiet tone, my voice heavy with guilt and concern. "I went over there to yell at her and make her feel guilty and awful, but contrary to my intentions, I was the one who left feeling guilty and awful. She said something that- ... that I dismissed initially, but in light of what has happened, I think it may have had some merit, however much I regret that."

"I don't understand..." he muttered pathetically. From the way his sweaty palm clenched around my own, I assumed he had an inkling of where the conversation was headed.

Every time I looked up, into his eyes, I grew more uncertain whether this was the right thing to do.
But I knew I at least had to tell him, he needed to know all the facts. After all, if I want us to be in a relationship of equals, I should work to make that happen, instead of making his decisions for him based on what I want and what I hope he wants.

"She said that it might be a good idea for us to be apart for a while. So we can grow as individuals..." I paraphrased carefully.

"You want to break up." He concluded in an almost accusing manner.

"No, that is exactly it, I do not want to break up with you. I can't stand the thought of being away from you, you have to understand that... but it is something she suggested. Lord knows I hate her guts but maybe she has a point... she wouldn't say it without reason, right?" I tried to explain and tried to assure him.

There was a depth to the expression on his face and in his eyes that I had never witnessed before. At the forefront of the mixture he was feeling and showing, was confusion and hurt as he stared at me with a gaze darting back and forth between my two eyes, searching for the meaning behind my words.

"Look, we have to face the facts. We both have issues. You don't feel like you can completely open up to me and I have been a jackass about that to be frank. Maybe Nettle is right, maybe we can only solve these things by being apart for a little while and growing as individuals."

His mouth which had been hanging open slightly, shut firmly, his lips pressing together in a thin line. His eyes suddenly narrowed as well and the shadow of his thick lashes obscured the emotions that swirled vividly in the cobalt blue orbs. I thought maybe I had angered him, but honestly it was impossible to read him.

I sighed and looked away, not really sure how to proceed, not even sure what just happened, on emotional and relationship level. There was a nervousness in my stomach that I couldn't shake, the kind of nervousness that you feel when you are worried you just screwed something up badly. Or maybe closer to the nervousness you feel when you just realized you have possibly made the biggest mistake of your life.

"We don't have to decide now," I told him, holding onto his hand even though he attempted to pull it free from my grip, "we can talk about it later. Right now we have to focus on you getting better and out of this hospital. I just wanted to be honest with you and tell you what Nettle told me, because it has been eating at me." I stared into his eyes and he stared back with an empty gaze. "Please say something..." I begged him, but he didn't say anything. "I don't want to break up." I stressed and continued with a clear edge of despair to my voice: "I just don't know what the hell I am doing, or am supposed to be doing! I don't want my ignorance to end up hurting you again!"

He wasn't looking back at me anymore. He had diverted his gaze to a random spot on his sheets. He seemed frozen, the golden skin of his complexion had dulled to a pale shade, but the hand I was holding was hot and slick with sweat.

It pained me to see him like this. I knew my words must have upset him, I knew he loved me too much to easily be willing to let me go. I knew he hated the idea of a possible separation as much as I did. Yet his face was like stone, his mouth a perfect straight line, the corners neither turning upwards nor downwards, his eyes were narrow but his eyebrows were still and relaxed, not even that frown-line in between them to mark his struggle with his own emotions. He locked himself away again, deep inside of him, in secrecy. And here I sat, on the outside, excluded, a bystander, an onlooker, but there was nothing to see.
The nervousness in my stomach became vague - though the stinging in my heart only intensified. As much as I hated it, I was confronted with the truth Nettle had so callously predicted: there is something Heero is incapable of, something I desperately need and for both of us to be able to grow out of our shortcomings, we needed to focus on ourselves, instead of remaining in this relationship that makes us so consumed by the other.

It was a hard truth to face and I wished, more than anything, for something to happen to make this truth untrue, to make one or both of us changed people. But I gazed at Heero's face again and it was still impassive and my own heart still ached in response to the sight. Nothing had changed. I didn't blame Heero for not being able to open up to me. Even though the war seemed like a different lifetime, it was less than a year ago, the hurts were still fresh, the scars had yet to heal. If Heero so desired, he should be able and have the right and opportunity to tuck those feelings away and to ignore them for a little while so he can feel better. However, I also could not bring myself to blame myself for the fact that it was exactly this openness that I needed. I had spent a lifetime arms-length away from the people around me, either by my own doing or against my will. I couldn't stand living like that any longer. I didn't want to be excluded anymore.

With a bitter and dry voice I whispered: "We'll talk about it later. I'm gonna..." I let his hand slip from mine and with feeble knees I rose out of the seat. "I just have to go for a little while..." I croaked, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. With a bottom lip that I could not stop from shaking I said: "There is a change of clothes in your bag and some other stuff." I patted the bag that was on the night stand beside me.

Heero avoided eye contact during the entire exchange.

What is going to happen now? I am going to walk away and the best thing that has ever happened to me will be over? If we part, will we not only grow as individuals, but also, consequently, grow apart?

As I approached the door I had expected him to break the silence, but he left me hanging. His silence was the only thing that kept me from turning back and wrapping my arms around him once more, whispering in his ear that I would never let him go. If anything, his silence meant that he agreed. And how could he not, it was logic, logic cooked up by a women who, in her profession, excelled in problem solving logic, to the extent that she has diploma's and awards adorning her walls in honor of her logic. Heero, ever the Perfect Soldier, understood logic more than he understood anything.

I wished he would call me back to him, I would respond instantly. But the fact that he made no attempt to stop me as I neared the door with slow footsteps, created a hurt that I needed to get away from. If he was willing to let me walk away, than I should be willing to do so. after all, I promised to myself that I wouldn't hurt him anymore, that I would do what would be best for him. If he thinks that our separation could indeed benefit him, then I would have no choice but to honor that.

Standing in the doorway, I remembered something Quatre had told me, something Heero had said to Trowa in that other life. "Follow your emotions." He had said. My emotions told me to turn the fuck around and seat my ass back in that goddamned chair and continue to hold his hand. But my emotions had been wrong before. I didn't trust them anymore.

I was about to take that step that crossed the threshold into the hallway, when I heard his plea. A plea I had heard before and knew not to ignore this time.

"Please don't leave me." He had said, his voice nearly unrecognizable, his breath shaky and uncontrolled.
I turned around to look at him. His face was unrecognizable too.

He was looking at me with intense, honest eyes, peering through his haphazard bangs. His mouth was open with shallow, irregular breaths, the corners down turned. His eyebrows had formed an upset and begging expression. His features were sickly pale.

His cheeks were wet with tears that streamed down his face.

"I'm sorry." He said with cracking voice. "I'm sorry I am like this. I wish I was better. I wish I was better for you, because you deserve better than this. I am trying! I am trying so hard!" He exclaimed between sobs. "I just don't know if I am ever going to be good enough. I don't know if I will ever learn how to cry, or how to cook. I don't know if I am ever going to be able to live a normal life." He took a deep, trembling breath and continued in a whisper: "But I do know that without you I don't stand a chance at ever learning those things... You taught me what it is like to truly be in love and- and you taught me what it is like to truly be alive..."

Overcome by shock I hadn't been able to see anything. I watched a particular teardrop as it rolled over his cheekbone, followed the line of his jaw and then fell off the point of his chin, wetting the sheets below.

After a long period with only Heero's sobs and shaky breaths filling the silence, I pointed out dumbly, still very much dumbstruck: "You're crying..."

Heero's eyes widened in shock, like he hadn't realized it himself until I just pointed it out. He brought a hand up to touch his face. The tips of his fingers landed on the wet stream traveling down his left cheek and he seemed surprised at the touch of his own tears. He gasped, perplexed at his own display of emotion which neither of us thought he was capable of at that point in time. He swallowed loudly and then seconded: "I'm crying." He looked up at me with big eyes. The flow of his tears had stopped.

I worried briefly if embarrassment at the intensity of his own emotions would cause him to withdraw within himself again, but this worry was unfounded; it never happened.

Even though his face was still wet, his lips formed a genuine smile. He looked down at his fingertips that glistened with the salty wetness of his own tears. All of a sudden, completely out of the blue, he started to laugh. Like he had laughed at Relena's ball, that one night, a carefree moment in which he was overcome by himself. "I can cry." He spoke with wonder as his soft laughter died out. He looked at me with eyes that held a sense of: if I can do this, I can do anything. I noticed a glint in the blue orbs that had been absent for a long time, it was a glint of pride.

I was amazed. My heart ached at the sight of his tears but at the same time I was flooded with a sense of relief. I felt honored and truly happy that he finally trusted me - and himself - enough to completely open up. His loving words only added to the amazing experience and if possible, I loved him even more as I finally felt confident that he loved me back with the same intensity and that "us" was more important to him than anything else, and he was willing to face his pain for our relationship.

Somewhere in the back of my head, that tiny, lingering representation of the God of Death silenced Nettle's harsh evaluation. Rather than allowing my fears to confuse me, I decide to put faith in my emotions and pay heed to their demands.

Still without coherent words, I walked back to him with large strides and didn't stop to hesitate for a moment. With my hands I cupped his face, feeling the trails of tears under my palms. I leaned
down and locked our lips to kiss him passionately.

Heero kissed me back.

It took a long time, but when we finally parted, he repeated softly, his breath spreading against my face: "Please don't leave me..."

"I won't." I whispered back. I had never wanted too and was only willing to sacrifice our relationship if it would be the only solution, one Heero agreed with. But with his tears Heero had proved Nettle wrong and he had proven to me that leaving him would not benefit him, but only hurt him. I returned the favor of Heero opening up by promising him I will no longer be misguided by my own expectations: "I won't judge you if you want to take the pills, or anything else you feel you need to do. I will be by your side, supporting you, for however long it takes. I promise. I will be better, for you." I emphasized, reflecting his earlier sentiment.

He didn't say anything, instead, he wrapped his arm around my neck and took firm hold of the base of my braid, pulling me down to his lips for another soul-searing kiss. "I love you." He breathed, the moment we parted.

"I love you too. So damn much." I chuckled and wiped his cheeks as new tears started to trail down, I had a feeling though that, for the most part, they were happy tears.

His eyes were beautiful and bright as they looked into mine. Behind the happiness and the relief and I saw his pain, his pain at all the things he has been through. I vowed to guide him through his painful memories and to one day make it stop hurting.

After long moments of staring into each other's eyes, Heero said back and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly and then attempted to dry his tears, but they kept flowing. "How do you stop once you've started?" He asked, followed by a mixture of a chuckle and a single sob.

I sat down in the chair and pulled the duffel bag Quatre and I had packed earlier into my lap, ripping the zipper open. I took out the set of clothes that was on top, presuming he would like to change out of that uncomfortable piece of paper as soon as possible. I placed the T-shirt and sweatpants on the bed beside him and dug my hand back into the bag, aware of his curious gaze.

My fingers blindly found a little plastic bag and pulled it out. Wrapped in the bag was a spoon from our kitchen, I unwrapped it and told Heero to hold it, which he did with a flabbergasted expression. I continued my search and only mere moments later was I victorious. With an uncontainable grin, I wrapped my hand around the jar that had sunk to the bottom of the bag and pulled it out for him to see.

The smile he gave me was the most beautiful smile I had ever seen and his eyes lit up with a childlike joy as he identified the item in my hand. "Peanut butter."

"Peanut butter." I confirmed and unscrewed the lid. I offered the open jar to him and he dipped the spoon into the sticky substance, bringing up a liberal amount.

With an adorable, embarrassed smile he brought the spoon to his lips and licked off most of the peanut butter. What that did to me was unspeakable. I smiled brightly, enjoying the suddenly carefree and lighthearted moment that we shared. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. With his tears, he had shed not only some of his own pain, but some of mine as well and even though we still had a long way to go, I felt a confidence and hope returning to me which I had lost somewhere along the way.

Heero offered the remainder to me and I gratefully licked it off, looking at him mischievously. As
my tongue tasted the peanut butter, I started to become aware of how hungry I was and also, more strangely, how badly I needed to pee. It seemed the stress of the situation had limited the needs of my body. I chuckled, amused at how one moment you can be thinking of your relationship possibly being over and the other about how long it has been since you peed.

Unbeknownst to my amusement, Heero's face grew grim and serious and he looked down as he dipped the spoon into the jar once more.

"What's wrong?"

He sighed and stalled by licking off another spoonful before he dared to look me in the eyes. "You know I'm not fixed yet, right? I'm still messed up."

"I know. Me too. But I will fix you and you will fix me. And until that moment comes when we are both healed, we will just be broken together. Broken but strong, because we have each other." I smiled at him and he smiled back.

"I really don't think Nettle was right. I don't believe in psychology."

"Good." I said. And good it was. To hear him say that, to know that he felt that way, convinced me that Nettle was, indeed, wrong about us, wrong about our capability to develop. I would only leave if he said it is what he wanted, what he needed, as long as he is saying the contrary, I will stay by his side, for as long as he will have me.

We shared another spoonful of peanut butter before Heero convinced me that his stay in the hospital need not last any longer than it already had. I had him wait till a doctor had come to check him and even though he preferred Heero to remain under hospital supervision till morning, we signed the discharge papers. I helped Heero get into his clothes and repacked his bag. We shared a look when my hand reached for the bottle of pills. I took a deep breath and then smiled at him. I tucked the bottle into a small compartment inside the duffel bag along with the brochure, zipped it up and slung it over my soldier.

"Ready?"

"Yes." He breathed.

I held out my hand and he took it and we walked out hand in hand, a cab waiting for us outside.

We escaped the hospital and Death, once more.

The world was dead quiet, few cars traveled the road, nearly no lights were lit, the windows of houses and apartments were pitch black. The cab came to a slow halt in front of our building, equally dark.

"Have a good night." He said as I closed the door and then slowly accelerated back onto the road.

We were back home. The furniture was all the same, yet the space felt different.

I put Heero's bag on the couch and then walked around the living room to turn on a selection of lights. As the room was illuminated, I saw Heero staring at the kitchen floor, his arms folded in front of his chest, almost like he was protecting himself.

"Are you okay?" I asked cautiously, walking over to him.

He sighed and then shrugged, but he couldn't shake his feelings. "I just remember standing there..."
He replied honestly and heartfelt, with a soft tone. "The phone is in my hand but I just don't know what to with it. For some reason, all I knew was how one night, we sat at that dining table and ate birthday cake." He looked at me with a poignant expression. "That seems like such a long time ago, doesn't it?"

I nodded.

"The funny thing is... I don't think it was a memory. It was just us sharing a birthday, any birthday. I realized that I wanted to celebrate every birthday with you. Like you said, like what you said our life could be like..." He spoke almost reverently and his eyes abandoned mine again. "I think I'm starting to see it. My life that is." He shook his head, confused and frustrated. "It's just all very vague."

"Good." I walked up to him and wrapped my arm around his shoulders. "I like to leave room for surprises." I joked lightheartedly. "Why won't you get ready for bed? I'm just quickly gonna leave Quatre a message on his cell to let him know we are home, or he'll freak out in the morning."

"Quatre?" Heero wondered.

"Yeah, all the guys came down here to support you. They wanted to make sure you would be alright."

He frowned at that, wondering why they would ever do that for him. Even with his newly acquired power to form tears, Heero was still lost in most of the social interactions, but for the first time in a long time, that fact no longer caused me heartache or concern. I found it quite adorable again.

"You know, the five of us," I explained, looking into his beautiful eyes, "aren't just five ex-gundam pilots. We are five friends."

"I'm glad you have forgiven Quatre."

I smiled. "Me too. And guess what, Tro and Quat are getting married." I had expected him to respond cynically to that with a scoff and a remark along the lines that marriage was an outdated construct that served no true purpose in modern society.

He said no such thing. He said: "Good."

"Good?" I wondered, a little bewildered.

"Yes. When two people love each other, I think it is inevitable that a moment will come when marriage is the appropriate next step."

I grinned at him. "You are just full of surprises today." Even though I brushed it off casually, I tucked the memory of this moment away somewhere safe for future reference.

He blinked at me, not entirely sure what my comment referred to and tilted his head to the side in question.

