Salvage

by GoodIdeaAtTheTime

Summary

Wufei has spent the time since the Mariemacia uprising burying himself in work and avoiding society wherever possible. But with the opening of the final major HQ drawing closer, he’s forced to face that maybe he’s not needed any more. Overseeing the preparation for the opening on L2, he rekindles a friendship with someone he’s not seen since the war, and wonders if adjusting the habits of a lifetime might not be so bad after all.
The first time Wufei saw Duo Maxwell after the war was nearly a year later and it was in a photograph in the Sunday newspaper. He wasn’t even the focus of the picture. Relena was doing her inaugural colony tour, and the photograph showed her visiting one of the regeneration sites on L2. She was at the forefront, smiling and engaging with local officials who were giving her a tour of the site, but in the background, half-hidden by shadow and not-quite looking at the camera, was Duo.

He spent far too long looking at that tiny collection of pixels, but something about it proved more thoroughly than Quatre’s semi-regular updates that Duo was alive and okay.

The next time Relena visited L2, 6 months later, Duo was there again in the background of the photo. A little bit closer this time, waving his cap at someone off-camera. Again, Relena seemed unaware of his presence, and surprisingly Heero, stood a judicious distance away from Relena and scanning the crowd, seemed to be looking totally the wrong way.

Wufei began to accumulate photographs like this. Every time Relena visited L2, Duo was there in the background of her photos. Sometimes he was working hard on the reconstructions on building sites. Once he was doling out coffee to the builders, another time he was actually juggling for a cluster of delighted children at the back of the frame. Each time Relena and Heero seemed oblivious to his presence, but something in his stance showed that he was fully aware of theirs.

Duo was the only one of the pilots that Wufei hadn’t seen since the end of the war. He’d worked with Heero regularly, and Trowa had passed through intermittently, working special cases or visiting when Quatre met with Lady Une for their regular budgetary discussions. Based in the Preventers HQ in Brussels, Wufei had found himself conveniently placed to maintain contact with most of his previous… compatriots. But Duo…

They hadn’t been particularly close during the war. Wufei had not been comfortable with most social endeavours, and Duo had seemed not to want to push it, but when he dropped out of contact as peace was declared, Wufei had found himself regretful that he didn’t have the skills to reach out and resume their acquaintance. He… missed him. But too much time had passed, with too little previous relationship to base it on, and Wufei couldn’t think of a reason to contact Duo without it being… odd. Duo had never reached out to him, so obviously he hadn’t thought about Wufei enough to want to keep him around.

He thought he had dealt with that, until these photos appeared, and suddenly he found himself feeling that damn reminiscent ache where Duo’s presence had once been. He should have just thrown away the photos, but he couldn’t. Kept them, kept looking at them, like poking at a sore spot to see if it’s still there.

Loathe as he was to admit it, that sore spot was the reason he didn’t argue too much - He argued a bit, obviously, or Lady Une would think something was wrong with him - when he was posted out to L2 to inspect the Preventers HQ there now construction was complete and the staff could be moved in from the temporary offices they’d been stationed in previously.
He’d had time to dump his bag in his temporary apartment before making his way to the shiny new building. Its glass frontage shone in the artificial light of the colony, the Preventers’ logo in wrought metal high up on its face. Inside the building it still smelled of fresh paint and new carpets, but the decorating was done and the unpacking had started, computers were installed, files had been transferred and everything was being stored in its rightful place.

And I do mean everything, Wufei thought dryly, standing out the front of the building and watching the prisoners being unloaded from the back of the secured vans, returned to the Preventers by the local police, who were no doubt grateful to have their cells free for their own criminals.

The problem with a new office, he reflected, was that you ended up with new everything. And whilst new resources were good, new recruits were perhaps inclined to be dazzled and distracted by the gilding and get lazy about the basics.

Like that. Wufei’s eyes narrowed as the agent unloading one of the prisoners fumbled with the cuffs, trying to move the restraints to the front of his body. It was small, but it was all that was needed. Before Wufei could shout the agent was flat on the floor, dazed, and the prisoner was off, disappearing into the crowds immediately.

“Williams, pick up Lang!” he barked, leaping down the steps. “Get Merrick onto the surveillance cams and notify backup to head us off!”

He didn’t stop to see if his orders were registered, surging past the people who had been shoved out of the way by the escapee and following hot on his heels. It was easy to work out the way he’d gone by the ripples of disgruntled pedestrians, and the gap soon closed enough for Wufei to see the man dodge down a side street.

He grinned, slightly bloodthirsty, this was what it was all about. Even after small fry like this, there was something about the chase that thrilled through his blood. He was the predator, they were the prey, and he would squash them. He lengthened his strides, feeling his blood begin to pump as they wended their way through alleys towards an industrial estate. Wufei cornered better, and was closing the distance between them, but his target seemed to be finding a second wind as the gaps between the large warehouses widened.

Still, Wufei was close enough behind him as he rounded a corner to hear a surprised -

“What the - “

And then a holler of

“Oh no you fucking don’t , sunshine!”

Wufei followed around the corner to the sounds of a scuffle and some grunts and when he came into view his prisoner was flat on the floor, wind knocked out of him, his face being smushed into the pavement as he was sat on by a black-clad figure, who was redoing the man’s cuffs, properly.

“Alright buddy you can get real cozy with the tarmac there while I work out who you belong to…”

Wufei slowed to a walk, recognising that voice, recognising that attitude, and definitely recognising the long, chestnut braid that was dangling to the floor.

What were the odds, he marvelled, watching as Duo rocked back to sit fully on his victim, one foot still firmly on the man’s face as he rummaged in his pocket to pull out his cell phone. Bringing it up to dial, he glanced up and blinked as he saw Wufei drawing closer. A wide grin split his face.
“Hey there stranger,” he called happily. “Think I’ve found something of yours.”

Wufei couldn’t help but grin back.

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Duo had hung around the HQ after giving his statement, waiting whilst Wufei had marched the escapee back into custody and given Lang a dressing down about handling prisoner transfers.

“Brrr,” he commented as Wufei marched back towards him, leaving Lang to be checked out by the medics. He grinned lazily at him as he slouched against the reception desk. “Bet you get invited to all the staff parties with an attitude like that.”

Wufei sniffed haughtily, although not without humour.

“I only go to the most exclusive parties,” he replied. “So exclusive, there’s no-one else there.”

Duo let out a surprised bark of laughter and fell into step beside him, draping an arm cheerfully over his shoulder. He’d grown since Wufei had last seen him, more than Wufei had, and was about half a head taller than him now, a hair over six foot perhaps, but he was still all long, lean muscle and movement, warm against his side.

“Well, you’re going to have to lower yourself to a Maxwell party today,” he declared, gesturing broadly with his free arm. “It’s a little less classy, but hopefully still stimulating!”

They trotted down the steps together and Wufei looked around him, taking a moment to inspect the neighbourhood in a way he hadn’t previously. This had been an area of wrecks and burnt out factories, most of which had produced armaments for the war. Now it had been rebuilt - new shops and high rise apartment buildings had sprung up, the streets repaved and maintained. Hell even trees planted and a small park with a fountain was just beside the HQ - planting had previously been left to the agricultural levels, as it was seen as a waste of resources and space in the overpopulated residential areas. Some of the better condition factories and warehouses had been reconditioned into apartment buildings, and even a hotel. A hotel! On L2! The colony was becoming well and truly gentrified.

He glanced towards Duo, and saw the other man watching him carefully, a thoughtful smile on his face.

“Looks good, doesn’t it?” he asked finally, before Wufei could break the silence.

“They’ve done a wonderful job,” Wufei agreed, as they continued down the steps and onto the street. “I’m impressed how much they’ve accomplished.”

“Still plenty left to do though.”

A brief expression of displeasure had flickered through Duo’s eyes, but it was gone before Wufei could even fully register it. They walked side-by-side down the street, and Duo was chatting away again, detailing the work that had been done specifically in this area, and the plans that were in place for the future.

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“Hells Bells!” Duo cried cheerfully, flinging open the door of the bar and striding in like he owned the place.

“Mort!” came a happy response. Wufei’s eyes adjusted to the dim interior and saw it came from a grinning lady stood behind the bar along the side of the room. She was tall and slim, hair a dark red and cropped short. She had several piercings up her ears, and one in her nose, whilst her arms were covered in colourful tattoos. Hells Bells seemed a fitting moniker.

Duo led the way over to the bar and hopped onto a stool.

“Wufei, this is Helen,” he said magnanimously, “Hells Bells to anyone who has ever had the misfortune of knowing her.”

“Mort, if you’ve brought another of your cute friends to parade past me,” she said, moving over and starting to pull a pint without asking, “this one had damn well better be single.”

“Sorry Hells,” Duo commiserated, taking the offered beer with a nod. “This one’s all hooked up too.”

Wufei shot Duo a puzzled look.

“No, I’m not.”

Duo blinked at him, and pulled a sympathetic face.

“You and Sally break up? That’s a bummer man, I’m sorry.” He patted Wufei’s shoulder comfortingly, as Helen placed another full glass down in front of him.

“We were never together,” Wufei said, contemplating his newly-arrived beer, and wondering where Duo had got the idea he was seeing Sally.

“Oh.” Duo was looking at him, a mix of expressions on his face, but before Wufei could begin to unpick them they’d fled in the face of another huge grin. “In that case, Wufei, let me introduce you to this lovely lady I know. Her name is Helen and she is quite wonderful. But just a warning,” he leaned in and dropped his voice to a stage whisper. “If you guys break up, I’m siding with her. I know we were brothers-in-arms, but I can’t lose this bar. It’s the only one that still lets me in.”

Helen snorted then headed back down the bar.

“The usual?” she called over her shoulder.

“Yeah, for me,” Duo called back, and then looked at Wufei speculatively. “And a Captain’s Special for Wu here.”

“A Captain’s Special?”

Duo grinned and span around on his stool so he could slouch backwards against the bar.

“First night on L2, I’m treating you to dinner!”

“I can order for myself, Maxwell.”

“Yeah, but then that’s no fun for me.”
Wufei rolled his eyes and mirrored Duo’s position, leaning one elbow on the bar and surveying the room whilst he sipped his beer cautiously. He was pleasantly surprised to find he liked it, it was light with a citrusy flavour that cut through the yeasty tang that put him off most beers.

The bar was mostly empty at this stage; a few tables against the walls filled with people catching an early dinner after work, and a couple of guys trying to show off on the pool table. The walls were decorated with bright street art, neon colours against a dark background. He catalogued every patron, filing them away as ‘no threat’ and out of his concern, and glanced to see Duo watching him with a grin.

“Do you like it?” Duo asked.

“I have to, if this is the only place that will let you in,” Wufei told him dryly.

Duo laughed, and it was rich and deep and throaty, and Wufei felt a weird throb in that emotional sore spot he’d been poking at for months.

“Well, that’s what happens when you start making improvements to a place,” Duo said, a little ruefully. “The people who used to go there can’t afford to go there anymore.”

There was a slight angry tone to his voice at the end, and Wufei quirked an eyebrow at him.

“You don’t approve of the regenerations?”

Duo waved a hand and shook his head slightly.

“Nah man, they’re great. And god knows Relena’s got her heart in the right place, but…” he paused, shrugged. “You’ll get it - L2’s problem’s always been too many people with not enough money. They’re building all these fancy places to live, and no-one from around here can afford to live there.”

“So more people are being forced into a shrinking area of affordable resources,” Wufei continued whilst Duo took a long mouthful of his drink. The other man nodded encouragingly.

“Right, and what do you end up with when that happens?” He didn’t wait for Wufei to answer. “Slums. And the people in them are written off as wasters, and somehow no-one ever gets around to fixing the problem ‘cause no-one’s got any idea what to do with the people there. OR they go through and fix it, but then you got a load of people with nowhere to live ‘cause nothing’s been built they can afford.”

Wufei frowned, swilling the liquid in his glass thoughtfully. The colony regeneration projects had been a big part of Relena’s election campaign in ESUN, helping the colonies to recover from the damage done throughout the Alliance’s ‘rule’ and the war after. L2 had been the biggest project, but with its poorer populace and lower political standing it hadn’t garnered the same level of consideration as the richer colonies. Hence the Preventers only just getting their own building. He would have thought the risks of true gentrification would have been accounted for though, certainly enough studies had been done on how detrimental it was.

“Surely there’s a plan in place for that though?” he said. “Relena might be naive, but Winner’s been a big part of this too, and you can’t accuse him of not seeing the big picture.”

Duo snorted and turned back to the bar, leaning his elbow on it and propping his hand on his chin.

“Quat’s got his undies in a bunch over a centuries-old earth scheme he read about,” he drawled. “How to solve the homelessness problem? By giving people homes!”
Wufei choked slightly on his beer and Duo grinned, passing him a napkin.

“You’re not serious?” he wheezed eventually. “I know Winner would make friends with the entire world but he can’t seriously want to buy everyone a house!”

“Oh, he’s not doing it,” Duo reassured him. “He found the data from this scheme last time, put forward that the money spent by the local government building homes would result in massive savings elsewhere in terms of health provision, unemployment support, policing… Having a permanent address helped people to get jobs, so they could pay taxes which went back into the economy to help more people…” Duo twirled a finger in mid-air. “The ever-spinning hamster wheel of life.”

It was a noble idea, Wufei allowed grudgingly, and knowing Winner his research and figures were solid, but…

“It’ll never work,” Wufei said.

Duo pointed a finger at him, and made a ‘pew pew’ noise, which Wufei took to be agreement.

Helen reappeared then and placed two plates on the bar behind them. Duo’s held a giant burger with thick cut fries, but Wufei was pleasantly surprised to see that a Captain's Special apparently meant some kind of thick seafood stew with a couple of slices of crusty bread. Duo scooped up his plate and, not waiting to see if Wufei followed, wound his way towards a table in the corner, so they could both sit with their backs to the wall whilst they ate.

“I know I think it’s naïve,” Wufei continued, once they were settled, “but I would have thought you’d be behind a scheme to get people off the streets.”

“There’s no dignity in this though, far as I see it.” Duo waved a fry at him to punctuate his sentence. “People still got dignity even when they’re down-and-out, and this is just a handout. I read one of those studies - they had a problem with people leaving their houses and sleeping rough again. Had to keep scooping ’em up and carting ’em home. Doesn’t address the reasons they were there in the first place, just puts a bandaid over it.” He drew a house shape in the air with his fry, to illustrate. “‘Sides, the long term issues aren’t with the people they’re getting off the streets, but everyone else. They see all these people getting handed houses and start thinking. Well shit, they think, I’ve worked all my damn life and no-one’s given me anything free, and this guy used to piss outside schools in the middle of the day, drunk off his ass. How come he just gets a free ride? And then you get resentment, and then you get people being harassed ‘cause of it, and then property prices being driven down because of how close they are to ‘free housing’, and then you just end up with the same thing all over again – the Haves and Have-Not’s, and those free houses are suddenly derelict and people are on the streets again.” He shrugged one shoulder and dipped his fry in ketchup. “It’s the sort of thing that works great in a small community when everyone’s on board. But you can’t just roll it out across the whole damn world and tell people they’re going to like it.”

“I’d have never pegged you for a cynic, Maxwell,” Wufei said dryly, and Duo winked at him before starting to tuck into his burger.

There was that funny feeling again, prodding at him. Although, it could also have been the warming stew, which was filled with all the flavours and spices it should have been. It even seemed to actually be fairly healthy.

It occurred to Wufei since meeting Duo earlier that day there’d been less awkwardness and stilted pauses than with people he saw regularly. The other pilots seemed to manage with him, but other people struggled with the long silences and his lack of patience for small talk. Even Sally would
sometimes resort to humming pointedly to fill silences if he wasn’t being talkative. But the ease with which Duo was talking with him, it was almost as if they hadn’t been out of contact since the end of the war, as if they’d established a relationship that was familiar and genial - this was certainly more relaxed than they’d been when they’d parted last.

It was an unexpected conversation too. He’d expected perhaps to clumsily reminisce about their shared friends and histories, given as their recent past had not connected, followed by a drying up of topics and an uncomfortable parting. Colonial regeneration and ESUN’s housing policy would be considered heavy topics at most dinner parties.

“I suppose you’d know a lot about this, being involved with Urban Planning,” Wufei commented. Duo looked at him, puzzled. “I’ve been following your media career,” he elaborated. “You often seem to be around the building sites.”

“Oh, that,” Duo said, and laughed. He laughed a lot, Wufei reflected, naturally and unguarded. It… put him at ease. “Nah, I’m not involved with any of that stuff. I volunteered a bit at first, but only for things like the community centres, and schools, that kinda thing, the sorta buildings that don’t make a profit. The people building the other stuff have got plenty of money for labour. The hotel industry ain’t hurting for cash.”

“So the photographs are… coincidence?”

“They’re on purpose alright.” Duo grinned wickedly and his eyes twinkled. “They drive Heero fucking nuts, man. It’s hilarious. He does everything he can to try to spot me each time, but I always meet them for lunch the next day and he’s there with the paper looking like he wants to murder me.”

“That’s why he overhauls Relena’s security so often,” Wufei muttered. “He’s like a man possessed sometimes.”

“What can I say, I’m good at what I do.” Duo leaned back in his chair, hooking one ankle over his knee. “What’ve you been up to then, Chang? You running the Preventers yet?”

“That’s a job I thankfully haven’t been given,” Wufei drawled with a small smirk. “Une is more than capable of handling the task. And, were I less charitable, I might surmise that she’s paying for the crimes of her past with paperwork and politicians. I’ve no desire for that kind of self-flagellation.”

Duo let out a bark of laughter.

“No, you wouldn’t,” he chuckled. “I remember you Chang, if you’re intent on paying for your sins you won’t pick death by a thousand paper cuts. But Sally’s told me how often you end up visiting her after taking a stupid mission risk. I think she’s planning on using you for anatomy lessons soon!”

Wufei inclined his head with a grin, acknowledging the hit. Then he frowned slightly.

“You’ve seen Sally?”

“Yeah, a couple of times when I’ve been visiting the others, last time I saw her was… L3? Couple of months back?” Duo tilted his head at him, quizzically. “Why?”

He took a moment to stir his stew, trying to work out how to phrase the question, and also why the issue even bothered him in the first place.

“What did she say to make you think we were… involved?” he settled for, eventually. He was fairly certain she wouldn’t have told Duo as much in words that they were involved - the woman was undeniably eccentric but she wasn’t a downright fantasist, and as far as he was aware they were both
satisfied with their current relationship. He was perhaps closest to her of anyone other than the other former pilots, and he respected her abilities and character, but he wasn’t interested in anything…

romantic.

Duo shrugged, the gesture nonchalant whilst he studied his plate.

“I dunno, nothing really, not like specific or anything.” Apparently his burger was pretty fascinating. “She just, y’know, she talks about you all the time, so I figured you guys were…” he paused, then looked up at Wufei with a cheeky grin. “…doin’ the bedroom boogie.”