I closed the distance between us and sensually brought my hands around to his back, stroking his body through the fabric of the T-shirt. I leaned in close, our foreheads and the tips of our noses touching. For a moment we just breathed the same air. Heero brought his hands up, placing them flat against my chest and then with a sigh and a melting of the stiffness in his body he pushed them over my shoulders and one of his hands wrapped strongly around my braid.

I couldn't believe I had almost lost him. To death... To an arrogant psychologist... To my own
confusion...

When we kissed, it was the best kiss we had ever shared. I guided him to our bedroom where we undressed each other and lazily kissed with open mouths and the occasional inquisitive tongue till sleep overcame us.

The next day would be a day with problems like every day of our lives had ever been. But for the first time, it was a day without the doubt that in the end everything would fall apart like a house of cards. I would spend every day making up to Heero for ever thinking so. As we both spend every day proving Nettle wrong, growing together, rather than growing apart.

The night had been darkest right before the dawn, but now I could feel the warmth of the sunlight in my heart.
There is this thing about warheads, if they don't explode, they will never be safe. They will just be sitting there, waiting for absolution, waiting for completion, a dangerous time bomb waiting for the one that treads uncarefully. A warhead has to come full circle, has to complete it's purpose. It has been created for the purpose of violence and death, sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of anger, sometimes out of lust for power, other times out of pure necessity. The necessity of protection. The necessity of a change, to wipe out all instability and create opportunity for strength amongst the rubble.

I am a warhead. I was made for destruction. Not vain destruction, but the kind that clears the way for something new. Like bringing down an old and unsafe building, so a new structure can be erected in it's place. Sometimes my veins feel like wires, my skin like steel casing and my heart like a ticking clock. It is the way I was made. It is all I remember. My childhood is both clear and vague in my mind, like watching a muted, stop-motion film, flashing images - who knows how far apart, what has happened in the darkness between the images. But the quality is clear. When I close my eyes it is like they are open and I am looking at a photo-album, that is how clear. There are a lot of faces I see, when I close my eyes. For a long time they all have the same expression. I hardly excel at reading expressions - though I have been improving -, I do not fool myself, but I've been spending a lot of time with my eyes closed lately, now that I know more, now that I understand more. The expressions I think to be a mixture of pride and fear. Pride for what they had created. Fear of what they had created.

A warhead. As volatile and deadly as they wanted and intended me to be.

When I fast-forward through the likeminded faces, a new expression emerges, a new face. When I look at that face, my veins don't feel like wires, my skin doesn't feel like steel casing and my heart doesn't feel like a ticking clock. My veins are just veins, brimming with life. My skin is just skin, yearning to be touched. My heart is just a heart, loving him.

It is something I don't fully understand. I'm starting to feel like maybe I am not supposed to. Maybe this is something that should not be dissected, should not be scrutinized, should not be judged. It should just be felt.

I don't like confusion, but I like the way he looks at me and says: "You're doing it again." "What?" I always ask. "You're thinking too much." He would smile a smile that is unimaginable, indescribable. A smile that I know is intimate, because I've never seen him smile like that to the others. "You have that cute frown on your face." He always points out.

"You're doing it again." Duo said, he's been getting ever more smug lately, jostling me awake from my thoughts.

I smiled. There was a brief, instinctual thought to suppress it, but I didn't.

"Hey, that's a new response." He reacted. "Just when I think we have the routine down you throw me a curve ball."

"I like to keep you on your toes." I responded. I'm not much of an expert but a quick sideways
glance and it is clear, even to me, that he appreciated my teasing response.

"Right. So that is why you have been sleeping for the past four hours? To keep me on my toes?"

He backfires and chuckles.

I hadn't even realized I had fallen asleep. I had closed my eyes to rest and lose myself in my thoughts, apparently before my later thoughts emerged, I had unwittingly dozed off. I checked the clock and of course found Duo was not deceiving me, the dials had changed to a much later hour. I apologized for falling asleep but Duo scoffed and assured me there was no need for apologies.

"What were you thinking about?" He inquired after allowing a few silent moments to pass. Curiosity always gets the better of his patience.

"Warheads." I answered candidly, only to realize that my response would not make much sense to him. After all, even though I at times accused him of it, Duo could not read my mind.

As expected he ventured confused: "Warheads?"

"Just an analogy." My voice was growing a bit soft. I looked out the window, going through my thoughts, trying to organize them in a way that I would find words to explain them to him.

"For what?" He instantly shot back.

"For us." Not yet in possession of much sensible words, I left it at that and watched his face as he pondered over my statement.

He finally concluded: "That is a good analogy."

His answer I found a little confusing, certainly unexpected. So much so that I presumed there was more to his reaction than the mere dictionary meaning of the words he used, but his tone of voice I could not, yet, appropriately decipher. His words were affirmative, but somehow he made it sound like he did not agree. Duo didn't like me thinking of myself as a weapon, he has made no secret of it. I wondered that, however much he disliked it, he did realize that he could not deny the truth in my line of thought. After all, we were weapons, as much so as our handguns nestled in the holsters we had slung over the back of our seats. We were made that way and we were still that way. The only difference being between then and now is that the finger on the trigger is our own. We make our own judgment calls.

I didn't need to tell him, he was well aware of these thoughts I had. However, awareness did not dictate understanding. What is so wrong about recognizing that we are valuable weapons? I didn't think it necessarily meant a bad thing, it didn't have to be a bad thing, it didn't mean that that is all there was to us. "Weapon" is a term that brought much disagreement between us. "Heated discussions" Duo calls these disagreements. If you ask me, we were just fighting. Not the fighting where your left hand forms a bone-crushing fist, but where your lips form heart-aching words. I didn't mind the fights, as long as we make up. So far we have always made up.

The conversation, brief as it was, was over, because we have already had it, numerous times. Officially the conclusion is we agree to disagree. Unofficially I know both of us are still hoping the other will be convinced of our own reasoning. Duo is as stubborn as me like that.

"What's that smile about?" He asked. His voice is kind, he held no grudge.

The smile had escaped my guard. There was a split second of nervousness before I remembered it was okay, it was okay to smile. "You're a stubborn asshole."
"You're a stubborn asshole." He barely managed to retort before bursting out into laughter.

It was this exchange we did, born out of a particularly bad "heated discussion" when I had burst and called him a stubborn asshole. I had been shocked at my own reaction, the volume of my voice, the emotions that came out of me through expressions and body language. Duo startled me even more when he abruptly started laughing, even though he had been screaming at me before. Between near violent chuckles he said "I love you." I was still angry, though perplexed. I called him a stubborn asshole again and he said it right back to me with a big smile.

That is how most of our fights ended, with Duo smiling at me - an expression I believed to be one of relief - and telling me he loves me.

"Stubborn asshole" had become some sort of secret code between the two of us, to remind us that no matter how bad - or "heated" - things could get between us, we could always get back to that state of loving each other.

"Have we made some progress?" I asked, looking outside at the clouds surrounding us.

"In the past four hours? Hell yeah. Say hello to landmass." Duo released the controls and flicked the ground radar screen. We had long left the coast behind, it was about to disappear from the screen.

"I missed flying." He added as a wistful afterthought.

I relaxed back in my seat after leaning in to observe the radar screen. "You are very good at it." I commented, hoping my voice would convey that I didn't mean anything by that, that I didn't imply that we are most suited for this, for missions.

He didn't appear to take it the wrong way. He mischievously replied with a grin he trademarked: "There are other things I'm very good at too."

His words were innocent enough, but his stare and the accompanying wink illustrated his underlying intention. His shameless reference brought a blush to my cheeks, which only caused me more embarrassment. I remembered the last time, though I tried not to, not wanting to give him that satisfaction. I saw images of the North wall of our bedroom as he had roughly pushed me against the opposite wall and kneeled down before me, his warm hands all over me, touching me demandingly. I liked it. When I started to lose control of myself, I suppose when I started to like it too much, he placed both his hands on my hips strongly and kept me firmly pressed against the wall to keep me from thrusting in response to the pleasure. I wanted it so much. His hair felt amazing as I buried my hands in it.

My voice sounded so strange when I called out his name as I climaxed.

"You know," he continues jovially, "like carpentering."

A single chuckle escaped me, much like a sudden cough. I stopped the others, though I didn't know why, it was funny. I had wanted to laugh, but my militarized instincts still tended to override my reactions. "That was not what I was thinking about."

"I know. Carpentry doesn't make you blush."

Ever since Duo had been trying to convince me of buying a house to fix up and make our home, kidnapping me to open houses, the word "carpentering" had consistently been worked into more and more conversations. I didn't yet know where I was at, I needed convincing, Duo recognized that too. So far nothing of what he had said convinced me to take that leap; to expose myself to
that. What if at the end of one year, or two years, or three years, we end up with a perfectly constructed house - safe and strong; everything works, nothing leaks - and I would still be where I was, lost, hands reaching out through a thick, dark fog, only grazing his invisible fingers as he holds his hands out towards me from where the light shines.

I was afraid of what it meant if a barren, inhabitable house is easier and quicker to fix than me.

Our gazes simultaneously focused on a screen merged into the consoles and switches when a sharp alarm beeped once. At the perimeter of the scan a red target appeared, numbers attached to it. With the blinking of the screen, the target inched closer.

"Military?" I wondered.

Duo's eyes darted to the ground radar. "We did just fly into Chad airspace. They have been particularly vigilant since the third world war." He shook his head, his expression was irritated and frustrated, but also confused it appeared. "No way they could have spotted us. This aircraft is practically invisible to any radar device."

I looked at the numbers accompanying the approaching target. "46,000 feet. It's high for a commercial flight, but not abnormally so."

"Quiet airspace like this? Why climb so high?" Duo processed out loud.

"Turbulence?"

Duo's face remained the same, he didn't seem consolidated. "Why won't you try eavesdropping, maybe you can catch some chatter."

I nodded and unbuckled my seatbelt, flinging the bands over my shoulder. With ducked head I got out of the front of the cockpit and seated myself in a single chair in the back. The plane had been designed for espionage, the receiver with which it was fitted was the strongest to ever take flight and still be able to leave the plane invisible. I flicked a switch and the dark console came to life with buttons lighting up in a rainbow of colors. On the keypad I gave the order for the receiver to scan all frequencies and while it started to get to work I lifted the heavy headphones off a hook and placed them over my head. Through the pads I heard only white noise.

"Anything?" Duo questioned.

I didn't answer, knowing he would get the message. I focused on the static. Eventually there was a brief beep and on the screen a frequency lit up, meaning it was in use. With a press of a button I could listen in on the chatter. I waited for the plane to squawk.

Finally, through the headphones, I heard: "Alpha-Bravo-356 you have cleared the turbulence, descend to an altitude of 40,000 feet and remain at cruising speed. Over."

"Copy that." The pilot replied. "Descend to 40, maintain cruising speed. Over."

"It's nothing." I told Duo. "Just a commercial jet avoiding turbulence."

He was visibly relieved. If the plane had been military, our cover would have been blown and the mission would be a failure before it had even started. Duo always blamed me of getting too involved, but this mission was close to his heart as well. It was the mission we have been preparing ourselves for for eight months.

"I'll just make sure we stay out of their visual range and we should be clear." Duo slightly adjusted
our course and the projected path showed that our path and that of the commercial jet would not cross.

I joined him back at the front and strapped myself in again. I had learned to read Duo quite well and recognized him to be tense. He was putting too much pressure on himself. He had been very hands-on regarding the preparation of this mission. Usually Une was the one to make the arrangements, to call the shots, she had clearly struggled to relinquish that control. Duo wanted everything to go his way. I didn't think it was because of a lack of trust, she was very competent, but at the same time Duo knew she would never be able to match him. Wasn't that, after all, the very reason why she wanted us to be involved as Preventers? Mostly I figured Duo wanted to make all the decisions because he wanted to carry the entire load of responsibility. I didn't really understand why he would do that to himself.

He never made a decision I disagreed with, so I never challenged him, but I quietly worried. We were assigned to this mission because we were the best and that made us the best pick to handle this high priority mission, but with both of us distracted by our emotions and pressured by the importance, I wondered if we were still the best pick. I shook my head. I didn't understand why I was thinking these things. Even if other - lesser - agents had been better suited to complete the mission, purely based on lack of emotionality, I didn't think I would have had the objectivity to step down and let them take over. This was our mission. This was our way of coming full circle. This was our moment, as warheads, to explode.

We were quiet, probably because we were both thinking. I didn't know what he was thinking about. His expression was one of conflicted emotions, I didn't know what to do with that, how to sensibly interpret that, nor did I know of a good way to ask him, so I left him to his thoughts as I lost myself to my own. To keep my thoughts and emotions from distracting myself from our purpose, I preoccupied myself by going over the plan. We were nearing our destination, it was likely one of the last opportunities to quietly go through it step by step, to ensure any error or liability had been appropriately dealt with.

Our mission started yesterday. We had been on stand-by for a month, no off-premises training exercises, no out-of-town trips. We had been waiting for the perfect storm and we knew it had happened when, at five in the morning, our phone rang starkly in the silence. We had been in bed. Duo had replaced our two beds with one queen-sized. There was no more "his side" and "my side", our places were at the center, lying in each other's arms. Duo had been behind me, one of his long, strong arms wrapped around my waist, the other he had folded on his pillow, his cheek resting on his bicep, his breath spread across my neck and bare shoulder. We both jolted when the phone rang, instantly awake, but we hesitated to get up. Maybe there was some kind of reluctance lurking in our sub-consciousness.

At the third ring, Duo said: "It's time."

I only answered: "Yeah."

He released me and got out of bed. Barefoot he padded across to apartment to answer the phone on the wall near the front door. Out of some sense of modesty I put on a pair of sweatpants before I followed him. He was holding the phone to his ear, looking very serious.

His responses were a string of single syllables.

"Good... Good... Great... Yeah... Right... Yeah..."

He hung up the phone after he said: "We'll be there in forty minutes."
All we had to do was get dressed and get our previously prepared duffel bags out from under the bed and make sure that all electric appliances were turned off. We didn't know when we would be getting back. In silence we took the train to the Preventer head quarters. Duo didn't tell me anything about the call, there was no need.

We arrived before most employees would start their day, the grounds were quiet. The receptionist recognized our faces and let us walk to the elevator with the slightest, nearly imperceptible nod. Up on the control floor Une was waiting for us in the doorframe of our office, she was talking into a headset but cut off the conversation as soon as she spotted us approaching her through the dimly lit room. "This way." She took out her ear piece and handed it to the assistant who trailed her more dutifully than her own shadow. "Sorry for the early call, we just got the call, we don't know how long this window is going to last." In spite of her words she did not strike me as particularly apologetic. But we didn't need her to be, we all understood the importance of the mission.

Sleeping in could wait till we were in our seventies. We had every intention of making it that far.

Even I.

The thought startled me first, now it brings me calm.

She led us to the conference room of which by now we had memorized every ceiling panel and wall board. Seated at the oval table were men in suits and men in military uniforms. They were all bald, I didn't know why I noticed that. I also noticed their heavily decorated jackets of the generals and commanders of the RUSA military.

"Duo, Heero, you remember the Secretary of Defense, mister Carlysele." She nodded towards one of the familiar faces in the room.

"Yeah. Hi." Duo said. I presumed his casual attitude to be very inappropriate but hadn't expected any different of him.

Une briefly introduced us to the others. The faces were divided. In some I dared to believe I saw admiration, in others I immediately identified distrust. Being able to place most expressions on a spectrum of emotions had, in some ways, only complicated my life. Thankfully it enriched other parts of my life generously to outweigh the cost.

I looked over at Duo and I suppressed the urge to reach out and briefly hold his hand in mine. It's something that had taken more effort recently, to suppress the urge to randomly touch him. Yet another thing I simply didn't understand.

A screen rolled down and an overhead projector blinked to life. An iridescent map of the world appeared. Une had a remote with which she zoomed in. We were looking at the Red Sea and the surrounding coastlines.