Wufei choked on his mouthful of stew, and reflected that maybe he should stop eating and drinking around Duo. The other man, for his part, looked delighted to have made him squirm and he was aware that there may be a bit of colour on his cheeks and he shot Duo a glare whilst he drank his beer and cleared his throat again.

“I see age has done nothing to dull your ever-colourful turn of phrase,” he drawled finally.

“Naw,” Duo said, although he looked quite pleased at the assessment. “I even learned some new ones.”

They finished off their meals mostly in silence, although it was companionable, and broken by occasional comments on the quality of the fare at the bar. Duo had seemed pleased by that as well.

“How long are you up for?” Duo asked finally, scrunching up his napkin and tossing it onto his empty plate.

Wufei placed his spoon neatly in his bowl and studied Duo, who had leaned back in his chair and folded his arms behind his head, smiling expectantly at him. It was such an open expression, and perhaps a little… hopeful?

“A month,” Wufei told him. “I’m finalising the last measures before the place is fully opened. This is the last colony HQ to be completed, so Une is keen to make sure it goes smoothly.”

“Well, I hope you’ll have some more time to hang out while you’re up,” Duo said, and he studied Wufei’s face for a reaction to the proposal. There seemed to be a slight hesitance to his suggestion, but it was gone before Wufei could be really sure it was there.

“I am only really here because I have the authority to sign off on all the organisational matters, and I was the only senior agent currently available,” Wufei told him dryly, “So I’m not expecting things to be too taxing on my time. The infrastructure has been planned and approved for months now, it is simply a case of implementation and tweaking where necessary.”

Duo stared at him blankly for a moment, eyebrows raised, before rolling his eyes.

“…I’ll take that as a ‘Yeah, sure, Duo, I’d love to hang out some more’.”

Wufei found himself grinning back at Duo.

“Yeah, sure, Duo, I’d love to hang out some more,” he parroted obediently. Duo beamed at him, delighted.

“Let’s celebrate! Cocktails!” He grabbed the small cardboard menu on the table and studied it with a snicker. “What do you think? A Woo-woo for Wu-Wu?”

“As delightful as that sounds,” Wufei said sardonically. “I’ll have to say no for this evening. It’s…
been a long day of travelling and I think an early night is in order.”

Duo grabbed a napkin and pulled a pen from his pocket, scribbling on the paper before thrusting it at Wufei.

“Come to my place tomorrow, then, when you get off,” he declared. “I’ll make dinner. If I know those Preventers apartments you’ll be lucky if you’ve got a toaster and a microwave.”

Wufei couldn’t exactly argue with Duo’s assessment of the facilities, and he took the napkin with grateful inclination of his head and stood. He held his hand out to Duo.

“It is… nice to see you again,” he settled for, as Duo clasped his hand firmly, his hand warm. Duo grinned at him.

“Yeah, we shoulda done this sooner.”

Wufei’s stomach clenched at that, wondering then why they hadn’t. Why Duo hadn’t contacted him before. He clamped down on it as he moved towards the door, then paused, turning back to Duo.

“Maxwell,” he called, and Duo looked up, quirking an eyebrow at him. “What were you doing down that alley, earlier?”

Duo grinned, and looked a little embarrassed but at the same time unrepentant.

“Heero mentioned that you were coming up,” he said. “I was heading to the HQ to see if I could ‘accidentally’ bump into you.”

Wufei stared at him for a long moment, feeling like the emotional sore spot that had been pretty abused already today had just been punched quite soundly.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Duo asked, and there was that hesitance again, as if he wasn’t sure how to take Wufei’s reaction to his confession. Wufei took control of himself again and nodded, remembering to smile.

“I look forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the first fic I’ve written in 10 years. SORRY GUYS. Thanks a billion to maevemauvaise for beta-ing for me.

This fic was 90% powered by Walk The Moon’s "Talking Is Hard" album, so if you want to get an idea of the tone for this fic... Listen to that.

- If you're interested in gentrification theory, there's a Tedx talk from a Professor in Human Geography about it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMz1x5_yF2Q It deals with council estates in London, specifically, but it's an interesting watch. Of course Duo and Wufei haven't seen this, so they're a bit less well-referenced.

- The town which gave everyone a house is Medicine Hat, in Alberta! http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36092852 Unlike Duo, I think it's a great idea if it can be managed. But I agree with him that people are awful and it wouldn't
necessarily work out.
Whilst the apartment the Preventers had provided him with for his stay was only marginally more Spartan than his own living arrangements, Wufei had to admit that he could not really feel comfortable there.

He had never particularly accumulated… stuff, so his home in Brussels would be considered by most to be minimalist. He had his sword, his books, and a few photographs, but it otherwise looked much as it had when he had moved in. It had even come with the furniture in it, and that had suited his needs for the most part. Where it hadn’t, he had adapted.

Since the end of the war, Wufei had not really taken much time to stop and consider the concept of Peace. Instead he had thrown himself into his work with the Preventers, perhaps as a penance for his actions as a pilot, and perhaps because he was a little bit frightened about what he would find were he to stop working and have to spend time considering himself as anything other than a tool for a cause. As a person. As someone who might have a future aside from fighting.

Heero’s apartment was not much different from Wufei’s, although there had been touches added, gradually, which showed that Relena had opinions on Heero’s taste in interior design and was doing her best to rectify it without him noticing. Trowa’s own apartment was barely lived-in, and he seemed to keep it entirely so he didn’t feel like Quatre’s kept man, so there was nothing much in there either. And Quatre… his houses – and condos, hotels, chalets - had all been inherited, a familial portfolio of ridiculous real estate, none of which he had had time to decorate and none of which reflected anything of the young man’s interests or personality, aside from his personal rooms in his most permanent home which were kept tasteful and understated to help him escape the grandeur down the corridor, and shut off from work.

So as Wufei headed towards the address scrawled messily on a bar napkin, he found himself wondering what sort of place he would find there. He had never been a proponent of knowing someone through seeing their home, but he could not help but be curious.

The building was on the far side of the industrial estate he had chased his prisoner through the day before, just as the streets became residential and made way for houses and communities, Colonial Suburbia, of a sort. It was an old garage, with a cheerful sign over a large bright red metal hatch, clearly designed to take anything up to a large truck or a mobile suit, and high windows to let light into what he assumed would be the garage floor. The warehouse-section of the building appeared to be at least two storeys high, but Wufei noticed at the top of the building there were large rows of windows which seemed separate, another storey’s height above the work building, and he wondered if that was where Duo lived.

Next to the big, red garage door was a smaller red door, a heavy duty metal affair like its larger companion, and beside it was a buzzer and a security camera.

Wufei pushed the button, and it pinged quietly to let him know that his message had been received.
He made eye contact with the camera and waited, patiently, and trying to imagine that he wasn’t slightly nervous about this whole thing. It was dinner, with an old… acquaintance? Friend? Nothing he’d not done before with the others, and certainly on the scale of alarming activities he had pursued in his lifetime this shouldn’t even rate a blip. But he found himself wanting to fidget. And he didn’t, by nature, fidget.

There was a buzzing noise, and then the sound of a lock disengaging. After a moment’s hesitation, Wufei pushed the door open and stepped inside, letting it shut behind him.

The interior was, in fact, a garage. There was a section of rolling road, a car lift, and a number of hoists, along with cabinets along the far wall that he had no doubt were filled with tools and spare parts. The windows he had seen from the outside were high on the walls in here, letting in plenty of light but keeping the interior cool. There was a small blue hatchback sat parked just by the hatch, and the shape of another car in the corner, covered by a dust sheet. Towards the back of the garage was a long, scuffed table with a few disassembled parts on it, and behind it two black motorbikes – one clearly built for speed, and the other a cruiser. Both were in beautiful condition, and he had no doubt they were both Duo’s.

“Hey,” Duo called, “I’ll be out in a minute!”

Wufei turned to the sound of his voice and saw the small room to the right of the entrance. It was clearly a later construction, a box built from partition walling inside the garage, to act as a reception and waiting area. There were two large windows looking into it, showing a handful of comfy chairs and a table with some magazines on it. Duo was sat behind a desk at a computer, clearly the base of operations for the place. Watching him work, Wufei realised that until this point he’d had no idea what Duo did for a living, and it was strange to find himself suddenly standing in the middle of it.

The printer beside Duo whirred and he snagged the piece of paper it spat out, folding it as he stood and heading over to Wufei with a grin on his face. He knocked the lights off in the office as he went, pulling the door behind him.

“Sorry,” he apologised cheerfully, strolling over to the blue car and sticking the piece of paper under the wiper. “Every so often you’ve gotta do the paperwork. But now Mrs. Kane can have her car back to use and abuse some more.”

“Is this… all yours?” Wufei asked, looking around the huge space again.

“Yeah!” Duo flung his arms wide. “Welcome to my humble home. Got it cheap on auction, had to knock it into shape a bit, but it’s turned out okay. Want the grand tour?”

Wufei inclined his head slightly and followed behind as Duo pointed out all his favourite toys, and detailed the deals he’d got on them all – it seemed he’d acquired most of them second hand, through auctions or salvage, but he had obviously restored them to fine condition and maintained them well. Wufei was impressed, the whole garage was clean, tidy and organised, and everything was cared for. He knew he shouldn’t be surprised, remembering how Duo had looked after his Gundam, but he supposed his attitude during the war hadn’t exactly belied a sense of care or order, at least to Wufei’s own overstressed brain.

Duo shrugged when Wufei noted how well-kept everything was.

“Gotta look after it or it won’t last,” he said, as though it were obvious. “And you don’t wanna lose something just ’cause you’ve not been careful.”
He led Wufei over to the covered car in the corner and grinned wickedly at him.