"N'Gasi finally emerged from underneath the shroud. Our trails lost sight of him two weeks ago and our insider has been quiet equally long. It is only reasonable to presume he has been uncovered and executed." Une started. "Undercover units have since been working around the clock to pin N'Gasi down. We thought our opportunity had been lost, but a new one arose from the situation. We caught a break. Senator Onslow of Ethiopia is one of many determined to free Eritrea from Ethiopia, after Ethiopia seized the country to gain access to the coast over twenty years ago. He understands that with N'Gasi at the helm things will only get worse for his former country so he is willing to help in exchange for a political debate that will open up the opportunity for Eritrea to become an independent nation again."
The map changed. First Ethiopia appeared and was highlighted, then the image shifted, restoring the borders of former Eritrea which had been absorbed into Ethiopia after a violent war. Eritrea has since been plagued by resistance of its own citizens who extremely and tirelessly protested the merge, even to present day. Eritrea has been carrying the poor Ethiopian nation since its capture, its citizens paying impossible taxes to keep it's master from bankruptcy.

"Since striving for the independence of Eritrea was already in our five-year-plan, we have struck a deal. Senator Onslow has gladly given us the current location of N'Gasi. This is a unique chance, one we must not waste. Over the past few months we have found N'Gasi to cleverly evade follow-up attempts by appearing only in public places that make assassination unreasonable or disappearing off radar."

The image changed to an aerial picture of the Red Sea, with a vague, white shape in its blue waters. "This 6.7 million dollar yacht was not previously known to be in N'Gasi's possession or any of the people close to him but Senator Onslow has informed us that N'Gasi occasionally comes down to the Hawra Harbor and takes it out to sea. This is one of those occasions. A curious and brave employee of the harbor has secretly videotaped N'Gasi's arrival at the harbor."

The video with shaky and blurred images started to play. Despite the poor quality, N'Gasi's smug face was identifiable.

"We have verified his identity using enhancement software and he is seen here boarding the yacht accompanied by two servants and six heavily armed guards. No children present to complicate the matter this time." She looked at me briefly, in her eyes a turmoil of which I could make no sense and neither could she probably. "The yacht has laid anchor a kilometer off shore, right here." The map with a good overview returns and a red dot lights up. "Satellite surveillance shows no one has left or boarded the yacht, but the yacht is being patrolled. This smaller boat, presumably with more armed guards, hangs close by, regularly circling the yacht. It's the best opportunity for months, only two civilians present, but at night when we have our entry planned, they will be asleep in their own quarters and hopefully won't notice a thing and won't get in the way. The protection, compared to other instances, is marginal and certainly not impenetrable. Finally, there was a riot in Adi Keyh last week, protesting N'Gasi's reign. The military handled it poorly - violently - and there is a lot of anger amongst the civilians of Ethiopia and worldwide. If we do it now, fingers will be pointed in all directions, everyone has motive and because we will make sure they will find no proof to pin it on us."

She looked us all sternly in the eye and questioned: "Do we agree to move forward with this situation?"

All heads nodded, including mine and Duo's.

"We have previously agreed that to get into the country undetected, Heero and Duo will fly themselves, in one of our Stealth airplanes. They will land in our base in Sudan, there they will be supplied with a vehicle and all the equipment they will need and they will cross the Ethiopian border as ghosts, here, in the middle of the desert. They will lay low in Iridan, right here, till we have confirmed that their entry has gone unnoticed and the situation has remained unchanged. When that has been confirmed they will approach the shore, following this line, no villages, no patrols, no checkpoints. The coast here is all desert, N'Gasi probably thinks this prevents any land based approach, but it is a distance of little over two hours, easily manageable. Once they are in position they will approach the yacht under water, take out the guards, hopefully peacefully and without alerting the patrolling boat and they will assassinate N'Gasi, followed by a noisy exit to make the hit seem unprofessional and poorly executed."
"How do we bring stability to the country, once we get rid of him?" The Secretary of Defense wondered.

With nods the other men approved of his question.

"The USS Valora is situated in the Golf of Aden, they can reach Ethiopia in a matter of hours and will move in as soon as Agents Maxwell and Yuy have confirmed the success of the mission. They, along with ground and air troops will be standing by to subdue any uproar of the army. A new president would mean the army would have to relinquish a lot of it’s power. We expect some resistance but they are vastly outnumbered and Sudan and Kenya have already agreed to back us up should it ever get that far. Senator Quasim has successfully been under our protection and he is currently in hiding in the capital, awaiting my call. As soon as he does, the senate will be gathered and they will appoint him as temporary president. Democratic elections are already being orchestrated in secret."

"Why can't we just bomb the damn yacht and get it over with?" One of the decorated, military men grumbled.

"We need the benefit of the doubt. We have to make it look like anyone could have done it, including rebelling citizens. We still have many enemies on Earth and in the colonies, if we take overt action like that, they will use that to rile up more resistance against us. We prevent violence and war, we do not instigate it." Une answered. She sounded annoyed and impatient. The general had been giving her grief throughout this project, thinking she unrightfully assumed control over the operation.

"Then why don't we just get them fake passports and fly them straight into Ethiopia on a commercial flight? Do you have any idea how much this costs? A privately chartered stealth plane?"

"With all due respect sir, we have discussed this at length and we agreed this would be the most invisible way to enter the country." She argued.

Though hesitant to apply my newly acquired social skills confidently in every situation, I thought I heard unadultered impatience and annoyance in her voice. I thought the general picked up on this too, he looked almost offended at hearing her reaction. After our first meeting with the general, Une had warned Duo and I, she had said: "I don't predict he will be giving us trouble, but he won't be of much help either." Further meetings had proven this initial conclusion correct. There were a lot of ambitious characters gathered in this one conference room, I supposed it was only natural that they would eventually clash.

That same day we had more, rushed meetings with several different crews who had to be informed of the operation. Everything was need-to-know, employees were only briefed on their part in the operation. The plans were reviewed, discussed and finally, agreed upon. Tension rose as time kept ticking away, even I could tell.

Duo and I had a hasty dinner of a cafeteria sandwiches as we watched ground personnel load our chartered plane with dummy cargo, lightweight, empty crates. In case any government or agency had the Preventer airbase in Sudan under secret surveillance, the flight could be written off as fairly routine transportation of equipment. Une assured us she could brush off any following questions about why Preventers would choose to transport anything in an expensive, stealth plane.

The Lady herself joined us just as the last of the "cargo" was rolled on board.

"I just got off the phone with the president." She said. "He has given us the green light. Wheels off
in T-minus forty." She left us alone, I didn't know why.

Duo sighed beside me, his tense shoulders slumped for the first time that day. I didn't quite know what that meant, it should mean relaxation, but he didn't look relaxed. Other associations between emotion and slumped shoulders I didn't know of yet. No matter how much I learned, it seemed Duo would always have me guessing. It annoyed me as I came closer and closer to a rather unspectacular realization, that reading people is not an exact science and no matter how skilled you are, people will somehow always manage to confuse or fool you with their expressions and body language.

"Are you ready for this?"

His questions confused me at first; why wouldn't I be? But when I considered his inquiry more closely I could feel something in my stomach that felt like nervousness and hesitation and it dawned on me that the question was righteous. "I am if you are." I answered and it was the truth, I was ready as long as I would have him by my side, strong and dedicated.

He looked at me and for a long time did not speak, till finally: "I am." There was no sign of second-guessing in his voice. Though my interpretations should always be considered inconclusive.

It had taken us an eight hour flight to get to where we were, in the middle of Chad airspace, a commercial flight a few miles North of us, unaware of our presence. The plane was not as quick as the SuSo53, it couldn't be. Speed meant noise and noise, by definition, wasn't very stealthy.

After a long time of silence, I decided to turn the tables on Duo and ask him the question with which he oftentimes interrupted my broods. "What are you thinking?"

He smiled at me. It was fake, of that I was sure. "Nothing, buddy."

Agitated by his insincere response, I spat back: "Is "Nothing" a new code word for something?"

His apology for his patronization was instantaneous, his elaboration I had to wait for. It seemed he struggled to find the words, I knew what that felt like, so I gave him time. "I'm just worried." He started and then proceeded to be at a loss of words, or fighting some sort of self imposed censorship.

Going on the information he supplied me with, I tried to assure him that the mission would go well. "Everything is planned and it's a good plan." This was not a lie, but like with most plans, the problem of a plan lies not so much in the conception, but in the execution. There are variables you can't take into account thousands of miles away from your target, hunched over blueprints and land charts. I didn't know how to consolidate him in this regard, after all, I never could consolidate myself. Still, I somehow managed to accomplish my missions, which gave me a sense of security, though limited. I held on to that because every step had to be taken with confidence, if you start second guessing your footwork, you will loose your balance. That is what I have been taught, I have applied this methodology to all my assignments. I had always thought it was the same for Duo. He was one of the best, solely my ego disallowed any higher credit than that.

"I'm not worried about the mission." He corrected me. "At least, not more than is to be expected." He looked at me poignantly, the censorship was discontinued and he told me honestly: "I'm worried about you."

"You think I can't do this?" My tone was insulted, because I was.
"No, I don't have a doubt in my mind that you can do this. I know what you are capable of in the field..." He paused meaningfully. "I also know what it takes for you to achieve your impossible goals, what you need to become- what you think you need to become." His gaze briefly departed from my face to scan the screens and controls. With the situation still calm, the plane flying comfortably and smoothly on automatic pilot, he turned back to me. "You have been doing so well, we have been doing so well. I don't want you to take a step back and then be paralyzed and unable to move forward again."

I wished I had a promise to offer him, one I knew I could keep. But I didn't. "It's not something I can control." I tried to explain. I felt something in my chest, jumbled emotions. When I looked away from his pensive eyes, it didn't sting so much. "It just sometimes happens..."

"I know." His voice was comforting, even though he must too be feeling those confusing things in his chest. "That's what worries me."

I dared to look into his eyes again and was met with a mixture of compassion and concern.

The on board computer interrupted us, a tinny voice that talked with awkward pauses between it's words announced: "We are nearing destination. Descent program will be initiated." Duo switched off the automatic pilot in response. To avoid detection we would maintain altitude till the last moment and then make a sharp descent to the tarmac of the Sudan Preventer Air Base, approaching it from sea after a U-turn.

The conversation appeared to be over. It was just as well, I didn't know what to say anyway and more importantly, we needed to focus.

As we passed the air base Duo started to turn the plane, steering it back towards our destination and at the same time initiating the descent. An alarm went off to warn us that the cabin pressure will change quickly with the rate of our descent. With the switch in my reach, I turned it off. Moments later I started to feel a discomfort in my ears, it was a tolerable pain and I was not concerned, I knew Duo wouldn't take the plane down faster than we could handle.

"This is the Sudan Preventer Air Base, code Echo Lima 547, approaching unidentified, squawk call-sign. Over."

Duo put on his headset and pulled the microphone down to his mouth. "Echo Lima 547, this is Yankee Foxtrot 288, we are approaching for op. Red Sea Eclipse. Over." He covered the microphone and joked: "I guess operation "let's get this son of a bitch" was taken."

There was a pause as they verified our identity. "Yankee Foxtrot 288, you are clear to land and directly proceed to hangar D-Delta. Over."

"Copy that. Hangar Delta. Here we come. Over."

The sun glared, high in the sky, as we made our approach. Duo flicked a switch and the windows tinted dark, like sunglasses and the runway appeared before us as a clear strip of tarmac in the middle of a flat, dry desert. Sand was blown ruthlessly against the hangars and the control tower. Every structure had a beige facade that allowed the buildings to blend with the surroundings. A single road led away from the small, secluded air base. As we dropped lower and lower, we could see heavily armed men patrolling the grounds and the gunmetal air defense systems jutting up through the sand, the long barrels immobile.

"Hold on." Duo gritted, the controls shaking in his clenched fists. "It's going to be a sharp one."
With a sharp jolt that briefly pushed me into my harness, the wheels touched ground, but the plane gently decreased speed and Duo steered it off the lonesome runway onto the side tarmac, through the wide open doors of Hangar D. Inside everything was grey, it was just a slab of concrete with steel clad walls and a steel support roof, brightly lit. In the corner there was a black helicopter with its rotors folded along its tail and all along one side crates were stacked up right to the ceiling. If I squinted I could read some of the black text painted on the plain crates. "Ammo" and "Tactical Defense" were recurring terms.

The second thing I noticed were the Preventers surrounding us, their uniforms were sand colored, unlike the standard issue black and dark green ones we wore, obviously, in this environment, they had to adapt.

The small airbase was home to a lot of Preventer personnel, since my failed assassination attempt, analysts had figured this air base would likely be subjected to violent revenge. Of course by now we all knew they had been wrong. The air base had gone untouched.

I reluctantly followed Duo as he left the cockpit after running through the shut-down procedures. There were a lot of people down there and I suspected they would want to meet us. Over the past few months Duo and I had made quite a reputation for ourselves as trainers. Une informed us privately that we were already whispered to be legendary. This surprised me because, especially during the first few months, we were not met with a single happy, nor appreciative face. A lot of big ego's got stepped on, both students and other trainers, when we were assigned as co-leaders of the Preventer training program.

The hatched opened with a hydraulic hiss and Duo confidently walked out, onto the concrete, where employees were gathering. I trailed his footsteps, lingering behind him. I had no interest in meeting all these new people.

They all clicked their heels together and saluted us. The Preventer force was structured much like a military organization and even though we didn't officially carry ranks such as commanders or generals, as agents and as trainers especially, we outranked these soldiers. But Duo didn't like this military style and was always quick to assure people they did not need to be so formal with us.

"Can any of you guys escort us to base leader McCormack?" Duo asked jovially.

One of the employees volunteered, a young man with a fresh, clean face. It didn't look like he had any experience in the field whatsoever. We followed him through a steel door, down a narrow corridor and then up a narrow staircase. The whole base seemed like a fortress of steel and concrete and inside it felt suppressing and hopeless, like the depth of an earthly cave that could collapse on top of you. But our escort brought us to the light. After climbing several stairs he opened a final door and we found ourselves in the watch tower, with a 360 degree view of sun baked, sand plains, contrasting with the azure of the sky.

"Officer McCormack?"

A surprisingly young man rose and turned to meet us. His face was withered by the relentlessness of the sun and the wind that gave him a stern and aged look, but his uncontrolled hair and free demeanor returned to him that youthful essence that he was supposed to have. He approached us and shook Duo's hand. He wanted to shake mine too but he quickly caught on that I wasn't going to meet his hand halfway between us, so he dropped his limb back down his side and thankfully made no remark.

"It's good to see you made it on time."
His accent was strange. From the information we had received I knew he was American, like Duo, but his use of the English language sounded forced and uncomfortable. He had probably spent a lot of time abroad, losing his American accent and gaining another in his communication with many internationals.

He continued to explain: "We have a sandstorm on our radar, coming in from the West. Not sure you would have been able to land in that bad boy."

I was surprised Duo didn't feel the need to boast that he could land any plane in any condition.

"Will it disrupt our schedule?"

"Well, visibility will be low but it's not like you have to worry about much traffic out here, so as far as we're concerned everything is still a go."

"Good."

"Sorry you had to go through the trouble of bringing fake cargo, by the way, we weren't sure if we could clear one of the hangars in time. I'll take you down to your transportation. The cook can prepare a meal for you before you leave." He suggested and he guided us back down the way we came.

"As long as we have some food for on the road, it will be fine." Duo answered.

I was grateful our stay would not be unnecessarily extended.

The base leader brought us to a significantly smaller hangar that obviously was not designed for large aircrafts like the others. There were two rows of army jeeps parked neatly beside each other. Only one of them had the canvas roof up and this is the one McCormack guided us to. He ripped the tarp off the open back and showed us the jerry cans of spare fuel, the bottles of water and the rations. The equipment specific for the mission we had brought along ourselves, air base workers were carrying the bags and crates over from the other hangar, as well as our personal duffel bags.

McCormack handed us a clipboard and told us to sign the log. I didn't make a move, leaving Duo to take the initiative. I walked around the vehicle and checked if all the supplies were properly strapped down and all present. My gaze kept gravitating towards the wooden crate. A heavy feeling caught me off guard. I pushed it away and calculated how many liters of water we had in total, concluding that it should be more than enough.

"Now I don't know where you two are headed and for what purpose," McCormack started, handing the clipboard to a passing employee, "but miss Une herself called me to notify us of your arrival, so I'm thinking whatever you guys are going to be doing, it is going to be important... What I want to say is, I guess... good luck." He gave Duo a pat on his shoulder.

I was secretly pleased to be out of his physical reach. From the meaningful look in his eyes, I doubted whether he was truly unaware of the intentions of our mission.

Duo thanked him, upon which he was handed the key to the car and the base leader walked off.

Duo's back was turned towards me, but I could see him momentarily deflate.

I didn't say anything because I didn't know what to say. I walked around the car, opened the door and seated myself behind the wheel. The sound of the door slamming shut drew Duo's attention towards me.
He grinned and playfully punched my shoulder. "What makes you think you get to drive, huh?" He tauntingly held the key out of my reach.

"You got to fly." I argued dryly.

With an exaggerated sigh he handed over the key and walked to the other side, getting into the passenger seat. A Preventer in the corner flicked a switch and the door in front of us opened swiftly. Rough sand blew inside and we could hear it being dragged along the concrete floor and the canvas roof by the forceful wind. Duo nodded to the man as I pulled the jeep out of the hangar, into the unknown.

We were fully dependent on our navigation system. I could only see the tarmac directly in front of us.

Duo was quiet. The wind was the only talkative entity in the desert, howling around the chassis and over the roof. The air in the hangar had been air-conditioned, the air-conditioning in the jeep however was no match for the heat outside that enveloped us. We quickly made the wordless decision to turn it off, it wasn't doing any good anyway, it would only cost us fuel and with that resource we could not take any chances.

The first thing Duo said, after nearly two hours of silence was: "Get off the road here, go South."

I complied and turned the wheel. The jeep jolted as one by one the wheels left the elevated tarmac and went into the hot sand. Luckily the desert was mostly flat, with only few, gently sloping dunes and the sand was not so loose that the wheels would simply dig into it, but the terrain did slow our process.

All of a sudden, the sky appeared above us as we left the sandstorm behind. The vastness of the desert stretched around us on all sides and it gave me a brief sense of hopelessness. A quick glance at the navigation brought me confidence and relief. A red line was plotted between the base we had left and our destination and the jeep was a small dot slowly moving along that line.

"Fuck this desert is hot." Duo commented. He pinched his thin shirt between his fingers and pulled it away from his skin, allowing air to cool his chest.

I was sweating too. My bangs plastered to my forehead as my shirt plastered to my chest and back. "Did you know that not all deserts are hot?" I didn't really know why I started such a meaningless conversation. Perhaps the silence was getting to me. I was used to Duo taking the initiative to alleviate the quiet, so used to it, that I've grown to need it, to feel comforted by it.

I could hear Duo's smirk in his voice as he replied: "Every desert with you in it is hot."

The hand that he rested high on my thigh didn't exactly cool me down.

I wondered what the meaning was of these sexual innuendo's that he kept including in even the most brief and unrelated conversations. I had learned there was a reason why he kept bringing up "carpentering". I had to know what he was trying to achieve with this topic. So I blurted out my question: "Does it bother you that we haven't had sex since-?" I didn't need to specify since when, he knew exactly what I was talking about, he had mastered mentioning "it" without ever truly saying it.

"We have sex."

I could tell that he is unsure of his response. It was an alien feeling, being able to tell, but it was good. "You know what I mean."
"Anal sex..." He verified.

I think he just said the words out loud for shock value. With result. It made me blush. "Yeah." I kept my gaze focused far up ahead, afraid of what even a moment of eye contact could do to me.

"I miss it." He answered candidly. "But it doesn't bother me. You?"

I was silent for a while, thinking about my answer. "I miss it too." I finally replied. "But I want to be sure that I miss it for the right reasons. That is the only thing that bothers me, that everything is so complicated with me. Nothing is ever easy." My frustration was evident in my voice.

"I keep telling you, Heero, that it's fine that you have to take a little while. Or a long while, whatever, I'm waiting for you. And I am fine with waiting for you."

"Then why do you keep talking about it?"

He sighed, now it seemed he was frustrated, with me. "I'm just holding the door open, in what I thought was a playful way. You told me yourself that you have problems taking the initiative and reading the signs, so I just figured that I should keep letting you know that I'm interested, so you can play into that when you are ready. I don't mean to pressure you!"

"I'm sorry." I said meekly as I noticed the conversation getting as heated as the air.

"It's okay. I'm sorry too. I-I didn't want to make you feel that way. And I didn't mean to raise my voice at you just now."

Relief cleansed me of my confusions and hurt feelings. There was a smile I couldn't suppress. "You're just a stubborn asshole, that's all." I whispered, clenching the steering wheel as I fought the urge to laugh.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the stubbornest asshole of them all?" Duo bantered with a cheeky grin.

"'Stubbornest' isn't even a word."

"Case in point." Then he started laughing, a delicious rumble that just overcame him.

I let out a few chuckles, but I couldn't laugh out loud with him, something within me stopped me, something I had no control over. But it felt good to chuckle and the relief tricked my body into the thinking the temperature dropped several degrees.

"You know I would kiss you if I wasn't afraid we would crash, right?"

I smiled and I looked at him. "I know."

He flashed me a mischievous grin. "Are we nearly at the hotel yet?"

I glanced at the navigation. "If you consider over 200 kilometers 'nearly'. We just passed the border." I noted.

"Into the lion's den." Duo muttered, gazing out the window at a scenery that never changed.

Our progress was interrupted by a couple of necessary stops to let the engine cool down and once to dig ourselves out when I had accidentally plowed one of the front wheels into a bank of loose sand. The sun was not working in our favor either, when we had left, it had still been early in the day and relatively cool, but as time crawled by, the temperature climbed relentlessly. At the hottest
hour of the day the jeep functioned as an oven, but there was no relief to be found outside. You could feel the sun burning your skin, the heat of the sand would work it's way through the material of your shoe and the wind sanded your exposed skin raw. I even burned my palm popping the trunk to check on the engine radiator.

As Duo kept saying, embellished with a colorful variation of curses: it was like hell.

His response was very agitated and loud when I reminded him that it had been his idea to drive across the border through the desert. I didn't mean to imply it was a bad idea. If I thought it was a bad idea, I would have opposed it back at Preventer Head quarters several weeks ago when he first suggested it. It was the most inconspicuous way to enter the country and therefore I agreed that it was the best approach. I attributed his biting reaction to the heat and didn't try to explain or defend myself.

The sun moved across the sky and the dial of the temperature gauge moved with it.

"Sorry." Duo said, miles into total silence. "Again." He rolled his eyes, at himself.

"It's okay. The heat?"

He shook his head. "The mission. There is a hell of a lot riding on us. I just felt for the first time the fear at possibly having made the wrong decision."

"It was the right decision." I offered.

"Maybe. But there are many more decisions that need to pass the test."

I understood the pressure he was under. What I did not understand is why he put himself through this, by being the one who made a lot of the important decisions when we sat at that table, planning the entire mission. Maybe it was another test for me. A test to see if I could relinquish control. I felt a strange sense of pride because I knew that if it had indeed been a test, I had passed. I did not try to take control, or make things go my way. Granted, this was mostly because I agreed with every decision he made.

"What's that?" Duo wondered, interrupting my thoughts.

I squinted at the vague shape up ahead, nearly unrecognizable as the air above the hot sand trembled and distorted everything in sight. Again, it was the navigation system that came to the rescue. "It's Handuar." I said, reading the Arabic script next to the outline of the small city on the navigation screen.

"Civilization. Thank you, Jesus."

We approached the poor settlement. The buildings were low and old. The majority of the traffic on the streets were grains of sand and tumbleweeds. It was the definition of a ghost town, but to Duo and I it meant hope, it meant a nearing end to our journey. I pulled onto the road - a dirt road - at a small, abandoned looking farm at the outskirts of the village and followed the infrequent sign to the main road that led to shore, towards the highway that would take us to Iridan. Duo and I both sighed when we got onto the tarmac road.

Iridan was an only slightly larger town but with more activity, worldly residents and a handful of international tourists. It was located a few miles closer to the shore, but still far away enough from the coastline to avoid anyone making the connection between two foreign visitors checking into a room this very day and checking out the next. A Preventer stationed in Ethiopia, had sought out the hotel for us and arranged the ideal room as our mission base.
We arrived there half an hour later. Though small, Iridan was lively and I had to slow the jeep down for pedestrians that had taken over the narrow streets. Our hotel was situated right at the town's square but I parked the jeep at a distance, so we would have the privacy to gather everything into just a few bags so we could carry everything up to our room. I casually stood guard whilst Duo popped open the crate and transferred the guns and ammunition into a duffel bag, hiding them under a layer of clothing.

Even through the darkness of the sunglasses I wore, the sunrays that reflected off the white walls were harsh to my eyes. The shadows of the dark and small lobby of the rundown hotel came as a relief.

"Marhaba." Said a man from behind a small counter in the darkest corner. He put away his newspaper and smiled at us.

Duo took the lead. "Marhaba." He clumsily repeated. "Do you speak English?" For someone who did not speak French, we discovered Duo could excellently imitate a French accent, a strange skill of the tongue that we used to our advantage, selling the lie that we were from France, rather than America. We figured this could be better, considering America is the home front of the Preventer Agency and Europe as a whole was only home to a few scattered satellite offices.

"Yes. Well, little bit, little bit. You tell me!" The man laughed.

"It's very good." Duo complimented amicably. "We have reservations."

"Yes. Can I see identification card please?" The man put a pair of delicate glasses on the tip of his nose and pulled a thick binder out of drawer and started to rifle through it.

"Voila." Duo said as he produced our fake passports from his shoulder bag and placed them on the counter.

The man stopped on a certain page and flipped our passports open next to it. "Which name for reservation?"

"Mine." Duo leaned in and pointed at his own passport. "Rousseau." Duo turned back to me and winked.

I rolled my eyes, remembering how long it had taken Duo to pick a name to his liking. He had been sounding off French surnames in that thick, exaggerated accent of him for hours. Because he had been so enthusiastic about it, I had offered him the pleasure of coming up with my name as well, since I had no interest in the process whatsoever. That had been a mistake.

"Ah, yes, Rousseau." He made some notes in his binder before slamming it shut, then he handed us back our passports and presented us an old-fashioned key and welcomed us: "Enjoy your stay mister Rousseau and Mister Petit."

I glared up at Duo - who kept growing beyond my stagnated height - one last time over the ridiculous surname he had given me and then we started heading upstairs. Our room was on the second floor, but without an elevator, with heavy bags and with straining heat, we were both sweating anew by the time we had reached our door.

The room was as expected. "Modest and cozy" was the kind of spin a used-car dealer would put on it. The space was small and smelled dusty, everything was old and worn. The bedspreads were threadbare. There was only one, small window, looking out over a back alley.

In spite of all of this, Duo dropped his bags to the faded carpet, sighed and commented
appreciatively: "Oh, it's like the four seasons." He threw himself onto the bed that he knew I would not have chosen because it's furthest away from both the door and the window and he moaned into the pillow.

As he got his rocks off on what looked to be just another hard and uncomfortable mattress, I checked out the bathroom. Discolored tiles and a tiny sprinkle of water from the shower that took forever to get warm. It's not like we hadn't been faced with worse than this during our career, but it was an adjustment, after having grown used to being in the comfort and security of your own home. An adjustment I found to be more difficult than I had expected.

Of course a small town like this offered nothing better and even if it did, considering our situation and having to keep a low-profile, we couldn't check into a luxurious hotel and get registered in a digital database and risk being exposed.

The mission comes first. Always be inconspicuous. I thought to myself. I could still hear J screaming those very words in my ear.

"What are you doing in there? Come here." Duo called.

I defiantly appeared in the doorway of the bathroom and moved no closer even though his eyes were beckoning me. He had rolled onto his back, his hands folded behind his head, his eyes boring holes into me. "What?"

"I owe you a kiss." He said dead serious, his eyes occasionally leaving my face to glide up and down my body slowly.

A slight shiver went through me. It almost felt like he was touching me with his gaze.

"You're so gorgeous."

"Duo." I warned with an embarrassed blush.

"Take your shirt off." He ordered, shifting slightly on the bed, like he was getting comfortable to enjoy the show.

I looked down at my white button-up shirt. The front and back was still wet with my sweat and clung to my body. "Why?" I wondered.

"You're hot, right? So take it off." He said with a grin.

"Duo, we don't have time for games. We need to focus on the mission."

"We're not playing games." He retorted, "We are just chilling." He sat up and pulled his grey T-shirt over his head, his movement were slow and seemed intentionally sensual, his fingers grazing his skin as he dragged up the fabric. He carelessly threw the shirt to the floor, the item had become irrelevant in the situation. He lay back down, the sheen of sweat on his skin made the muscles of his abdomen, chest and biceps glow in the warm sunlight that filtered in through the curtains.

I knew we were, for a fact, playing a game. But so far I didn't mind where it was going, so I peeled my gaze away from his exposed torso and looked down at my fingers as they started to unbutton my shirt. I shook the fabric off my shoulders and draped it over a convenient, empty chair within reach.

"Mmm, your methods need some refining but the result is unrivaled."
I looked down at myself. My skin was moist and shone and my olive green cargo pants hung inappropriately low from my hips.

I liked the way he looked at me and at the same time, I didn't. I liked it because it made me feel like he really saw me and he really wanted me, but at the same time I didn't like it, because I couldn't fathom how he could like - let alone love - what he saw. Each time he looked at me like that, I tried to put myself in his position, tried to imagine what he saw. The image that kept confronting me is not something that pleased me. Sometimes I wondered how I possibly could be good enough for him. I always felt lesser in comparison. Less open. Less brave. Less understanding. Less tall...

He frowned. My insecurities had made their way into my expression, without me even noticing. "What's wrong?"

I wanted to say "nothing", but I couldn't, because we had promised each other to be honest and open and since I had made sure he would keep to that promise, I had no right to keep secrets from him. "I'm just trying to imagine what it is you see that you like." My voice was soft, nearly a whisper. It was raw and vulnerable and made me uncomfortable.

He sat up and threw his legs over the edge of the bed. "Come here." He said again, only he sounded very different this time.

I walked over to him, coming to stand in front of him. Duo reached out and placed his hands on my hips, urging me closer. I had no choice but to oblige. He kissed my stomach, almost reverently and with his every breath, warmth swept across my abdomen. At first he didn't say anything, making me question whether he was ever going to, but then he looked up at me, his eyes honest and poignant.

"I see you." He simply answered.

I felt tears coming into my eyes, but I didn't understand why, because his answer hadn't made me sad, it had made me relieved. I blinked them away.

"I love you." He said.

"I love you too." I whispered back.

He kissed my stomach again, but this time more sensually and his hands moved from my hips to my ass, his fingers needily pressing into the flesh.

I buried my fingers into his thick, soft hair, not knowing what was going to happen but eagerly awaiting it. I could feel the temperature of my body rising from deep within. My skin felt charged, enhancing the experience of every kiss and every playful lick or rake of his teeth. His hands left my ass after one final squeeze and slowly drew up, brushing my hipbones and ribs, moving up and up till his fingers reached my nipples. The way he touched and teased them sent jolts up and down my body. My pants strained around my erection but Duo completely ignored it as he kept adoring every inch of exposed skin his mouth could comfortably reach with him remaining in a seated position and his fingers were devoted to pinching around or rubbing over my nipples.

"Is this your idea of chilling?" I wondered out loud before I'd lose all coherent thought.

He let out a single chuckle that felt hot against my skin. "Yeah. You like it?"

With my face and body burning with heat I replied: "Doesn't make me feel very... chilled." I gasped loudly when his arm suddenly brushes my groin. I think he did that on purpose.
All of a sudden we were both horizontal on the bed. Duo had pulled me on top of him and let out breathless chuckles, probably laughing at the surprised look on my face.

With our crotches pressed together, creating some delicious and welcome friction, I wasn't exactly in a chuckling kind of mood myself. Duo took advantage of my surprised, open mouth, firmly planting his lips on mine and wasting no time to thrust his tongue inside my mouth to battle my own. I fought back fervently, wishing I could make him feel the same sense of amazing deliriousness that he imposed on me.