“Check this out,” he stage-whispered, and pulled the cover off with a flourish.

Beneath the cover sat a fully refurbished, classic sports car. An Aston Martin, if Wufei wasn’t mistaken, in British Racing green. It was in perfect condition from what he could see, and the paintwork shone. Crouching to peer through the window, he could see the seats and fittings even looked brand new, the leather immaculate.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, glancing up at Duo who was looking at the car like a proud parent.

“Aw, it’s not mine, more’s the pity,” Duo said, leaning over to flick a minute bit of fluff off the radiator grill. “Some guy with more money than sense, works down on Earth – Zurich – bought it, and got in touch with Howard after a contact in the refurb business. Got it shipped out to me and now he’s paying me to store it for him too ‘cause he’s got nowhere to keep it.”

“He’s bought a car to keep it somewhere else?” Wufei shook his head disbelievingly. “Has he even seen the finished product?”

“Oh sure. Once a year he and buddies get together for a reunion, he pays for me to come down with it and he shows off with it for a week, then pays for me to take it back up here to store it.”

Duo twitched the cover back into place, carefully smoothing it down and making sure the car was fully protected, and Wufei smiled a little at the care being taken – perhaps this man was not such a moron after all, he would certainly be getting his money’s worth in terms of security and maintenance from Duo.

“So is that your main line then?” Wufei asked, as Duo came back around the car. “Refurbishments?”

“I’ve got fingers everywhere,” Duo said and leered at him, then laughed again at himself. “I do some regular mechanic work for some of the neighbours,” He waved his hand in the direction of the houses outside. “And some bits on the trucks for some of the other business round here. I mostly get word-of-mouth recommendations for refurbishments, ‘cause they tend to be long jobs by people who are pretty precious… although sometimes Hilde gets the odd find through her yard and sells it to me for a song to fix up and sell on, but I don’t do too much of that. I’ve got some other stuff on the go too, just to mix it up a little now and again. Bein’ my own boss, ‘s the only way I can keep interested!”

Duo led him across the garage floor as he talked, towards a set of stairs which were tucked away behind the office. There was another door to the left of the stairs, and Wufei paused, realising that there was another partition wall set up within the garage, sectioning off a large piece of the floor space.

“What’s through there?” He gestured at the door, and Duo paused.

“That’s just the workshop,” he said.

Wufei raised an eyebrow and glanced around the rest of the room – wasn’t that the workshop? Duo quirked a smile at him and strolled past him towards the door, gesturing for Wufei to head inside first.
The room was as high as the main garage, but not as cavernous. In the centre stood a metal sculpture, tall and black, of a large owl. Its figure was a framework, like a cage, and when Wufei approached he could see that it was made of weapons – mainly guns, which had been forged and moulded into the shape of this animal whilst retaining enough of their original form to be recognisable. He stared, and looked around, seeing a furnace, and a wide selection of blow torches, hammers and tongs all laid out on a workbench on one side of the room, and an angled drafting table and stool tucked away in a corner. A welder’s mask and fireproof suit with gloves hung behind the door, a long, deep sink and a number of buckets piled underneath it, along with a variety of fire extinguishers. There were cabinets like in the main garage, and a few sizeable crates full of, Wufei could see, more weapons and metal scraps obviously waiting to be used.

He glanced back at Duo, eyes wide, to see the other man leaning against the doorway, arms folded and watching him carefully.

“What do you think?” he asked finally, after Wufei had circled the owl twice.

“Did you do this?” Wufei wasn’t sure whether he wanted to study the sculpture or Duo.

“Yeah,” Duo said. “It’s for the foyer of your new building, the HQ. Une commissioned it.”

Wufei’s mind leapt back to a near identical statue in the Brussels HQ – a falcon, but through the black structure of that one was visible a silver dove inside the bird of prey - and made the connection.

“I didn’t know,” he apologised. “The one in Brussels claims the artist wished to remain anonymous…”

Duo grinned, seeming to relax from a tension that had barely been visible to begin with.

“Well, I kinda did, but I thought Quatre would have told you, it’s a pretty badly kept secret.”

Wufei couldn’t help but feel a little hurt that no one had told him, but pushed it aside. They had probably figured it wasn’t something that interested him, and he had never thought to ask.

“You’re very talented.”

“Nah, I just set things on fire then smack ‘em really hard,” Duo brushed off the praise with a grin. He moved past Wufei towards the cabinet on the far side of the room.

“Where do you get the weapons?” Wufei asked.

“I’ve got a deal with the local police and Preventers, they decommission ‘em and I get a bulk discount to dispose of them. Hilde and Howard can usually hook me up with bits of mobile suit as well – the L4 branch one’s mostly made outta bits of old Taurus.”

Wufei suddenly had the feeling that he was standing in the home of a stranger. Far from the easy conversation yesterday, where it was like they were old friends who had never been apart, today he was struck that he had probably never really known Duo at all. Was the difference that yesterday had been ‘neutral’ territory? Now he was most emphatically on Duo’s turf, as it were, and feeling quite vulnerable with it. He wondered if Duo felt vulnerable having him here.

He watched as the other man crouched down to reach into one of the cupboards, questing for something inside, and tried to reconcile what he was seeing today with what he remembered of Duo.
Very little, if anything, in this building was bought new, that he was certain of. Duo’s ethos seemed to be the repair and care of abandoned things, rebuilding them or repurposing them. Preventing waste, and giving a second chance at existence.

“Why metalwork?” he asked, before he could stop himself. “Why weapons?”

Duo straightened and turned, holding a small black bag in his hands.

“What, you’re surprised I turned out to be a long-haired hippy artist?” He shot Wufei a self-deprecating grin and set his package on the workbench. “I dunno, it started as a fun little thing with spare bits from the scrap yard that were too small to do anything with and then it just got… bigger. It’s not all that different from doing cars and shit, at least for me.” Duo looked up at his owl, thoughtfully, scratching his chin. “I saw this thing in a museum on Earth back during the war, where artists had made sculptures out of guns as a protest against violence. And I figured, otherwise it’d just be… materials sitting in a lock-up somewhere, waiting for the next war, so why not?”

Why not indeed, Wufei thought, watching Duo fidget with the tie on the bag in front of him, frowning slightly. Apparently the bag was causing some consternation, and Wufei found himself a little relieved that Duo wasn’t feeling quite as at ease as he seemed, since he had been feeling off-kilter since before he had rung the doorbell. After a moment longer of indecision, the frown cleared and Duo pushed the bag across the table towards Wufei.

“This is for you,” he said abruptly, by way of explanation. “I know it’s kinda… presumptuous, so I hope you like it. If not, it’s no big deal…”

The bag was heavy, and made from a soft black chamois material. Wufei undid the tie and let it fall open, staring at the contents.

It was about 8 inches tall, with a shiny silver finish, polished up brightly and obviously kept that way by the bag. The dragon curled around itself, its head angled to stare at him imperiously, as if wondering why he’d had the audacity to open the bag in the first place.

It occurred to Wufei that there wasn’t much chance Duo had done this in the time he’d known Wufei would be coming to L2, and the room suddenly got a little warmer.

“…I did some research,” Duo piped up, sounding unsure of Wufei’s reaction. Wufei prided himself on being hard to read, but apparently his slight widening of eyes was not setting Duo’s nerves to rest. “Five toes, on Shenlong, right? Because he’s… Imperial.”

“That’s right.” Wufei’s voice was vague as he picked the statue up to study more closely, studying the details and the joins of metal. It really was quite a dense piece, considering how small it was. “What’s it made of?”

Duo didn’t answer for a long moment, and Wufei set the figure down on the table again to look at him. He seemed to be chewing over the answer, and Wufei’s raised eyebrow only appeared to make him a little more jittery.

“It’s… Gundanium,” he said, finally, and cleared his throat awkwardly. “It’s, um, it’s from Altron.”

Wufei must have actually physically started at that statement, and Duo hurriedly continued, as if he wanted to get the explanation out before he thought better of it.

“I know enough people on salvage crews that I was able to pick up a decent amount of the remains from Wing and Altron after. And I was able to grab plenty of Sandrock, Heavyarms and Deathscythe after we destroyed them. Everyone else has one too, but I wanted to give it to you in
person which is why I’ve held onto it, I didn’t want to overstep or anything…”

The temperature in the room did definitely seem to have gone up, whilst the oxygen levels seemed to have dropped. Wufei was having a bit of trouble breathing. The value of the gift in front of him was more than he could put into words, but Duo seemed anxious by the lack of verbal reassurance.

After a long moment more with no response, Duo clapped his hands together and tried to change the subject with a forcibly relaxed tone.

“T’im hungry, shall we get the grub on? What kind of host would I be if I invited you over here and then starved you - “

Wufei grabbed Duo’s arm as he came past, his grip tight. Duo froze, and his eyes flicked to Wufei’s hand before meeting his gaze squarely. There was hesitation in his eyes, and Wufei felt a pang of regret that he wasn’t better with expressing things like this. Perhaps if he had been, he thought ruefully, he and Duo would have reconnected sooner.

“Thank you,” he settled on saying, putting as much weight as he could behind the words, and still feeling it wasn’t enough. He cursed himself, and tried again. “This is… immeasurably precious to me.”

Duo studied his face carefully for a long moment, and there seemed to be a slight bit of colour in his cheeks. He smiled, and inclined his head once to accept the thanks. Wufei released his arm and stepped back, feeling his own colour rising.

“I’ll get started on dinner,” Duo said again, although it was more relaxed now. “Come on, we’ve not finished the tour yet!”