I didn't know why it would bother me for Duo to mention sex in conversations. I certainly didn't mind his touches. I guess because I was never really afraid of where the making out would go, Duo respected these limits, he agreed with them and even if we should pass them before we deemed ourselves ready, I knew it would be good anyway. I remembered. The conversations were different in that way. Whenever the topic of sex would come up, I would become fearful, fearful of what would be said and what would be asked. I was still reeling from the question Duo asked me many months ago: "Do you only like sex because it makes you forget?"

I didn't know. I didn't know how I should be feeling, so I could make no judgment of right or wrong. I felt so silly sometimes. Stupid even. I wondered where Duo found the patience. It took me so long to figure things out. It took me so long to find the complicated answers to what was supposed to be a straightforward question.

All I knew for sure is that when he kissed me, I didn't feel like myself anymore. I felt like someone free and uninhibited, able to twist his fingers into the hair of whom he desired and pull him closer for another deep kiss.

I didn't know whether that was wrong or not.

It just felt right.

Duo had his hands on my behind again, pressing my pelvis against mine as he grinded his hips.

"Ah!" I ended the kiss and buried my face in the crook of his neck. Against his skin, taut over strong muscles, I groaned, embarrassed: "I'm going to cum in my pants if you keep this up." The heat was becoming overpowering and I couldn't stop my moans from spilling from my lips as Duo had apparently been deaf to my remark and managed to work a sinful hand in between us. A hand that eventually found it's way into my underwear. His skills with buttons and zippers in challenging situations never failed to amaze me.

My moans were so loud I was afraid someone would overhear, but I couldn't stop them for long. I would bite my lips and try to keep quiet, but only a few breaths later the sounds would burst out of me again. I hoped the walls of the old hotel were thick or that the neighboring rooms were unoccupied. Duo liked it when I was vocal and I supposed I owed him at least that much. After all, in the heat of things, I didn't have the kind of precision control over my body that would be required to be able to work my hands into his pants and return the favor. In frustration I had to give up on the stubborn buttons of his pants, I just couldn't think straight, for all I knew I was just buttoning him up further.

"Don't worry about it." Duo whispered in response to my apparent frustration. When he spoke I could feel his lips brushing the shell of my ear. "I want you to come, baby."

For some reason I felt a surge of heat when his words registered and I could only let out a low moan in response. Most of the times I was unsure of how I felt about having gone from "buddy" to "baby", but this time I definitely liked it. Though I would never admit that, not even under cruel
and unusual torture.

I was so close. But I would not get any closer. Cosmic timing I have always tried to deny the meaning of, rationalize it into something meaningless, into numbers that represent a small but not impossible chance. However I am not sure if that is honest, to others or even to myself. Who was I fooling?

My moans were interrupted by sharp, rapid beeps, only slightly muffled coming through the fabric lining of one of our bags. It would not stop.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed, raising myself up to look over my shoulder and glare at our belongings.

Duo laughed at my profanity. "It's Une, calling to check in."

I sighed, exacerbated. Right, I thought, the mission... I felt very uncomfortable now it had been brought to my attention how incredibly poor our timing had been.

"We're going to have to get that." Duo commented, as I had made no move to get off him.

"You get it." I rolled off his body and settled on the narrow strip of unoccupied mattress next to him, staring up at the ceiling. The bed shifted as Duo's weight vacated. I listened to his muted footsteps on the carpet and the sound of watertight zippers being ripped open. Things were being moved around in the bag as Duo searched.

"Got it." He pulled a small sized laptop out and put it on the seat of the chair in the corner, where I had abandoned my shirt. Duo kneeled in front of it and opened it up. With a single tap on the keyboard he accepted the incoming conference and a screen loaded but no picture ever appeared, as intended.

"02. About time." Was her excuse of a greeting. I had noticed how she was always less friendly in mission-related conversations. I didn't care much for it.

"You know how bottomless bags can be when there is that one thing you need." Duo brushed it all off with a casual grin. He always handled it well. He knew exactly how to react to any sort of demeanor he was faced with.

"Have you arrived at checkpoint C?" She inquired. The line was secure, but we had agreed not to take risks and never mention full names, locations or the purpose of our mission.

"Sure have, we were just enjoying the view."

"Good. This will be our final contact. The shark is still in the tank, no changes, we have him under constant surveillance. Communications has been monitoring all chatter, your dive seems to have made no splash whatsoever. You have been cleared to go shark fishing at time A."

"Allrighty matey."

"Is everything according to plan on your end?"

"Sure is."

"And 01, is he alright?"

I looked over in surprise and caught Duo stealing a glance my way. Our eyes lingered and he said confidently, with his gaze focused on something within me that only he could see: "We're just
anxious to reel in this big motherfucker."

"Okay." She said after a pause. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Duo said and he closed the laptop. "She's just worried about you." He explained without me ever questioning it. "She is a friend, you know. Friends worry." He got up on his feet and walked over to me, lying down on the bed, close next to me. He placed a warm, large hand on my chest and slowly dragged it down, perhaps to continue what we had started.

I took hold of his wrist, not tight enough to hurt, but strong enough to stop his hand in its descent. "I think it's a mistake to do this now."

Even though he didn't look at all perplexed at my statement, he asked me why.

I shrugged. There was a delay in my response because I could not instantly find the words. "We have to do it for the right reasons. I don't want it to mean something bad, us doing... it right before this important mission. I don't want someone to hear about it and read something bad into it." With "someone" I meant our therapist. Duo knew that.

We hadn't planned on going back to therapy. We thought we could handle it. We were wrong. Prior experience influenced us to keep postponing the decision, till one quiet dinner, when Duo looked up at me and said: "We need help." I did not disagree with him. Help materialized as a five foot tall, stocky woman in a humble office. We had been reluctant at first, especially me, but I saw the effect she had on Duo once he allowed himself to open up to her and I wanted that same effect to happen within me. I didn't quite know how I would achieve that yet, but I tried. And for that reason alone, Duo said he loved me when he picked up from my session each time.

"Okay." He said and he relaxed on the mattress, his arm casually but comfortingly draped across my waist. "You're right."

I hoped he indeed agreed with me. This relationship with me was not easy on him. I put him through a lot of negativity, a lot of anger, a lot of sadness, a lot of guilt, a lot of doubt. I wondered if that is what he filled his sessions with, with our shared therapist. I wondered what she had to say about it. Sometimes I feared she would just tell him to cut his losses and let me go. Not because I think she is a bad or mean person. But because sometimes I feared I was. I was working on that, but I would never know if my work will ever be good enough to change me, until I am a changed person. It is scary waiting for that moment, never having any security until that moment arrives. Occasionally, at a random hour of a random day, I find myself looking at my wristwatch and counting how much time had passed since I had been freed from J. And once the math is done, I go to the nearest mirror and I stare at my reflection, hoping to see a changed man.

I haven't seen him yet.

"We should probably eat something and then get a few hours of sleep in." Duo suggested, his voice cheerful. He probably caught onto my morose mood and tried to lighten my spirit. It was a kind but vain gesture. He got up and started rummaging through our bags again, producing a half decent meal of out of the products we had brought. We ate it on the floor, our backs leaning against the side of his bed. The distance between the two beds was so short that Duo could prop his feet up on the other bed, his bare toes wiggling to a beat that was only playing in his head, as between us, there was nothing but silence.

I peeled an orange. Call it desert. Meticulously picking away at it. At some point it became more about perfectly cleaning it than actually preparing to eat it. My thoughts got the better of me again. I realized that though my reflection continued to resemble the young, scared boy, trained to pretend
to be a warrior, with a mean shape to his piercing eyes, I was not him anymore. Not exactly. That boy was a soldier. That boy was cold. That boy was devoted to nothing other than the mission. I could not find myself in that persona anymore. Duo was the center of gravity, everything about me pulled towards him. The beating of my heart, felt not like a contraction of a muscle, but a soul fighting to be closer to him, being pulled back every attempt by veins and tissue, only to try anew. My gaze kept finding him, sometimes I would not even notice, until all of a sudden he'd be looking back at me. Even sitting next to him, a mere inch apart, I had to restrain myself from leaning my body slightly to the left, so our shoulders would touch.

I had a feeling once. It was long ago. Long forgotten. We were on a railroad bridge and Duo was stuck. I wasn't worried at first, but then in the corner of my eyes, a dot of sharp, white light registered and Duo said to me: "Heero, the track is vibrating." It hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt like throwing up, a reaction I only knew from the many times J had me exercising for too long. It was different that time. I was afraid. So afraid I became instantly nauseous. It wasn't until later that I realized why I felt that way. I was afraid of losing him. Terrified. I didn't even know why. I didn't particularly like him back then. He mastered annoyance like a form of art and I was his canvas. It was the first emotion to be painted on my face, for as long as I could remember. God I hated him for that, for giving the mask an expression. It took me a single, near-death experience to realize I had been wrong. I didn't hate him for it. I loved him for it.

He never gave up on me. He never gave up on my ability to react, to feel, to emote. He kept pushing me, kept taunting me, because he knew that sooner or later he would get underneath my skin and touch a real person hiding there. He was the only person, ever, in my life to have that faith.

So I was struck again by this fear. This utter fear of losing him. Not only did I love him. I needed him. I needed him to keep pushing me, to keep reaching underneath that thick skin, to keep having faith that there is anything to touch at all. Without him, there wouldn't be. It's like the philosophical question Duo once came home with, when he was still in high school: If a tree falls deep within the forest, but there is nobody there to hear it fall, did it make a sound?

I cannot change myself, without Duo as my witness.

Without him I will always be staring in that mirror in disappointment. I desperately needed to continue to evolve, I could not afford to get stuck in this phase, because in this phase, with the soldier all but shed, I am just a young, scared boy.

That is a selfish reason to need someone. But a reason no less.

I lost my appetite and offered the peeled orange to Duo.

"You eat it." He replied, just throwing away the peels of what had been his orange. "Vitamin C and other stuff that I don't understand."

"I'm not hungry anymore." I muttered and even though it was a waste, I threw the orange away.

"Everything okay?" He tried and failed to sound casual.

"Yeah," I lied, "just had too many crackers." I didn't want to burden him with my personal concerns. This mission was weighing down enough on him as it was. The last thing he needed was another thing to worry about.

The light coming in through the single window became increasingly dimmed. The sun was setting and the air started to blessedly cool. We rearranged the contents of our bags to suit the phases of
the mission and then agreed it would be best to try and get some sleep, or rest at the very least. Because the temperature wouldn't drop much in the building, that retained the gathered heat of the day well throughout the night, I simply stepped out of my pants and neglected to put on the sweatpants and shirt I had brought. Duo had the same idea.

We crawled into our beds.

"Good night. I love you."

"I love you too." It felt strange wishing him goodnight as the sun had yet to fully set.

Iridan was a very quiet town come evening. The silence was startling and a little disconcerting. I would have done anything for an incessant cricket to disturb my thoughts. Our apartment back home was quiet too, but I couldn't remember it bothering me like the silence bothered me that night. Instantly restless, I struggled vainly to find a position that agreed with me.

"Hey prima ballerina," Duo called, "what are you doing in there? The solo of Swan Lake?" He mocked without ill intent.

Then it dawned on me. It wasn't a cricket I was missing, it was the soft thud of Duo's heartbeat, his breathing and the way his hair rustled against the pillowcase. And I couldn't find a comfortable position because over the past few months I had gotten used to lying against Duo, my head on his chest, his hand on my waist - sometimes, at dawn, sinfully south.

"Heero? You okay?" Duo wondered in the dark as I hadn't responded to his bantering.

"I will be." I kicked the sheets off my body and got out of bed and crossed the short distance to his. Briefly I stood by his bedside, waiting for approval I suppose. Duo held up the sheet in invitation and scooted back to make room for me on the narrow mattress. I slid into the bed and Duo wrapped the sheet around me before settling onto his back. I draped a leg across one of his, lay my arm over his abdomen and rested my head on his chest, just under his chin. Duo's arm found its way around my torso and his thumb gently rubbed circles on my skin. "I guess I've just gotten used to it." I tried to explain, but it did not alleviate the embarrassment I felt.

He sighed in contentment. "Me too."

We were quiet for a while, but before he could fall asleep I started seriously: "Hey Duo?"

"Hmm?" Was his half-asleep response.

"Don't ever call me a ballerina again." I warned.

Fully awake now, Duo laughed. "Okay, okay. Fair enough...Mister Cuddle."

I punched him hard in his side.

"Ow!" He exclaimed, but then he just laughed again and continued to joke.

I didn't remember what he said. I fell asleep soon after, feeling like a lucky young kid in the arms of his forever.

The dreams were good, they were kind. But they were not reality and throughout them I was aware of that and it tainted everything with a bittersweet taste.

When I woke up, I was in no one's arms. And I wasn't that lucky kid anymore, I couldn't be. Duo's
cold hands on my bare side startled me and I jostled awake, my hand instinctively gripped around his wrist, protecting myself from harm.

"It's okay, it's okay. I'm sorry I woke you." Duo said softly.

With a sigh I loosened my grip on his wrists and he reached one hand up to brush some locks of hair out of my eyes. His face was kind and understanding, but something different too. It was the mission, I could see it in his face; in the clenching of his jaw, in the tightness around his eyes. I wondered if he saw it in my face too. I felt it in my heart, but that was no guarantee he could see it, as there has always been a disconnect between the two.

The world outside was dark. The small window looked like a black square painted on the wall, framed by curtains. An orange glow from the lamp on the nightstand bathed the space but also created deep shadows in corners and underneath what few furniture there was. I didn't have to look at a clock to know what time it was.

Time A.

The time we - Duo and myself, the generals, Une and the president of the RUSA - had agreed on as the start of the mission under unchanged circumstances.

Even though I didn't make much sense, I commented with a sleepy voice: "Your hands are cold."

"Sorry. I took a shower and there was only cold water. We should leave in about twenty minutes."

I frowned, I had asked him to wake me at least an hour in advance, to allow me time to shower and check all my weapons and equipment. I didn't have to use my words, Duo read the frown correctly.

"Sorry." He said again. "I know that doesn't leave you much time, but I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful."

I didn't say anything, because the truth shamed me. I was glad he waited till the last moment to wake me up, because now that I was awake, I realized I didn't want to get out of bed at all. It would have been even worse to spend an entire hour fussing over my equipment, even though checking everything was the responsible thing to do, it was just so confrontational.

"Don't worry about your gear. I checked everything and cleaned your guns." He looked at me meaningfully. "You trust me, right?"

"Yes." I didn't even have to think about my answer, my lips said the words before his question even fully registered. Of course I trusted him. I got out of bed and, not looking forward to a cold shower seeing as I already had the shivers for some reason, I decided not to take a shower and just wash myself quickly with a washcloth. I stared at the reflection of my face in the mirror the entire time.

Still the same.

The door was open, so Duo was free to walk in. He brought me my outfit, already wearing his. Black cargo pants, black shirt, black jacket. My attire was identical. His eyes met mine in the mirror. He held up the key part of our clothing. "I'm already wearing mine. I figured it might be uncomfortable changing into it in the middle of a desert, don't want to get sand in there." He offered me a smile.

"Yeah. That's a good idea."

He walked back out of the bathroom, giving me privacy to get dressed, even though I had been butt
naked the entire time.

Fully dressed I walked out. Duo was just zipping up the bags. "Wait." I said, as he moved to close mine. "I have to..."

"Oh, right." He handed me my bag.

"Thanks." I placed it on the bed and opened up a small pocket on the inside, bringing out a plastic bottle that rattled in my hands. I was uncomfortable doing this in front of him, not because he judged me, but because I judged me.

"Here, use this. I don't think you're supposed to drink water from the faucet here." He had a bottle of water reached out towards me.

"Thanks." I said again. I unscrewed both bottles. I shook a white pill into the palm of my hand, I put it on my tongue and then swallowed it with the bottled water. I put the bottle of pills back into the bag and zipped it up. I closed the bottle and handed it back to Duo.

He shook his head. "Keep it." He suddenly smiled. "I don't want your cooties."

I furrowed my eyebrows deeply. I didn't know what that meant. I told him so.

He laughed again but paused long enough to close the distance between us and kiss me deeply. "Hmmm." He drawled as our lips parted. "I guess there is just no avoiding them. Your cooties are way too tempting." He continued to laugh and put my personal duffel bag with his, under the bed we had shared.

I still didn't know what it meant, but I liked the kiss, so I didn't question it.

"There. Everything we need is in these three bags. There is nothing incriminating in those two, just clothes, so we can leave those here. Just one finishing touch..." He haphazardly spread tourist folders out on the surface of the nightstand. "In case we're not back before dawn and they come in to clean the room. Which, judging by the looks of this place, probably isn't going to happen."

I nodded, standing in the middle of the room feeling a little sheepish and, strangely, out of my element.

"Let's go." Duo said.

"Yeah."

We carried the bags over to the window and with some effort managed to pry the window open, paint chipped off the window sill and jumped around us.

"I'll go first." I said. I secured a grappling hook around the window sill and lowered the rope down the side of the building. It was only a short distance but if I jumped it wouldn't be easy on the joints. Beside, we had to get back in once the mission was done. I climbed down the rope. Once my feet were on the ground I held my breath and waited to ensure that nobody had noticed. But the street the alley poured out into was dead quiet, no pedestrians and no traffic and there were only few windows on this side of the building and everywhere the lights were out and the curtains were drawn. I looked up at Duo and nodded to let him know the coast was clear.

One by one he dropped the bags down for me to catch. They were heavy but I was most concerned about the noise. Luckily everything transgressed without anybody noticing.
Duo sat on the sill and closed the curtains behind him before climbing down after me. We left the rope hanging, trusting no one would be able to see it in the dark alley. He took two bags and I took the third and we walked the quiet streets to the jeep, parked in another shadowy alley. After a brief argument over who got to drive - mostly for the sport of it - I drove the car out of town slowly, to minimize the noise. Closer to the edge of town we spotted several groups of people, talking loudly, laughing and having trouble walking in a straight line. Most of them were Westerners, which was perfect for our own cover. Iridan was a small town with low hotel room costs and little ID verification, close by a larger city that was known as a gamblers paradise that people from all over the world came to visit, looking for an expensive adrenaline shot at low physical risk.

To be inconspicuous, was to be the exact opposite and I could trust Duo to take care of that.

He rolled down the window and pushed his upper body out, with his arms in the air he shouted: "Yeah, rock on! Woo!"

The group briefly joined him in his enthusiasm.

"You enjoyed that way too much." I remarked as he sat back into his seat.

"I'm supposed to. It's what kids our age do."

I looked at him sideways, knowing he was right, but wishing he wasn't. I didn't know if I could ever be that guy.

Once we had left the town behind us, I drove the car off the road and back into the desert. We were quiet for the entire length of the journey, two hours long. I kept readjusting my hands on the steering wheel. They felt uncomfortable, warm and wet. It was happening again. It was too dark to imagine seeing the blood on my hands, so instead, I felt it. Blood that spills out onto your hands feels warm and slick. Sometimes I woke up at night, with my hands feeling like that. No matter how often I washed my hands, I didn't expect that feeling to ever go away. During the day I sometimes saw it. I saw red dripping from my fingers, could even hear the droplets hitting the floor. But once I blinked it would be gone, my hands would be clean but... not really. And when Duo kissed my hand, or teasingly sucked on the tip of a finger, I would instantly get uncomfortable, because I feared he would taste it, that metallic tang, that warmth on your tongue.

Soon it would no longer be a memory. It would be reality. It wouldn't go away when I blink, it would actually be there. And Duo wouldn't even want to kiss those hands.

This scared me.

I felt silly for it. For being bothered by something that I never even used to notice, let alone pay this much attention to. But I wanted to change and apparently it was happening and this is where it started.

One by one I took my hands off the wheel to wipe them on my thigh. It did not work.

Duo noticed, I felt his gaze boring into me. He saw everything I didn't want him to see and always interpreted correctly.

Because he was feeling the same things, he told me once.

I used to forget that, but not anymore. Duo was the same as me, only two steps ahead of me. I didn't know why, I didn't really question it. I was just grateful that he laid the trail and all I had to do was follow his footsteps. That in itself felt difficult enough at times.
Just a few yards short of our destination, I stopped the jeep. The headlights shone against a dune that was built up by the coastal winds. I flicked on the lights in the cabin. The canvas of the roof rippled softly under the caress of the wind. "What time is it?" I wore a watch myself, but I couldn't watch, anything would have made my stomach drop at that moment.

"We're right on schedule." He started to move his hands to unbutton his shirt.

All I could do for a moment was just watch him with a sense of detachment. A frightening epiphany overwhelmed me. I did not want to be here. This was paradoxal because it did nothing to change my feelings regarding the importance of this mission, nor my determination to contribute my hands for a purpose that I knew was righteous.

It was hard to put my confusion into words.

What a night to be confused.

I wanted this man dead. I needed this man dead. To me he was not only a dictator that abused his own people and ordered attacks on innocent bystanders, he was a representation of something bad that I have known all my life; men thinking they have to right to take whatever they want and have others suffer the devastating consequences. I could not stand the thought of a man like that being in this world with me, however far away he was.

But at the same time, I didn't want to make my hands the hands of the devil again.

What a night to be confused...

"Heero?"

Duo's voice sounded faint through the fog of my own thoughts. I scraped my throat, noticing how dry it was. "Yeah?" I looked over at him. He had already taken off his jacket, shirt and pants, leaving him in the black wetsuit that we had put on underneath in advance.

"Are you okay?"

I wasn't sure, but I was ready, so that's what I told him.

He nodded. "I'm going to go ahead and unpack the scooters."

"Yeah."

Duo got out of the car and I undressed myself. Once I was finished I followed him to the trunk. The top layer of sand had cooled during the night and it was cool underneath my bare feet until they sunk in further as I walked and I felt the residual warmth. The scooters he had referred to were the underwater scooters we had brought to make crossing the distance between the shore and the yacht swift. They were nothing more than a propeller at the base of a hydrodynamic cone shape, with handles on either side. They were painted black, had no lights and were fitted with oxygen tanks to supply us with air that did not let bubbles escape and give our position away once they popped at the surface.

"Look at this." Duo said with childlike excitement. He picked up one of two utility belts and strapped it around his hips. Everything we could possibly need was stored in watertight pockets, including our guns, which were of no special caliber or make as our only two instructions were to get in unnoticed and make it look like locals could have done it. Nothing fancy like explosives, poisons, or special firearms were allowed.
But I didn't really get why the belt would please him so, so I cocked my eyebrow at him.
"Come on! How Batman is this?"

I frowned, searching my memory to make sense of the reference. "Batman was the guy with the cape that didn't have any real superpowers, right?"

He scowled at me. "Did you just question Batman's "superpowerness"?" He mocked.

I shrugged. "He's not a superhero. He's just a guy, who knows right from wrong and takes a stand against people who don't."

He smirked at me. "Remind you of someone?"

"Yeah." I secured my own belt around my hips and got out my flippers and goggles and started towards the dune. I looked over my shoulder and told him: "But you are way more badass than him."

He got his stuff, closed the trunk and jogged after me, bantering: "Hm, not who I meant but baby, if I didn't already love you, I sure would now." He trailed behind me as we climbed the dune and added: "Your ass looks good in that wetsuit. No pressure, I'm just saying..."

The time for teasing was over. We crawled over the top and lay down in the sand. The shore was on the other side and we could hear the waves lapping at the beach with a soft rush and break. About a kilometer off shore a large white yacht had anchored and it shone in the dark like a diamond on dark blue velvet. A single dot of light leisurely circled the yacht. I started to time each round as they looped around the yacht at a steady but slow pace

Duo had brought a pair of binoculars to take a closer look. "All the inside lights are off. I can only see one guard on this side of the yacht, but he is not covering the other side so I'm guessing there is another one on the left side."

"Port side." I absentmindedly corrected.

"Right." In any other situation he may have made a joke, but neither one of us was in the mood. A switch had been flicked, we were in a different mindset now. The only kind of mindset in which a person could do what we were about to do. "On the small boat there is one guy standing guard, one guy steering from the above deck controls. The lights in the cabin are off, so I'm guessing the rest are asleep."

"One rotation around the yacht takes them on average one minute and ten seconds." I added. "But our entry point at the back is relatively exposed so we have less time outside their field of vision, probably around fifty seconds."

"That's more than enough time to get on board."

I agreed. It was a simple entry. We could easily climb onto the yacht via the swimming platform at the rear that was only slightly raised above water level. A short staircase up and we would be on the main deck, a large terrace in the back and two paths on either side of the two story cabin, to the sun deck at the front. The guard stood at about the halfway point, his twin on the other side probably as well. We didn't even have to get past them to get inside. Glass double doors in the back were locked but no match for Duo's lock picking skills. The only challenge being that this would have to be achieved within fifty seconds minus the time that it took us to climb on board. And of course everything would have to be soundless. We couldn't screw it up until our exit, when we would actually screw things up intentionally to make it look like a couple of amateurs got lucky
on their entry, but not so much on their exit.

The situation inside was mostly unknown. We knew the master bedroom was in the hull at the front so likely that is where we would find the N'Gasi. His two servants probably slept on the level beneath that, in the small, confined quarters with submerged portholes, they would not get in the way. However, according to the information, once we would get inside there would still be four armed guards in our way.

My hands started to feel warm and slick again. In reality it was just a nervous sweat. But my mind's eye saw blood.

"Duo?"

"Yeah?" He lowered the binoculars and looked at me expectantly.

"I don't want to kill any of the guards." I admitted and I started to bite my bottom lip. "We know that they have made bad decisions, but we do not know for sure they are bad men."

He didn't respond for a while, just allowed my words to sink in. Finally he said: "I agree. I was hoping it wouldn't have to come to that. Check the big pocket on the right."

With a frown I reached a hand down and zipped open the large pocket on my belt on the right side. I pulled out a bundle of white, plastic cuffs and a roll of duct tape. I looked at him in surprise, I hadn't expected our gear to include this, even though in hindsight it was a very good choice.

Duo shrugged his broad shoulders. "I may be a badass, but I'm not the God of Death anymore."

"Good." I concluded with a nod and I stuffed the cuffs and the tape back in the pocket. "Because I don't think I am the Perfect Soldier anymore."

He surprised me again by suddenly leaning in and capturing my lips in a kiss. I was too stunned to even kiss him back. "What was that for?" I asked as soon as my lips were free and my thoughts were coherent.

"You know exactly what that was for." He said with a grin and then he turned serious again. He nodded towards the target. "Let's do this."

We slowly made our way down the dune towards the shore, in our black attire we were practically invisible in the dark. We were nothing more than moonlight dusted silhouettes. At the water's edge we sat down and put on our flippers and goggles and took the respirator from the scooter between our lips. The water was black and when I stepped into the surf it felt like the waves were trying to take a hold of me. I looked over at Duo, he gave me the thumbs up and at that signal, we dove in. We swam towards the depths before turning on the propellers and from there on let them pull us towards the yacht.

Duo was right beside me, but I could barely see him in the dark water. His figure was like a ghost accompanying me, but I was grateful for his presence. During our training sessions with our students, they were not the only ones to learn a lesson. I learned too. I learned exactly how lucky I had been to have him on my side during the war and even more so, how lucky I was to have him on my side in peace time.

But even with the best partner I could wish for, my heart pounded. This was the first mission I would be doing as someone other than the Perfect Soldier. Which is not something I had counted on. I thought I would be the same version of myself as I always was under these circumstances, but I wasn't. I didn't really know who I was at the moment, in fact, it felt a lot like I was stuck in
between being two different people, stuck in twilight, but instead of feeling a like a little bit of both, I felt like I was neither; I felt like I was no one. And it would be that way till the next time I would look in the mirror and see the person that had stepped in to replace the soldier. The changed man. I wondered if I was going to like him. I wondered if Duo was going to like him. And I wondered how this mission would affect him. The soldier's hands were bloodied. I didn't want his to be.

The furious beating of my heart stilled when the small, circling boat passed by above us, leaving a wake of churning water.

The yacht appeared ahead of us, like a black monster resting at sea.

I think that analogy came pretty close to reality.

We steered towards the rear of the yacht and hid in the shadow of the swim platform. We turned off the underwater scooters and hung them from the yacht's rear propellers with hooks we had attached. Our flippers and goggles we gathered into a bag that we left there as well. Submerged and with our lips wrapped around the respirators we couldn't talk, but we looked into each others eyes and it felt like a meaningful conversation was shared.

I made a circle with my thumb and index finger and kept the other digits straight up.

Duo copied the signal.

We focused our attention back on the mission. We waited for the patrolling boat to pass by the rear. As soon as it did, we released the respirators after a final breath and we swam towards the edge of the swim platform. We only had to wait briefly for the boat to be out of visual range. I grabbed the steel edge of the platform and hoisted myself up, out of the water. Waves from the circling boat made it only slightly challenging but Duo helped me up with two shameless hands on my ass pushing me up. I was pretty sure Duo knew I could have done it without his help. Once I was up on the teak platform, I helped Duo up. I didn't think he needed my help either but I was starting to feel the time constraint. My heart made an almost painful beat with every second that ticked away.

The water that dripped off us stained the teak platform dark, we could only hope they wouldn't notice.

We snuck up to the staircase and started to climb gingerly. The top of the steps was in the line of side of the guard at the port side, but we were in luck. He was looking the other way, at the boat that had passed him and was nearing the tip of the yacht, almost on its way back. I signaled Duo to follow me and then moved across the terrace in a crouched position, dodging deck chairs in the dark and made my way to the glass doors, out of sight from either guard. With naive hope I tried the door, but as expected it was locked, with two separate locks. Duo kneeled in front of the door and started to work. I anxiously looked at my watch, he had about twenty seconds left.

"One." Duo said when he unlocked the first. His quick fingers moved over to the second.

"You have twelve seconds." I whispered back. I could already see the lights of the patrol boat reflected on the black surface of the Red Sea as it neared.

"Two." He slid the door open and pulled me inside, sliding it back shut behind us.

We kept perfectly still in the dark shadows as mere seconds later the boat passed by the rear. I held my breath and waited to hear if they noticed the water on the platform. All I heard was the gentle
We were in the main living room, a lot of ebony and navy blue and a well-stocked bar. Luckily, no guards.

Duo zipped open another one of his magic pockets and pulled out two black cloths that appeared shapeless and meaningless at first. When he held one out to me, I recognized it. It was a black ski mask, with only small holes for the eyes.

"If we're going in less-lethal, there is a bigger chance they will end up seeing our faces. Can't take that chance."

I nodded and took the mask from him, putting it on. I didn't like that it made me feel like a shameful criminal, but I knew it was necessary.

We took hold of our guns and started further into the lion's den.

A narrow staircase at the back of the living space led down to below decks. We had looked up blue prints for this kind of yacht and knew there would be a kitchen, dining room, small living room and three bedrooms. The master bedroom, in the nose of the yacht, was by far the biggest and the logical choice for a big man with a big ego.

We crouched down at the top of the stairs and listened. I could hear the soft squeaking of rubber soled boots on the polished wooden floor. We moved down slowly and I spotted the first guard, halfway down the hallway, at the end of which was the door to the master bedroom. He was pacing back and forth, his rifle held to his chest. I signaled for Duo to follow my lead and I waited for the guard to turn and walk back towards the door, facing away from us. As soon as he turned, I started down the staircase and snuck up behind him. I could feel Duo's presence behind me as he trailed me, covering me; protecting me.

When I was only a pace behind him, his shoulders much taller and broader than mine, I lunged forward and took him into a sleeper hold, my arm firmly around his neck compressing the arteries and veins. My free hand covered his mouth to keep him quiet. Before the guard could respond physically, Duo was in front of him, restraining his arms, preventing him from pulling the trigger of his rifle or sending a distress signal to his colleagues. His body filled with panic, he tried to scream, but he couldn't and the strength was quickly leaving him as he leaned his weight onto me more and more.

"Relax." Duo whispered, not trying to taunt him. "It'll be over soon."

He tried to jerk himself out of my grip, but my hold could not be budged.

It was over soon. He was unconscious within seconds, his heavy frame falling limp against me. Duo helped me quietly lower him onto the floor. I tied his hands behind his back and his feet together with the plastic cuffs, using two pairs each to ensure he would have a hard time snapping them, if he even woke up soon enough to interfere with the continuation of our mission. Duo, in the meantime, taped his mouth shut and commented: "Good move. Thought you were going to go for the Kung fu hit to the neck thing."