He headed out of the door, giving Wufei a few seconds to gather up his gift, stowing safely in its bag and following after. He closed the door behind him just as Duo was starting up the staircase.

The stairs were much like most warehouse stairs - functional, metal, bare. At the top of them was another metal door like the one on the front of the garage, and a small keypad beside it. Duo keyed in the code, and the lock beeped its welcome.

“And this is the Penthouse Suite,” Duo purred with a grin, stepping aside to let Wufei precede him again.

The first thing that struck Wufei was the light, and then the space.

The room was big, with windows all down one side, and then large windowed doors on another wall leading out onto a roof terrace. The living area appeared to be one big space, although Duo had managed to create separate areas neatly so the kitchen and living didn’t seem to crowd each other. On the wall opposite the windows were three doors, and Wufei could see the walls added later - bedrooms and bathroom, he supposed.

Duo slipped past him and headed towards the kitchen, bustling around, and Wufei placed his bag on the coffee table.

Whilst Wufei had avoided an accumulation of ‘stuff’ because it felt wasteful and indulgent, Duo had not taken the same tactic. He had a large sofa and a couple of arm chairs, all mismatched and slightly worn, but all very comfortable-looking. He had shelves between the windows, filled with dog-eared books, CDs and old video disks. Photos were pretty much everywhere he could fit them, and there were a couple of wild-looking plants perched on the deep window ledges.
There was a ‘thump’ noise from one of the other rooms and Wufei jumped, turning towards the sound and his hand instinctively moving towards his gun, but pausing when the thump was following by a funny little chirping sound.

The sound was repeated, closer this time and louder. Wufei moved around the sofa and tracked the noise to a small, skinny black cat with bright yellow eyes and a concerned expression. It squeaked at him as it went past, then went to stand behind Duo and let out a longer, louder noise - this one at least slightly resembling a meow.

He dropped his hand back to his side and shook his head slightly.

“That is the most ridiculous cat I have ever seen,” he announced, and Duo grinned at him, whilst the cat again voiced its displeasure at whatever had upset it.

“I know,” Duo agreed. “It’s a good thing she’s with me because she wouldn’t have lasted a week otherwise. But we street rats gotta stick together.”

The cat apparently understood that she was being disparaged and yowled, reaching up to try and climb Duo’s leg and get his attention, although even at full stretch her paws only just reached his knees.

Duo reached down and gently stroked the top of her head with the back of one of his knuckles, and she moved off, satisfied. She made it about three feet before flopping over onto her side and pawing at a small stuffed mouse that Wufei hadn’t noticed.

“What’s her name?” Wufei moved to sit at the dining table, and watched as the cat got distracted from her toy by her own tail and started grooming herself instead.

“Hrothgar,” Duo said, and seeing Wufei’s expression burst out laughing. “I know, right? I got it from one of those books you left lying around during the war, and it was just too funny not to. It’s not like she answers to it anyway, the only thing she responds to is her food and her stupid ball with a bell. I think she thinks her name is ‘jingle jingle’.”

Wufei looked back at the tiny black cat, named after the Danish warrior king, who seemed to have got herself stuck with her back legs over her head and fell over trying to untangle herself. On the one hand, perhaps it could be a little disrespectful to Beowulf and its literary standing. On the other… it was pretty damn funny.

Duo continued to stir dinner, adding stock and rice to the mix in the pan, whilst Wufei sat and considered what he had seen today, what he knew of Duo… and what he had always assumed about Duo. There were… a lot of assumptions, which reminded him of part of his motivation for being here. That strange fascination with Duo even after the war, after not having spoken for years. Might as well indulge, he supposed.

“I always thought you would be a dog person,” Wufei said thoughtfully.

“I like dogs,” Duo responded, after thinking for a second. “Who doesn’t like dogs? Well, lots of people, I guess, but I like ‘em plenty. I just, I dunno…” he paused, chewing his lip and looking at the ceiling as if that would help him phrase his answer. “Dogs are pretty needy. That’s why they’re great – they love you SO much, and they just want to be everywhere with you all the time. But, that’s a big commitment, y’know? And I’d feel guilty, ‘cause I couldn’t give a dog that amount of time or love or attention. But cats… Cats just get on with shit. I do my thing, she does her thing, sometimes that thing involves her sitting on me and getting cuddled, but if I’m busy or she’s busy, we don’t take it personally. I think we just like having the company.” He grinned at Wufei. “What about you? Dog
or cat person?"

Duo spoke as much as he remembered, using thirty words where one would do, but Wufei realised none of his answers were without thought. Even to such a flippant question as 'dogs or cats'. It was as though he felt every question deserved not just an answer, but a justification. He supposed that was what made Duo a good conversationalist, and himself somewhat less so.

“…That wasn’t supposed to be a stumper,” Duo said, amused, and Wufei realised he had been staring silently at Duo’s back for longer than was really necessary, and flushed, looking away.

“Sorry,” he muttered and Duo chuckled.

“Guess you’re still a bit shuttle-lagged, huh?”

Wufei neither confirmed nor denied the offered excuse. A glass of red wine was set on the table in front of him and Wufei glanced back at Duo, who was holding another glass as he leaned against the counter next to the simmering pan.

“I hope it’s alright, Quatre said it’s one you like.”

Just how many people had been talking to Duo about him, Wufei wondered, and picked up his wine, using the action to study the other man. The flavour of the wine was familiar, warm and rich and smooth, and Wufei was a little surprised - he’d only ever had this wine with Quatre, how had Duo got a bottle on L2? Duo was watching him with a small grin, clearly weighing Wufei up and trying to measure his reaction.

Peace suited Duo, Wufei thought. He had abandoned the ridiculous priest’s outfit, and was stood comfortably in black jeans and a red plaid shirt, with the sleeves rolled up and the collar undone. His ever-present black boots were still there, but the tension that seemed to have powered his more manic behaviours had dissipated, and instead he seemed open, settled and happy. He had found some kind of purpose in peace which kept him occupied without being restricted, fulfilled and not stifled by the mundanity of life.

He wondered what Duo was concluding from his assessment, observing Wufei as he sat in his uniform, as tense as ever, and having simply redirected his focus from fighting a war to preventing another. He had channelled everything – his anger, displacement, loneliness, confusion – into bringing the Preventers into fruition and ensuring they would be a lasting force for good. But the opening of the L2 branch was the signal that the work was complete. The structure was there, and robust, and he would not be needed with such intensity any more. And he was scared about what that would mean for him.

Perhaps that was why he had become increasingly preoccupied with his lack of contact with Duo. Somewhere inside he had realised he was about to become – not obsolete, but less necessary, and his subconscious had turned itself towards a new project to occupy his focus. A problem to distract him from -

“Alright, Chang,” Duo said finally, rolling his eyes and pulling out the chair across the table from him. He sat in it heavily and fixed Wufei with a steady stare. “Spit it out.”

Wufei blinked at him, blankly, and found himself sitting back a bit to put a little more distance between himself and those forthright violet eyes.

“I… What?”

“You’re clearly chewing on something ridiculous,” Duo told him. “Have been at least since
yesterday. Tell Uncle Duo what’s wrong.”

The look Wufei gave Duo at that could have curdled milk, but Duo seemed unphased, sipping his wine casually and raising an eyebrow expectantly. Wufei floundered for a moment, instinctively wanted to deny the claim, and hesitated – unnatural as it was for him to discuss personal matters with… anyone, he appreciated the matter-of-fact manner, and wondered if maybe it would help him relax somewhat. He rested his hands in his lap, resisting the urge to toy with his wine glass, and met Duo’s gaze squarely.

“Why didn’t you keep in contact with me?” he asked, and Duo blinked.

“Why didn’t you keep in contact with me?” he shot back, although Wufei recognised the deflection he answered anyway.

“I am… not comfortable with establishing social conventions in an informal setting,” Wufei said, speaking slowly, considering how to phrase a feeling he had previously only had a nebulous understanding of. “And, following the… Mariemaia incident, I was… somewhat ashamed of my actions. My contact with the others was continued largely by proximity as a result of my joining the Preventers, otherwise I would have been unsure how to initiate… anything. We… Our contact had ended at the end of the first war.”

Duo looked surprised, and scratched his chin thoughtfully, sitting back in his own chair.

“I guess... It was kinda the same for me,” he admitted. “You were always pretty formal with me, and after everything, when I didn’t hear from you, I didn’t want to overstep, y’know?”

There was that word again. Overstep. He’d used it earlier when presenting Wufei’s gift. He’d been anxious about the imposition.

“Even when I was not best able to handle it, I always appreciated your companionship,” Wufei told him. “And I’ve missed it.”

Duo took a slow drink of his wine, and Wufei wondered if he was using it as time to collect his thoughts following that clumsy declaration, and felt his face heating as he realised that he’d done exactly what he’d feared - misread the signals, blundered through the social situation and made a fool of himself.

He almost flinched when Duo started snickering, and something must have shown on Wufei’s face because whilst Duo started laughing harder he reached across the table and would have grabbed Wufei’s hand were they not both still clenched in his lap.

“I’m not laughing at you,” he managed to wheeze out eventually. “Just how stupid this is.”

Resisting the urge to bristle defensively at the comment, Wufei watched Duo for a long moment, before he realised what he meant, and couldn’t help a rueful little laugh too. Both of them avoiding the other because neither had been sure their overtures would be welcomed, but each missing the other’s presence in their own way.

It was pretty stupid.

The laughter died down and Duo shook his head in disbelief.