I stared at him, his face unrecognizable behind the ski mask. I didn't like it. "Thanks. It's Krav Maga by the way. I was worried I wouldn't be able to catch him in time. Let's go find the others."

We carried the guard into an empty bedroom and placed him a shadowy corner, then we headed back out. Rather than going for N'Gasi, we let him enjoy a few more minutes of undisturbed rest as
we would take care of the other guards. Silencers seemed too professional, so once we would pull that trigger, everyone would know what happened. We had to make sure that the guards actually standing a chance of stopping us in our escape, were incapacitated.

Searching the rooms we found one guard in a bottom bunk bed, snoring loudly. With the same teamwork, we applied the sleeper hold on him as well and after a few violent jolts and tremors in his limbs, he too succumbed and was tied and gagged. We dumped him in the other bedroom with his co-worker and broke the handle off the door, locking them inside.

The remaining two guards were in the kitchen. The door was open and we could hear them talking. The more words I heard, the more I realized they were just guys, guys who had eerily much in common with Duo and I. Just doing their job, doing what they thought was right by them and their loved-ones. I stopped listening to their words and instead focused on their voices, locating them in the space. I signaled for Duo to take down the one on the right side of the room and I would cover the left.

I held three fingers up and counted down.

3... 2... 1...

We rushed through the open doors and tackled them simultaneously. Our tumbles to the floor made quite a bit of noise but the remaining people on the yacht were too far removed to be able to hear. Duo and his target disappeared behind the cooking island, but I couldn't worry about him. I had the guard beneath me straddled. One of my hands was firmly closed around his throat, attempting the same sleep-inducing technique without having to strangle him, the other hand was over his mouth. He tried to grab his gun, but, unfortunately for him, I had planned my landing so my knee would end up keeping the gun on his belt pressed to the floor, completely useless to him. So he brought his hands up and tried to choke me before he would lose consciousness in my hold. I couldn't breath, I felt my face going red and my vision started to blur. My hold on him was weakening, but the same could be said about him. I adjusted my grip, attempting to strangle him with one hand rather than trying to close off his artery like I had with the others Knowing he would have no breath to yell out for help, I uncovered his mouth and used my freed hand to reach for my handgun that was behind my back. He wished he would have known so he could have used it to his own advantage, I saw that in his eyes as soon as he spotted the gun. His grip became weaker still, he lost his strength to hopelessness. His mouth formed a word.

Please.

His hands released my neck in an attempt to beg for my mercy.

With a groan I raised the gun high in the air and brought the handle of it down hard. As soon as the gun impacted his head, his eyes rolled back and his previously prone body slumped. I kept my hand around his neck, checking his pulse. He was fine.

I released a trembling breath.

"Never pegged you for the pistol whipping type. That's so not smooth, man." Duo commented with a grin that I could not see behind his mask, but nevertheless knew was there. He kneeled down beside me and helped me tie up my victim.

I frowned when I noticed a dark brown stain on the leg of Duo's suit, surrounding an inch-long rip.

Catching my gaze Duo sighed. "Yeah, the motherfucker pulled a knife out of God knows where. Hate those fucking magician-types."
"Are you okay?" I asked with abundant concern.

"Yeah, no main artery or anything, just a flesh-wound." He explained, looking down at it.

"Is he okay?"

Duo chuckled. "He'll live. Unless he kills himself when he wakes up with the mother of all headaches." He demonstratively held up his gun. "Had to resort to pistol whipping myself. Great minds think alike?" He offered, being on the receiving end of my supposedly infamous glare. He reached out a hand and helped me up. I could see his brows furrow. "It's weird seeing you with a mask on. I don't like it."

I nodded.

"Ready?"

I nodded again. I supposed the fact that I could not form words contradicted the quiet answer I had given him. It was still a night of confusion for me.

When we walked back down the hall, the world seemed to be grinding to a halt. I felt out of balance with the sudden shift in speed. But my heart kept beating a mile a minute, I could hear the pounding and the rushing of blood in the shell of my ears. The hand holding my gun did not feel as sure as it used to. I wish we had time to talk, I wish I had time to try and make Duo understand, even though my weakness shamed me. But there was no time, there was still the risk that the guards outside would notice a change, or have a regular check-up call not answered.

With the softest click, the door to the master bedroom was open and we stepped inside.

Nearly everything was white, bathed in a soft gloom of moonlight blue. Through the small portholes on either side, we could still see the patrol boat circling the yacht, apparently unaware of our intrusion.

N'Gasi lay in the large bed, on his back, peacefully lost in dreams. He looked like a regular man. He didn't look evil, lying there like that. I noticed he slept on the right side of the bed, leaving the left half empty. It must have been a force a habit. I read the intel on him. He used to be married. His wife died tragically, but also suspiciously. He had been cleared of all charges, but I had always figured he had had something to do with her untimely death. Standing by his bed, I wasn't so sure anymore. If he had willingly gotten rid of her, why did he save her space in bed? Why did he sleep as though he wished there was someone beside him?

It was hard to be confronted with the fact that even the evil souls are just human at some level.

Duo pulled off his mask and I followed his lead. He looked at my face for a long time, an expression of compassion and understanding in his eyes.

I broke eye-contact to look down at my gun. I adjusted my grip, my hands were slick with sweat. It felt like blood. And I felt sick.

"I'll do it." Duo whispered.

I snapped my head to look up at him.

He smiled at me reassuringly. "I'll do it." He repeated, no hesitation, only determination.

"Why?" I breathed. I could not deny that I was relieved I would not be pulling this trigger tonight.
"Because I can handle one more."

I took a deep breath and even though it was selfish, I nodded and I lowered my gun.

Duo walked up to the bedside, looking intensely at the sleeping figure. He aimed his gun at the center of his forehead and brought it closer and closer till the muzzle touched the man's forehead.

I could see his eyes slowly starting to flutter open from the cold sensation against his skin, then they shot open and stared at Duo in fear, he seemed completely paralyzed. He never got the chance to negotiate his way out of it, or call for help that would not come. Duo beat him to the punch by whispering menacingly:

"From the RUSA with love."

The gunshot echoed and reverberated in my chest. The bedroom wasn't all white washed in blue anymore. The spatters that, come sunrise would be revealed to be red, were like black ink stains on the sheets, on the walls and on Duo's hand. The future had been rewritten. Outside, shouts were instantly heard and the sound of the engine of the boat got louder as it hastily approached the yacht.

It felt like I stood there for eternity, counting the blood droplet on the sheets, but it couldn't have been more than a split second. I was reawakened when Duo's hands were gripping my shoulders. "Let's go! Let's go!" he screamed. My body got to work, enabling the escape. I followed Duo through the hall and helped him up when he stumbled on the stairs. While on the move, we both put our masks on. We took one of the side doors, running into one of the guards that had been outside. Duo threw his entire body weight against him, pushing him against the wall with enough force to splinter the mahogany boards. With a groan the man slid down the wall, defenseless, barely holding on to his consciousness. Behind us we could hear the other guard that had still been outside on the yacht yelling, his footsteps not trailing far behind.

We burst through the side door and without hesitation leaped over the railing, plummeting into the black water.

Bullets shot through the water but we were able to seek cover under the hull in time to spare ourselves bodily harm. We stayed calm as a state of panic would only cost more oxygen and swam towards the rear of the yacht where our scooters waited. With no time to put the flippers and goggles back on, I put my arm through the loop of the bag and unhooked the scooter, activating the propeller. Both of us held off reaching for the respirator till we were on the move, not wanting to waste any time. Rather than immediately turning towards the shore, we dove down deep. Bullets were still randomly being shot into the water. The deeper we got, the duller the shouts of the guards became, till we couldn't hear them at all anymore.

Using a compass, we found our way back towards the shore in the dark.

As soon as my feet were planted on soil I rushed out of the water and up the dune. I could hear Duo close behind me and frequently looked back over my shoulder to make sure he was not trailing too far behind. We cleared the top and dropped down into the sand in exhaustion. I was on my back, looking at the stars dotting the black sky, my fingers played with the fine sand. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of freedom, a feeling I could not put into words. I heard an old, monotonous voice that was once my own, saying: "I will never have to kill another person, ever again." It wasn't until now that I really felt that way. It was over. I was no longer the Perfect Soldier. I had the mind for it, but not the heart. My hands were dirty with sand, but not with blood, never again. I was a trainer now, but I would not train Perfect Soldiers. I would train righteous soldiers.
It was no longer a night of confusion.

"They are not coming to shore. Looks like they are going into the water." Duo said as he looked over the top of the dune.

"Come on." Duo helped me up. "Let's get out of here and call Une."

We got back into the car, this time I let Duo drive because I felt unfocused. Using the secure line in the jeep, he called the Preventer headquarters.

"Duo?"

"Success. We've hooked the shark." He threw me a sideway grin.

Une was quiet for a moment, stunned. "That's... Oh thank God..."

"Everything went according to plan, you can set the follow-up in action. And we'll be making our late afternoon flight."

"Good, it will be ready for you."

"Over and out."

"Over and out." She copied breathlessly and then the line was disconnected. Our work was done, but she still had a long night ahead of her, as did a lot of Preventers and RUSA military assigned to handle the follow-up of the mission.

As soon as Une would make the call, the RUSA battle ship that had been lying in wait just outside the Red Sea would move towards the Ethiopian shore and units would be ready for military deployment in case the Ethiopian army would protest the shift of power. Troops in Sudan and Kenya were also standing by to come into action should that be necessary.

A second call would wake a well-loved Ethiopian senator who had been under a secure Preventer protection detail for the past two months. He was one of the good guys and had been the right hand of the former president who had worked so hard to make his country better. He would be continuing that work, getting the education program back on track, taking the power away from the military and giving it back to the people and working to make Eritrea independent once more at minimal cost for either country. He was popular among the people and most of the other members of the senate, who had already secretly agreed to lend him support, to temporarily grant him the position of president until democratic elections could be arranged, which he would likely win anyway if the polls were representative. Preventer bodyguards would remain at his side to protect him from the ambitions of other possibly corrupt politicians. And the agency would be keeping a close eye on everyone altogether.

And finally, a third call, to complete our cover. Two days from now investigators would find two local John Doe's on the beach half a kilometer from here: unknown Preventer targets that had died when violently resisting their arrest, their bodies had been frozen and preserved for the cover-up. Local Preventer agents carried the same model assault rifles as the guards who wildly shot into the water. Bullet wounds would match and the local coroner of limited means would confirm to the best of his abilities that the guards had gotten lucky and the assassins bled out by the time they had made it back to dry land. The majority of the senate had already agreed to vote against a more thorough investigation should that be requested. And if the Preventers were ever thought to be involved, Une would make everybody change their mind again like she did last time.

The adrenaline vacated my body and I started to feel cold with my wetsuit clinging to my body.
While Duo drove us through the desert, back to Iridan, I started to undress.

"What are you doing?" He asked perplexed.

"Getting out of this wet suit." I lowered the back of my seat to give me more space to move around, exposing my torso before peeling the suit off my legs, leaving me completely naked.

"You're distracting me, that's what you're doing."

I ignored him and reached back for my change of clothes, my spandex shorts and a simple shirt.

"Hm. No underwear..." Duo drawled as I put on the skintight shorts.

I let out a breathless chuckle. I put on the shirt and dried my hair with a small towel I had brought along. "Do you want to get changed?"

"You just want to drive," Duo accused playfully, but he stopped the jeep anyway.

I had no intention of conquering the driver's seat while Duo changed. We always argued about who got to drive, but it was just for relief. We fought a lot about the deep, dark and meaningful things, sometimes it just felt nice to argue about something that in the end, never really mattered. It made the other fights seem less huge.

Duo didn't say anything when he got back into the car in clean clothes and drove us back.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked, about half an hour removed from our hotel room and half an hour since the last words were spoken.

"About what you said." I answered truthfully.

"What did I say?"

"Because I can handle one more." I quoted.

"I meant it." He assured me. "I'm fine. I never feel good about killing someone, but I do feel safer. Safer because I feel I have protected the people in this country, the people back home, myself and, most importantly; you."

I sighed and gazed into the distance. "Is that why you insisted on making all the big decisions? Because you could handle one more?"

A sad smile appeared on his face, but a smile no less. "Yeah. I just wanted to make sure that whether tonight went right or wrong, you would not be able to blame yourself for anything." he shook his head. "I'm sorry I'm so overprotective, but I just can't help myself. I know you are not baby, I know you can take care of yourself and I know how strong you are, I just-"

"Duo." I interrupted him.

He fell silent.

"Thank you."

He smiled and looked at me. "You're welcome, baby."

"Don't call me baby." I warned, even though I secretly started to grow fond of it.
"All-righty, honey." He responded with a grin.

"Don't call me that either." The threat in my voice was empty and spoiled by my smile.

"Might as well give it up, sweetcakes."

We laughed together softly.

When we arrived back at the hotel, after parking the car a few block away again, the sun was about to rise. Making good use of the last few moments of darkness, we climbed back through the window and pulled the rope up, shutting the window as a definitive end to our mission. We shared a cold shower to wash the sea salt out of our hair.

After drying himself off Duo left the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bed to bandage the stab wound in his thigh, refusing any offer of help. I lingered in the bathroom. I stood in front of the mirror and convinced myself to look at my reflection in spite of my fear of being disappointed again. I was met with a face similar to the one I have always seen in reflective surfaces. Yet I was different. Because when I looked at the image I did not think: He is the Perfect Soldier, a warhead. I looked at myself and I thought: That's me. And for the first time in my life, I was at peace with that. I smiled at myself. There was still a lot of hurt in my eyes and in my heart, I was still a work in progress, but I felt like I was exactly the person whom I was supposed to be at that point in time. Just a boy - the soldier had gone, the warhead had exploded - I was confused and scared, but open and ready, in love and... complete.

I followed Duo into the bedroom just as he tied the bandage around his thigh.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not really." He put the emergency medical kit on the nightstand.

"Does it need stitches?"

"Probably. But not tonight." He held out his arms. "Come here."

I came to stand in front of him like I had that afternoon and sighed softly when I felt his strong hands on my hips, pulling me closer. He rested his forehead against my abdomen and took a few deep breaths. Then he looked up at me, kindly and understandingly. "Wanna go to bed?"

"Yes."

He nodded and let go of me.

Before he could lie down and get ready to fall asleep, I clarified: "But not to sleep."

His perplexity was obvious but only thinly veiled his excitement. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." I touched his cheeks softly and then buried my hands in his thick hair. "I missed it... for all the right reasons." I leaned down and kissed him deeply and passionately. "Make love to me." I whispered, my lips grazing his.

His hands cupped my face strongly and he pulled me down for another long, soul searing kiss.

To ease the discomfort of leaning over, I pushed him back a little and straddled his thighs, lowering myself into his lap. The groan I heard was one of approval, I just wasn't sure if it was mine or his.

The object was not to forget something, it was rather to be reminded. To be reminded of how much
he loved me, how much I loved him and how right I felt being in his arm, souls activating like electric charges that sparked when skin touched skin. His hands started to wander, down my long neck, over my shoulders and briefly up my biceps before trailing back down. His fingers lightly ghosting over my sides, sending shivers down my spine. Then even further south, over the fabric of my briefs, down my thighs, his splayed thumbs brushing close by my groin. He followed my legs all the way down, massaging my thighs and calves till all of a sudden his fingers tickled the soles of my feet.

I interrupted our kiss with a surprised laugh. "You're evil."

"No," He whispered back with a mischievous grin, "I'm Batman!" And then he started humming a tune that I recognized from those old comic book films he had forced me to watch.

We both laughed as he lowered himself down on the bed, pulling me along with him. The sound of laughter soon died out, replaced by the sound of our pants as we continued to feverishly kiss and touch each other. At Duo's urging we repositioned ourselves on the bed so our legs wouldn't be dangling off the edge, losing our underwear along the way. Duo insisted on being the one lying on his back on the bed, with me above him. He teased as I straddled him again: "I kind of like you on top."

I bit my lip as nerves struck. It wasn't that I wasn't interested in the top-position, but with only two sexual experiences under my belt I felt uncomfortable and hesitant to take the lead. I didn't want to hurt him and I didn't want to make a fool out of myself by screwing it up.

Duo eased my concern with a smirk. "Not like that. Like this." He grabbed my hips, holding them still and dug his heels in the mattress to raise his hips off the bed.

I felt his erection pushing against me and I closed my eyes and moaned.

"Approve?" He teased.

"God, yes..."

"Did you miss it for all the right reasons?" He kept rocking our hips together.

I groaned. "Just please... shut up and do it!" I blinked as soon as I realized what I had said, my cheeks became a furious red.

"Bossy little thing." Duo joked. He reached over and grabbed the medical kit.

I raised an eyebrow as I watched him dig out a condom and a tube of lube. "Seriously? In there?"

"You can never be too prepared, baby." He winked up at me. He fell silent as he focused on putting on the condom and he quietly looked up at me, into my eyes, as he slipped two lubed fingers inside of me.

"Nn." I tried to keep my eyes open, tried to keep looking back at him, but I couldn't, the sensations overwhelmed me and I started to remember just how good it felt and how much better it would be once he was inside me. I was still embarrassed at my own, wanton thoughts, but not enough so to push them away or not act on them.

He pulled me down for more kisses and I eagerly accepted. Outside the sun started to rise but our world paused in reverence and made sure the moment would last as long as we would want it to. When Duo pushed inside me, us both moaning loudly as he did, I felt tears coming from my eyes. I wasn't in pain, Duo was very careful and tender. I was in love, and it felt so good to be loved back
that I almost couldn't stand it, it was so overpowering, so all-consuming. I smiled when I felt Duo's lips kissing away my tears and we stopped to take our time to kiss each other in gratitude. I could taste the saltiness of my tears in his mouth.

Our lovemaking was perfect. Duo's hands were on my hips, strong and urgent, but he let me take control and I felt ready and comfortable taking it. I kept our pace slow, I knew that if I did otherwise, it would be over too soon and I didn't want that. But the ending would always be too soon. Desire took over and he pushed his hips off the bed to meet my thrusts, his hands caressed me needily, avoiding my erection at my request because I knew even the slightest bit of additional stimulation would lead me to orgasm. He upheld that request until he announced with coarse voice that he was close himself and, as expected, after only a few soft touches, I came and Duo came with me.

Even though I was out of breath, I managed to tell him that I loved him, whispering it in his ear as I had leaned forward in exhaustion.

Duo's hands lazily caressed my back and after a few controlled breaths he said: "I love you too. So fucking much." And then he hugged me tightly and kissed my cheek and ear repeatedly.

I didn't know what happened then, I passed out.

I woke up a few hours later to sound of yelling and popping, like gunfire. I jumped up in bed, noticing with heartache that it was empty besides me.

"Don't worry, I'm right here." Duo stood in the doorway to the bathroom, a toothbrush in his hand, toothpaste spattering from his mouth as he spoke. He grinned sheepishly.

I listened intently to the noise outside, it was concentrated in the square up front, at the other side of the building, so I couldn't make much sense of it. "What's going on out there?"

Duo shrugged. He held up his index finger to indicate me to wait and he quickly walked to the sink to rinse his mouth. Toothpaste gone he said: "Don't know. It started about an hour ago and it's been getting more intense. I'm thinking we should leave soon."

"You think it's Ethiopian military?" I asked with worry.

"Don't know, but I think it is probably better if we didn't sleep in. I was about to wake you."

I nodded. I kicked the sheets away and got out of bed, wincing slightly when I noticed with a blush that I was a little sore and not from the mission. I looked up and found Duo staring at me with a grin. "Don't judge until we see what you would be like the morning after."

Duo raised his hands in surrender. "I'd be happy to find out."

With an even more intense blush on my cheeks I pushed past him into the bathroom to wash up and brush my teeth and then I walked back out to get my clothing from the bags we had placed under the bed. As I rummaged through it, my sand colored cargo pants in one hand, my other searching for my clean white shirt, I heard the soft rattling of the bottle of pills. I put on my pants and postponed the search for my shirt, getting the bottle out instead. I was suppose to take one pill in the morning and one pill in the evening, the minimal dose I had changed to three months ago, after four months of a more substantial dose.

I looked at the bottle for a while, lost in thought. It was still half full, I could see the pills clearly because I had peeled off the label with my name in advance, in preparation for the mission. I walked back to the bathroom sink, the bottle rattling in my hand.
Duo was sitting on the bed neither of us had slept in, putting on his socks and shoes, his head bobbing to a muted tune that only played in his head.

I put the pills on the edge of the sink and reached for the bottle of water we had left there and used for brushing our teeth, as the water from the faucet turned out to be suspiciously brown. I looked at myself in the mirror, my hair still had that I've-had-sex tousled look to it that was strangely quite distinct from the normal I-don't-care-about-my-hair tousled state that it was usually in. In my eyes I saw a sparkle. My bottom lip was slightly swollen because I had accidentally bit down on it too hard in the throws of passion. I also for the first time noticed the hand shaped bruises on my throat, from when the guard had tried to strangle me, but I wasn't bothered by it. I was still alive and so was he, I felt only relief.

I then realized something for the first time in my life.

I was happy.

I was truly happy.

A smile formed on my lips. I turned around, walking away, bringing only the bottle of water with me. I found my shirt in the bottom of my bag and put it on as Duo was packing up the last of our belongings. As he made a sweep through the room, he came out of the bathroom holding the orange bottle up at me with a smile. "Look what we almost forgot." He held them out to me, expecting me to take them and put them in my bag.

"You can leave those here." I told him with determination. "In the trash."

Duo was openly perplexed and confused. "Why?"

"Because I don't need them anymore."

His frown only deepened. "It's going to be a pain to get a new prescription without the old bottle."

"I don't need a new prescription either." I accepted the bottle from him and walked over to the trashcan in the corner of the bathroom and demonstratively dropped them in. They made their last, argumentative rattle.

Duo looked amazed as it just dawned on him what I was trying to tell him. "Are you sure? You know I no longer judge you for taking them, right? That was just a one time mistake, a big mistake!"

"I know." I said, walking back up to him. "I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for me."

He still seemed hesitant, remembering the difficult time between my accidental overdose and when I decided to start taking the antidepressants again. Two months of me rebounding, pulling back into my shell more than I ever had before, struggling with my emotions, shutting him out.

"Duo..." I whispered. I placed my hands against his chest and leaned in close, enjoying the warmth he radiated. "I'm happy. I don't want to take them anymore, I am ready. I promise I won't shut you out."

"I promise to keep you to that promise." He whispered and leaned in closer, nearly kissing me.

"Deal."

The kiss we shared was soft and romantic and sealed our promises. I don't know why, but in that
moment I remembered standing at Trowa's and Quatre's wedding, witnessing them exchange their vows. I was Trowa's best man. Duo was Quatre's best man. WuFei argued for the duration of the evening that he was the best man period. They looked so happy. I imagined I finally knew what they were feeling, security; knowing that not only will you receive the best of the other, but you can give your best in return. Forever.

"Let's go home." I said once we parted.

"I'd love to."

We slung the straps of our heavy bags over our shoulders and left the hotel room behind. In the lobby the noise from the street was deafening, screaming and gunshots and through the windows we could see a crowd of people running around. The man that had checked us in, was nowhere to be found. The reception was unmanned. I felt nervous, I started to doubt whether the mission had been the big success that we had presumed it to be.

"Guess I'll just leave it here, then." Duo laid a bundle of cash and our room key on the reception desk after once more calling and waiting for a response that did not come. He started towards the front door.

"Duo, maybe we should leave through the back door. Something is wrong. Something must be wrong."

He pivoted on his heel and looked back at me. He put the bags he had been carrying down on the floor in the corner and told me to leave my bags here temporarily as well. He didn't explain his intentions, he reached out for my hand and as soon as I took hold of it, he pulled me through the door, into the chaos.

My whole body froze as people frantically moved around me and their voices pierced my ears. Panic flooded me and I wanted to go back inside and urged Duo to come along with me, but he firmly held me in my place and he told me: "Pay attention."

"What?" I could barely heard him.

"Look closer!"

I focused on the face of a random man running by us, taken aback when I noticed he was smiling. I started paying attention to the faces of the others and they were all faces of happy people. The shouts and yells were exclamations of freedom and the guns that were being fired shot bullets straight up into the sky. The entire crowd started chanting as one, their voices unifying and I could decipher the Arabic.

"He is dead! We are free! He is dead! We are free!"

"Come on. You have to experience this!" Duo grabbed my hand again and he pulled me further out into the square, into the mass of people. He stopped at the center and turned around to face me.

I had my head ducked between my shoulders and I flinched at the sudden noises.

"Heero!" He waited for me to look him in the eyes before he continued: "You need to experience this!"

"Why?" I cringed when someone accidentally walked into me.

"Because this is what I want you to remember when you start blaming yourself for all the bad
things that have happened! All this happiness is your doing too!" He suddenly dropped down, wrapped his arms tightly around my thighs and lifted me up into the air.

I looked down at him first, but at his wordless encouragement I looked around and listened to their cheers. Flags were being raised into the air, children and even adults were being lifted up onto the shoulders of others, their hands reaching for the wide open sky, or spreading their arms out like wings and the look on their faces could have fooled anyone into thinking they were actually taking flight. I spread my arms out like them and felt the wind pull my shirt taut against my upper body.

I kept my arms spread out and closed my eyes, focusing on my heart beating in my chest. The world was a changed place; a better place. And I was a changed man; a better man. I liked it.

Duo lowered me back down. "Feels like flying, doesn't it?" He asked when we were face to face.

I frowned. "No it doesn't. You know it doesn't." We had both spent enough time in a cockpit to know better than that. Flying felt like freedom, like being invincible, like you are halfway into a journey that can only get better from there.

"So how do you feel about joining the mile-high club on the flight back home?"

I, again, resorted to frowning. "What does that mean?"

"You'll see." He grinned. "You'll like it."

I trusted him.

Duo leaned down and captured my lips once more, kissing me slowly, his hands softly cupping my face before touching my ears and burying his fingers into my hair.

When we parted I was only momentarily speechless, before I shared with him: "That feels like flying."

He smiled and kissed me again and I let him.

And again.

And again.

And again.
Part XXXVIII - Epiloque II- The paradox

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warheads

Part XXXVIII - Epiloque II- The paradox

The leak in the roof is still to be fixed. The paint on the walls has yet to dry. The clothes haven't been unpacked. The kitchen is covered in plastic wrapping and sawdust. The bathroom is only bare concrete and exposed plumbing and fixtures. The queen sized bed is not but an assembly of wooden boards propped up against the wall, next to the rolled up carpet.

But there is an old dresser in the living room of our new house that makes this house our home. It is not so much the dresser that might catch someone's eye. What glistens like a gem at the point of discovery, are the numerous frames in various sizes and colors, that scatter the surface. There is a particularly large one at the center of the divine chaos and it features five smiling young men. Five Gundam pilots who made more of their destiny than anybody had ever expected or dared to hope, including themselves.

We have our arms wrapped around each other and as the kind guest immortalized the moment, I made bunny ears with two of my fingers behind my unknowing friend WuFei and my gaze was diverted away from the camera and was fixed on Heero, who had just leaned his head against my shoulder. Trowa and Quatre were beaming and not because of their matching white tuxedo's, they looked at each other and kissed to the backdrop of their perfect, proudly gay wedding.

And then there is a picture of me, with my face unrecognizable as it is covered with my own birthday cake, but you can tell I'm smiling even though the cake in front of me is ruined. Quatre has his finger dipped into a glob of whipped cream on my cheek. Heero, on the other side of me, is licking frosting right off my cheekbone. WuFei is standing behind me, with his hands still on the back of my head and he looks vindicated and smug. Trowa is sneakily skilled with his camera phone.

A small photo to the left is a group-shot of a different kind. Heero and I formed the center of the composition, surrounding us were friends from a new lifetime. Landon is to my left, he has a strange smirk on his face after making a somewhat inappropriate gay joke. Sookie is next to him, her hand still in the air as she had not hesitated to slap him on the back of his head for the remark. Next to Heero, Une stands proud and tall, maybe a little taller than usual, with her long-term boyfriend just about to wrap his arm around her waist. He has an engagement ring in his pocket, at this moment, she doesn't know it yet. Finally, next to him, is his sister, a stocky woman who doesn't resemble him in the least. She is a therapist. Our therapist. We would never admit it to be so but at some point in time, I suspected she had not only made us believe in ourselves, she had also succeeded in making us belief in psychology.

Farther to the left is a picture of Heero and me. The background is filled with the vibrant colors of a traditional Japanese temple and the pink fuzz of cherry blossom that is out of focus. My face is contorted in the first stroke of a ridiculous laugh and Heero is frowning because he didn't understand what was so funny about what he had just said. I don't even remember anymore what had caused me to laugh, but that was insignificant, the important thing was that after the picture had been snapped, Heero himself started laughing too.
There is a picture of the front of the house as well, an angle from which at that time it looked condemned; the deck is rotting away and the chimney is dangerously tilting away from the roof. But the sign in the front yard reads SOLD and I'm standing by it holding a yellow and red toy hammer, grinning at Heero who is behind the camera.

In another picture, there is just Heero. The image was snapped only days before we were set to move out of our apartment and we were getting ready for another day of packing. Heero is leaning against one of the boxes marked "kitchen shit", marking the boxes had been my responsibility and I found myself a little bit less than eloquent, a little bit more than devilish. He was only wearing grey sweatpants, sinfully low on his hips, his long legs extended out, casually crossed at the ankle. His hair is tousled, probably because we had just had sex that morning. His face sports a sweet, yet smug smile, probably for the same reason. He had topped for the first time and we were both most pleasantly surprised. Tingles still run down my back when I look at that picture, but it's our little secret.

A fluffy creature fills yet another frame. This picture is very new, the kitten is barely any older than it was the day the picture was taken. Bright green eyes contrast against a grey coat. It looks like it's grinning with naughty plans to mind, which is why his tiny bowl says "Mischievous". I suspect this name won't be proven unjust. Someday there would be a puppy, but not quite yet.

There is a picture of the two of us in our Preventer uniforms as well. It is taken from the back of a high school auditorium, the camera phone zoomed in as much as it could. We are on the stage, behind us a projection on the wall reads "Thank you for listening, do you have any questions?". In addition to training agents, we scheduled time to visit my old high school as graduation time approached, supposedly with the intention of convincing young people to consider a future within the agency. Personally, I was just there to rub my super gay love into their narrow-minded faces and convince them of a different possibility for a future. Sookie, aware of my intentions and happy to enable me, shouted from the back: "Do you love him?" Her question is why I am kissing him on the mouth with smiling lips, right there in front of everybody. There is no shame, only our love.

Amidst the collection of photographs, two heavy duty bolts stand out. One is in pristine shape, aside from minor scratching of the usual wear-and-tear kind. The other is mangled, looks burned and is marred with deep slashes. In reality, though the surface does not betray this truth, both were once equally damaged as they are now both equally healed. In the tiny picture right behind them, Heero and I are both smiling, with our cheeks pressed together. You can't tell, but out of frame, our fingers are intertwined, but from our eyes you can tell we are happy. You see, we can't be scarred, we can't be burned, we can't be bent and we can't be broken. Not because we are the God of Death and the Perfect Soldier. Because we are Duo and Heero and we have each other.

And finally, in the last frame, there isn't a picture at all, elegant black letters on plain white display a quote by a lady who died a long time ago but spoke as if she knew us:

"I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love."

* The quote is by mother Theresa

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. I would love it if you would share your thoughts on the story
with me.

If you enjoyed the story and you would like to read more of my work, look me (ExecutiveShrimp) up at www.fanfiction.net. On that site I have posted several stories (work in progress) that you might enjoy reading. If you don't want to start reading a story that has not yet been completed, keep an eye out for updates on this site; once my stories are completed I will post them in full on Archive Of Our Own.

ExecutiveShrimp

End Notes

Thank you for reading. I hope you are enjoying the story, let me know!

Executiveshrimp

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!