“Ah man, I’ve gotta admit I’m kinda glad it’s not just me who gets caught up on stuff like that,” he said finally, hand resting on his stomach as he slumped back in his chair. Wufei quirked his eyebrows in agreement and reached for his wine again. “Alright Chang, let’s take this from the
Wufei lifted his glass to mirror Duo’s toast and quirked a smile back at him. The tension seemed to melt away and he was left with a warm feeling curling in his stomach that was nothing to do with the wine.

The meal turned out to be a chicken-and-rice affair, with ginger and chilli, and was warming and filling whilst being light and not too rich. Afterwards, they topped up the glasses and Duo led them out onto the roof terrace as the lighting began to dim towards colonial evening.

Hrothgar followed them out and disappeared over the railing and down the fire escape with a squeak, heading for adventures unknown down below. There were a couple of seats set up, a small heater, a barbecue, and a couple of pots with grassy plants in to try and make it seem like a garden.

“It’s nice out here,” Wufei observed, leaning against the railing and looking as lights began to blink out in the buildings nearby. “Peaceful.”

“Yeah, it’s not too bad.” Duo flopped down into one of the chairs and stretched out his legs. “Sometimes I miss Earth though - nothing quite beats sitting outside on a summer evening with a beer.”

Wufei couldn’t quite say he knew, but he could imagine, somehow, doing so with Duo. He stared out at the houses, full of peaceful civilians and considered how Duo’s post-war life differed from his own. The comparison wasn’t entirely flattering, and in the newly relaxed, intimate atmosphere that had sprung up over dinner, he didn’t bother to suppress the slight, cathartic sigh.

“Wufei?” Duo asked, catching the sound. He turned to face the braided man, contemplating his wine glass.

“I think… the world has moved past me in the last few years,” he said finally. “And I’m not sure I have a place in it any more.”

Duo didn’t say anything, just watched and waited for him to elaborate.

“You - all of you - have managed to redirect your skills to… normal life. I’m not sure I’m capable of that. And the Preventers have almost grown beyond a need for me as well…”

Standing, Duo moved to beside Wufei, looking out across the darkening view.

“I think we all felt like that, when it was over,” he said softly. “Quatre and Heero were lucky in a way that they had something waiting for them to do, there wasn’t the break. I think if Trowa hadn’t had the circus and the Preventers, and Quatre he’d have been pretty lost too.” He glanced at Wufei sideways, and grinned. “Hell, I still miss the rush. But I just had to… I dunno, repurpose it. ‘Mobile suit repair’ becomes ‘mechanic’, ‘Breaking and Entering’ becomes ‘Security Consultancy’. And I get paid more to do it than I ever got breaking in places!”

Wufei looked at him, eyebrows raised. Another string to Duo’s bow, he surmised, and another thing he’d been unaware of.

“Yeah,” Duo chuckled at his glance, misinterpreting it. “It’s dumb I know, but Heero says it’s helpful. I’m on contract with Relena’s security detail to break into all her offices and residences a few times a year and report back on the flaws. Une’s started drafting up one for the Preventers offices as well. I should probably move on and give it all up but… I dunno.” He shrugged a shoulder. “I’m proud of what I can do, and I don’t wanna let the skills die. And it means I still get the rush and the challenge, but without the victims.”
Silence fell again and Wufei turned to share Duo’s view, wondering if he’d be able to see Hrothgar prowling down below, but he couldn’t.

“There is a lot I didn’t know about you,” he said. “But that’s because there is a lot to know. I’ve… not been inclined to broaden my focus since before Operation Meteor. Aside from the fighting there’s not much more to tell.”

The wine swirled in Duo’s glass and he was smiling at it faintly.

“Maybe that’s just ‘cause you’ve not had the opportunity to,” Duo murmured, almost to himself. Then he turned his head and grinned thoughtfully. “Maybe now’s the time to take the time for yourself and consider what you want. Not what needs to be done.”

The thought sent a spike of cold fear through him, and Duo must have seen it, his eyes sympathetic.

“Think of it as a mission,” Duo told him, finally. “That’ll give you some focus and structure. I’ll be your support. Take the month you’re up here and think, try things out, make plans. Change them. Hell, just wing it and see what happens.” He straightened up from where he was leaning and turned to face Wufei, smiling almost gently. “That’s the fun thing about peace,” he said. “Risks don’t have to end in death.”

Wufei studied him, and found himself wanting to trust those words, those eyes, that smile. Well, if Duo had done it, maybe he was the best person to help Wufei.

He certainly seemed to have a talent for repairing and repurposing everything else he touched. Cars, tools, stray cats… even his own war-forged talents. Wufei felt his lips twitch in a slight answering smile, and something odd fluttered in his chest. Duo was a repurposing expert, that was certain, so perhaps he would even manage to repurpose Wufei.

* 

Chapter End Notes

- Duo's working model is based somewhat on my own mechanic, who runs his own garage out of his home, and does a line in refurbs as well. He even has a classic car stored for a wealthy businessman, which he drives down to him once a year to show off. It's a Ford Topalino and it is very cute. The rest of the time, he renovates houses and jaunts off to France where he's renovating a massive barn, and sells classic car parts and novelties on eBay.

- I first came across sculptures like Duo's at the Royal Armouries in Leeds. If you get the chance to go, you really should. It's a wonderful museum charting the history of warfare, and is free entry! You can see some examples of art like that here: https://www.niftyhomestead.com/blog/gun-art/

- Hrothgar is based on a cat I went to adopt but was already reserved, and the cat I adopted instead. She is squeaky and ridiculous.

- if anyone's interested, dinner was a chicken and ginger pilaf and it's yummy. There's a
great recipe here: http://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/1840665/chicken-edamame-and-ginger-pilaf (I usually swap the edamame for frozen peas, cause I can't work edamame)

A million thanks again to maevemauvaise for the beta! And I forgot to add in the last chapter (although it's there now), this fic was basically powered by the Walk The Moon album "Talking Is Hard", so if you want to get a sense of tone? That's the place to go.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

03.

Apparently ‘Operation: Refurbishment’ was to start immediately. Duo wasn’t even going to give him a chance to change his mind. Once Wufei had left the night before, and the intimacy had dissipated he suddenly found his gut trying to crawl up his throat and strangle him with embarrassment and anxiety. How had he said those things? How had he agreed to this?

Wufei spent the entire next day prowling around the HQ, checking and triple-checking the arrangements already in place, and ensuring everything was ready for the next phase of the move. He was settling down to an evening with the security specs when the telephone rang.

“Agent Chang? There’s a Mr. Maxwell outside, waiting for you.”

He indulged in a sigh - when had sighing become so cathartic? - and realised that it had obviously been too much to hope that Duo would let the whole thing drop and forget about it. Scrubbing his hands over his face he stood, and made his way down to the front of the building, wondering if he could blame his behaviour on the wine.

Before he could even attempt to say anything, he found himself reflexively catching the helmet that had been thrown at him. Duo sat astride the motorbike and grinned at him.

“Come on, loser, time’s a-wasting!”

“For what?” Wufei asked dryly, moving closer.

“You can’t know what you want to do until you know what you like to do,” Duo told him. “So we’re going to find what you like to do.”

“I like not being kidnapped,” Wufei told him, and Duo laughed.

“Stop being a pussy, get on the damn bike.”

Wufei muttered something rude and shoved the helmet on as Duo buckled up his own, and swung himself over the back of the bike. It was the smaller of the two he’d seen yesterday, the one built for speed, and he was pressed right up to Duo’s back, able to feel the warmth even through the leather jacket. This was the closest he’d been to anyone in a non-violent situation in… a good number of years, and his brain seemed to want to make him hyper-aware of every point of contact for no good reason he could think of.

“Hold on tight, Wu,” came Duo’s voice in the helmet as the engine revved, and he started slightly when he realised there were mics set up. “My girl here’s pretty fiery, don’t want you to get scared now.”

Wufei took the moment to share exactly what he thought of that, but he did find himself holding tighter as the bike tore off, and he ignored Duo’s laugh.

“Where are we going, Maxwell?”
“Aw, I bet you shake all your Christmas presents and try and guess what they are too. Life’s no fun without a few surprises!”

The bike sped quickly and easily through the streets, dodging traffic and heading out of the more crowded city area towards a cluster of older buildings - still intact, but worn and old, not yet fallen to the onward march of progress. It was next to an old retail unit that Duo stopped, wheeling the bike up to a streetlight and killing the engine.

Wufei pulled his helmet off and stared at the building, and then at Duo as the pair dismounted.

“Laserquest?” he demanded. “Honestly, of all the childish - “

“Have you ever done it before?” Duo asked, chaining the bike to the street light.

“Of course not!”

“Then you’ve got no idea if you like it or not.” He stood, grinning. “Come on, trust me.”

He put his hand on Wufei’s shoulder and steered him into the building, Wufei grumbling mulishly the whole way.

The corridors were dark, lit only with UV lights that made the graffiti on the walls glow and showed all the bits of lint on Wufei’s shirt that he hadn’t realised were there. Duo got them a locker, shoving their helmets, jackets and Wufei’s gun into it and pocketing the key so Wufei couldn’t leave without him, the Chinese man noted with a flash of betrayal.

“No pistol-whipping the 8-year-olds,” Duo murmured to him, as they came into the main room, brightly lit and full of arcade games and snack machines.

A cluster of said children were gathered excitedly around a pinball machine egging their friend on. A couple of older men, obviously Dads who were monitoring them, were chatting in the corner, and another party of kids, this time with their mothers was arranged around the air hockey table, all wearing matching neckerchiefs. A scattered mix of older teens and young adults were slouched in various arrangements around the foyer. Their eyes followed Duo and Wufei as they came to the counter, and Wufei felt extremely out of place, even though he was barely older than they were. He was suddenly glad that Duo had insisted he put his jacket away - his shirt was at least insignia-free and un-incriminating.

“Duo!” the man at the counter greeted as they approached. Did Duo know everyone on this damn colony?

“Hey Carl, what’s the run for today?”

“An 9th birthday party, and a scouts outing,” Carl told him as he paid up. “The other guys are just trying to get in their practice before the Regionals next week.”

Duo nodded thoughtfully.

“This is Wufei,” he said, pulling him up to the counter from where he had been stood, scowling into middle-distance and trying to will himself elsewhere. “Can you set him up with a pack like me, and put him in with the birthday party? I’ll go with the scouts.”

“Wait, what - “

“No problem.” Carl pulled a pack out from under the counter and scanned it, passing it to Duo. He
pulled out another jacket and scanned it. “What name’s he want?”

“Justice,” Duo said, before Wufei could reply. Carl tapped something into the computer and then handed the vest to Wufei.

“They’ll be going in in a couple minutes,” Carl told them, and Duo nodded, grabbing Wufei’s arm and pulling him through a side door into another darkly-lit room with long shelves running along one wall. Duo strapped his pack on and led the way to perch on the back shelf in the far corner, watching as Wufei followed, strapping on his own vest and looking grouchy.

“This is the briefing room,” he explained as Wufei sat down. “They’ll come in here and give a run down in a second, but the basics are this - two hands on the gun at all times or it won’t work, you get 10 points for hitting the sensors on the gun, 25 for hitting the shoulders, 50 for the back and 100 for the chest. There are three bases, you can destroy each of them once a game, including your own base, and they’re worth 1000.”

“Maxwell, what are we doing?” Wufei demanded. Duo leaned back against the wall and stretched his legs out in front of him. Wufei realised that Duo was in all black again, and the UV lights just seemed to be sucked into his outfit. He glanced down at himself, at least the black trousers were okay, and his green shirt wasn’t fluorescent but it did feel a bit more of a liability if the arena was going to be like this room. At least the vest mostly covered it.

“Those older kids out there? They’re ‘professional’ laserquesters.” Duo rolled his eyes. “By which I mean, they spend their lives in here trying to rack up a high score, and they don’t really take into account the fact that the other teams are made up of little kids who are just excited to be here. The place holds League days pretty regularly, but some of ‘em like to come in and try to boost their ranking against easier targets.” He grinned at Wufei, and there was something wolfish about it. “I like to drop by and… even the odds a little.”

“How noble,” Wufei deadpanned, although he thought back to the looks they’d received from the older cluster as they arrived, and realised that he wouldn’t be above finding satisfaction from wiping the floor with them.

The door opened and the groups came barrelling in, the children shouting and laughing, scrambling for seats on the benches, followed by Carl who proceeded to give the safety briefing, and then sent them through to the pack room. The lights on Wufei’s vest came on, glowing red to match the cluster of children from the birthday party, whilst Duo’s pack was a cheerful yellow, and the scouts were glancing up at him shyly, not quite sure where they’d suddenly acquired a new team member. The ‘professionals’ were in blue, sizing up their competition and looking fairly confident.

They were pointed towards another doorway and a countdown started before they were sent into the ‘arena’.

It was much the same as the other rooms – dark, UV lit, glowing paint – but wooden structures had been built up to provide a multi-levelled ‘maze’, and the children scattered into it with noisy voices and thumping feet. Certainly, knowing where his opponents were wasn’t going to be hard.

As he moved around a corner, all the lights on his vest went out, and the screen on his gun lit up, informing him he’d just been shot in the back by ‘DEATH’, and counting down until his pack restarted and he could rejoin the game. Turning, he saw Duo grinning toothily at him before disappearing into the maze, his braid flicking out behind him. Wufei gripped his rifle and smirked to himself. Right then, if that was how he wanted to play it.
Anyone who had spent any time on a battlefield was aware that conflict led to chaos, but there was usually some strategy underneath all that, even if it was driven by the simple, base instinct to stay alive.

Children in laserquest did not have that survival instinct, so the arena was anarchy in its purest sense, and Wufei had to roll with it.

His first task had been to establish the layout of the room, and he had quickly found and eliminated the bases, although that had not been entirely accomplished without occasionally whirling around a corner to startle a small child, who then followed him around giggling and trying to shoot him. The older children were a bit more savvy, and the Dads were getting quite competitive about it, clearly reliving James Bond fantasies.

He directed his team members to the bases when he saw them, and spent most of the game taking out the ‘professional’ team with no little relish as they muttered in frustration and dived off to find cover until they could restart. His main goal though was stalking Duo around the arena, trying to snipe at him where possible. Duo seemed to have a similar goal, and the competition lit a surprising fire in him.

It was a strange situation – there was no danger, no risk, but the drive to compete, to beat Duo and not get hit himself, brought his adrenaline levels up, but with the unfamiliar addition of endorphins. There was satisfaction in getting shots off and swinging away before his target could work out where he’d been, knowing that they saw on their rifle screen exactly who had tagged them, again. But in getting shot there was no recrimination, and if anything it became funny when Duo managed to wing him, and pushed him to try harder. He also couldn’t help noting with amusement that the only other person who managed to tag him with any comparative regularity was BATMAN.

The half-hour game wasn’t really long enough to push his endurance, but at the end of it he found himself starting to sweat and his heart rate was slightly raised, although whether that was from the warmth of the room, adrenaline or laughter he wasn’t really sure.

When the siren went to signal the end of the round, he found himself chuckling and straightening out of the stand-off he’d found himself in with one of the scouts. She smiled perkily at him and skipped past to head out into the foyer.

Turning to follow, he saw Duo watching him with the strangest expression on his face. He realised what a picture he made: flushed, hair starting to come out of its ponytail, sweat making a sheen on his skin and laughing at being out-gunned by a child. Flushing more, he wiped at his forehead and tried to tuck his hair back into place. Duo grinned, seeming to snap out of whatever he’d been thinking, and swung his arm over Wufei’s shoulders as they moved out to join the others.

“Death and Justice?” Wufei asked dryly as they walked.

“Well, I thought about Death and Taxes, but wasn’t sure accounting was your bag,” Duo drawled. “I just knew you wouldn’t be pleased at being ‘Superman’ or something like that.”

A large screen declared the scores – the team of older teens had come bottom overall, and were fairly sullen about it. The scouts and birthday party seemed delighted at their combined success though, with Duo’s team just beating Wufei. Duo celebrated with a round of noisy high-fives.
“Who was Batman?” Wufei asked, realising that Duo’s team had been full of superheroes, whilst his seemed to be video game characters.

He glanced across and saw one of the middle-aged women with the scout troupe grinning at him, looking pleased with herself, and he let out a surprised laugh.

“Round 2?” Duo asked him, as people started to file back towards the arena. He looked hopeful, and Wufei grinned.

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They sat on a bench enjoying the cool late evening air and letting it dry the sweat on their skin. Duo had bought burritos for them from a kiosk round the corner from the laserquest, and Wufei was pleased to discover more vegetables in the wrap than he had anticipated.

The bench was on a footbridge in the middle of the gathering of warehouses. From up there they could watch the world go by in relative peace. The area was still surprisingly busy - small shops and cafes were open in the abandoned structures, and where the buildings had been too destroyed to be kept whole, rubble had been cleared and a park of sorts had been created - skate ramps set up on one side which were a hive of activity, a couple of basketball hoops, and a set of soccer posts sunk into the concrete.

In the husk of the building, tables and chairs from a clear variety of origins had been bolted to the floor and fairy lights strung up, with potted plants arranged haphazardly between them. A handful of food trucks were parked up in there, shouting out orders and laughing with the people drifting between the tables and the courts, with balls and drinks and food. Clearly they were all familiar with each other, all regularly frequented the area.

Or maybe people from L2 were just that bit more open than people from other colonies. He had heard before that people with the least were often the most willing to share.

“So, what did we learn today?”

“That you have no honour in laserquest?”

Wufei’s team had won the second round, but Duo's had then pipped the third after two of the kids from the birthday party had careened around a corner in opposite directions and collided with each other with enough force to wipe each other out. Whilst Wufei had been helping check for concussions and mop up little Charlie’s nosebleed, Duo had gleefully taken the opportunity to shoot him every time his pack reactivated.

“Hey man, all’s fair in love and war,” Duo said, spreading his arms wide and grinning at him.

Wufei snorted and refrained from commenting, taking a bite from his burrito instead. Duo fell quiet again, but one of his arms had made it as far as the back of the bench and he left it draped there, warm against Wufei. The heat seemed to spread from where it was touching him, to his chest and stomach, and suddenly his mouthful was a little difficult to swallow.

He distracted himself by studying a couple of the gardens he could see on the roofs of the buildings across from him. They appeared to be large, communal affairs, with people drifting in and out, picnicking and dozing between the tubs of greenery.
“But seriously though,” Duo said, watching the people strolling past calmly. “This was a chance for you to have fun and not worry about looking stupid. Just do something for shits and giggles, for once. You’re a pretty damn serious guy, y’know.” He shot Wufei a sidelong look. “And if you spend all your time worrying about looking silly if you fail, you’ll never make a first step. What's so bad about failing sometimes anyway?”

Wufei bit back his instinctive first comment - death - and considered things. He couldn’t quite let go of the fact that when he failed he tended to do so quite spectacularly. Mariemaia and Treize were still rather raw in his memories. Maybe redheads were his problem. Or maybe just Khushrenadas - perhaps he should check to make sure there weren’t any more distant relatives lurking around the globe.

Or maybe, a little voice said, maybe the giant crippling fear of failure he was raised with was what led him to imploding so thoroughly every time, what made him keep pushing so hard and reaching so far for things which just weren’t right.

“Fei?” Duo’s voice was quiet, a little unsure. Wufei straightened and sniffed haughtily, saving his reverie for later.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Maxwell,” he said, just a hint of teasing in his tone. “I didn’t fail at laserquest, you took advantage of a man down. I’d beat you any other time. And in any other court!”

Duo’s grin was equal parts delighted and feral, and his eyes glittered at the challenge.

“Ohoho them’s fightin’ words!” he crowed. “Alright big shot, you name your weapon.”

Wufei’s face split into an answering grin, just as feral and just as dangerous.

After all, he loved a challenge.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to maevemauvaise for beta-ing - she is a superstar.

- I understand it's called Laser Tag in the USA? It's Laserquest here, but I think that's largely because that was the name of the biggest chain when I was a kid, which I don't think exists anymore anyway. But also thinking of laser tag from How I Met Your Mother, it looked like the guns were a lot smaller? The Laserquests over here you are basically given a laser assault rifle and sent to kill. It's great fun. The chests are surprisingly hard to hit because your arms and gun usually cover most of it. And there is always someone who you develop a rivalry with despite not knowing who they are because they are obviously trailing the same route you are but in the opposite direction.
Freerunning.

Of course, Duo hadn’t realised that was what it was called, when he’d been flinging himself off buildings and propelling himself up walls through sheer force of momentum. It was only when one of Howard’s crew had asked him how long he’d been doing Parkour for that he had looked it up and discovered an entire military discipline around what he had previously only termed ‘Not Getting Caught’.

He’d discovered Freerunning was the more ‘positive-thinking’ approach to Parkour and decided that was more his style, although it didn’t stop him screaming “PARKOUR!” when he leapt off a ledge and plunged towards almost certain death. If anything, the naming of it and the discovery of it as a ‘technique’ (or loose ‘martial art’, as Duo had kept insisting, pointing at the definition on the website he’d found) had made Duo even more reckless with approach to terrain, pushing himself as far as he could.

Wufei remembered it vividly, having come close to a few heart attacks before he’d got used to Duo diving headlong off rooftops, only to catch himself on some wire, post or windowsill below and swing himself onwards with a yelp of delight and a mad cackle.

Heero had never beaten Duo in a Freerunning race – he was an excellent athlete, but perhaps a little too inclined to thinking in straight lines and the most direct route, rather than considering alternative paths to increase speed and momentum. After all, why bother leaping across rooftops when you can just steal a jeep and drive straight through the building? Quatre, whilst by no means unfit, didn’t have the sheer physical strength required for it, nor the desire to chase an adrenaline rush.

Once he’d turned his acrobat’s mind to the situation, Trowa had beaten Duo with little difficulty, and Duo had spent the rest of the day muttering about ‘showboating’.

Duo had never challenged Wufei to a race, and Wufei had never offered, keeping his distance instead.

That was about to change.

The email with the location had arrived the next day, and Wufei arrived after work, in his workout clothes, just after the lights had started to dim. They were at the edge of a half-completed retail development. Empty shops, half-completed buildings and artistic constructions of various comprehension lay ahead. Pausing just a short distance away, Wufei spotted his opponent waiting for him. Duo was perched on the edge of a large, decorative stone flowerbed, leaning back on his hands and swinging one leg idly as he looked over his shoulder at the newly-planted flowers. Contemplating goodness knew what.

Wufei hadn’t spent too long dwelling on how he felt having Duo back as a part of his life, and what it meant for the strange gnawing preoccupation that had been developing in the years they’d been
apart. If he had hoped that simply meeting Duo again and rekindling their friendship would ease the feeling and allow him to resume life as a sane, normal human being, he had apparently been sorely mistaken. This… feeling, whatever it was, seemed greedy. The more time he spent with Duo, the more it seemed to want to spend with him. The more he learned about him, the more it wanted to know. It was like some kind of obsessive parasite, controlling his actions and thoughts, pushing him further towards Duo almost against his will.

He hadn’t spent so little time alone since being locked in a cell on the Lunar base. And he couldn’t help but note that Duo was rather involved in that stint as well.

Scuffing his foot against the ground to announce his presence, he moved closer and was greeted by a 100-kilowatt smile from Duo.

“You made it!” he said, hopping off his perch and stretching. “I was beginning to think you were going to chicken out.”

“You mean you hoped I was going to chicken out,” Wufei goaded. “I remember you being something of a sore loser.”

“Oh, I see you’re wearing your big boy pants today,” Duo shot back with a quirked eyebrow. “Okay then, my little fortune cookie, since you know the future and all let’s make this a bit more interesting.”

Wufei didn’t get a chance to respond to his new nickname with more than a dirty look, before Duo took his shoulders and turned him to face along the row of buildings and scaffolding.

“Heading straight that way about two miles is the bar we went to the other night. That’s the finish line – last one there buys the drinks.”

“I’ll get the order ready,” Wufei assured him, and then ducked out of Duo’s grasp and took off running.

He heard Duo shouting “Oi!” behind him, but the other man couldn’t keep the laugh out of his voice, and he knew his head start was only minimal.

Lengthening his strides, he leapt onto another of those raised beds, and used that to boost him onto the scaffolding of one of the buildings nearby. His momentum swung him through the large empty window and he rolled on the dusty floor, coming up running and tore through towards the next unit. As he reached the far side, tearing through the plasting sheeting that had been taped up, he heard Duo’s battlecry – “PARKOUR!” - somewhere above his head, and the saw the other man come flying off the roof ledge above him to land on the roof of the next roof with a cloud of dust.

The American paused to glance back down at Wufei. His grin was predatory, and his eyes were flashing with challenge. A jolt shook right through Wufei as their gazes met, hitting something primal and deep, and then Duo cackled and took off again.

Wufei backtracked, taking a run up to the balcony and using the handrail as a Launchpad to propel himself onto the balcony the next floor up on the building over. Pulling himself up, he scrambled to his feet and set off at a sprint. The roof – he needed to get up to the roof.

He made up time with his sprint, and enough to see Duo catch the ledge of the next shop with his fingertips and have to pull himself up. Taking advantage, Wufei hopped across onto the top of a street light and from there was able to angle his jump to catch the drain pipe on the side of the building and scramble up it, his feet hitting the rooftop a split second before Duo’s. In a moment of
impulse, Wufei kept his crouch, shifting his weight to his hands momentarily to sweep Duo’s feet out from under him. The other man tumbled and Wufei shot off past him, adrenaline building quickly and a wicked grin on his face.

This driving sense of competition, of contest, was thrilling through his body, his blood pumping and every muscle in him straining and pushing for better, faster, harder. The thrill of the chase, of the predator, which he got from tracking criminals was there, but multiplied by the presence of a challenge from a real equal, and purified by the lack of disdain, loathing for his opponent. The darker emotions were gone, and all was left was the will to achieve, to win, to be stronger and prove that strength against a worthy adversary.

And he’d upped the stakes by cheating a bit. Duo wouldn’t let that go unchallenged. He was looking forward to it.

He vaulted over an air vent, sliding across the metal surface and landing just short of the roof edge. The next building was not close enough for a direct jump, and he tried to calculate a route that wouldn’t take him right back to the ground again. He had just angled himself to try and use the streetlight to swing himself across the gap, but as he lifted his foot to push off into the jump, a strong hand grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him backwards and off balance.

Rolling back into a crouch, he brought his head up in time to see Duo taking the same course he had plotted. The American paused for just long enough on the far roof to flip Wufei a cheerful one-fingered salute before taking off, laughing wildly.

Losing the momentum to get him across to the next roof made him stop, reconsider. Launching from the roof he grabbed the streetlight and swung himself down onto the street instead, and ran alongside the buildings. Taking a corner sharply, he was able to push himself off the side of a building and boost himself onto a higher-level walkway designed to give access to top level units. From there it was easy to skirt the edge of the buildings until they drew towards the end of the building site and the finish line came into sight, on the other side of a newly-planted grassy space, with a small brightly painted swing park.

It was fairly simple for Wufei to clear the edge of the balcony and drop down to ground level to get into a sprint. Duo found himself behind, having to split his descent from the rooftops to the balcony.

Wufei kicked into overdrive, knowing that Duo’s slightly longer stride would close the gap between them across the straight flat finish. He could hear Duo’s footsteps growing closer, and tried to adjust his path, weaving to block him and prevent him overtaking.

He was grabbed again, but twisted free with a triumphant yell - he felt his shirt rip but didn’t care, carried on moving and dodging still. The tearing of his shirt had caused Duo to stumble from the recoil, and lose ground, but he caught up again and Wufei could hear his breathing, heavy and even, right behind him.

Eventually, Duo got fed up with Wufei’s attempts to bar his way, and suddenly there was a firm arm around his chest, wrenching him around and trying to push him behind. Wufei grabbed the arm and rolled with the move, feet planting as he was whirled in a circle, taking Duo with him.

Legs tangled, arms grabbed and momentum carried them both into a heap of elbows, knees and shoulders onto the floor, skidding a short way on the newly-laid turf and coming to a stop less than a foot from the road, and across it the bar.

They lay there tangled, dazed for a moment, breathing heavily and staring at the colony arching above them, cataloguing bruises and friction burns. And then one of them started laughing - neither
of them quite sure which - but soon both of them were laughing and unable to stop, still short of breath from the race and hearts pounding. They laughed even though it hurt to laugh because they needed to breath but then couldn’t, and it wasn’t until they started to untangle themselves and stand that they were able to settle.

Until they got a good look at each other and started snickering again.

Duo was covered in dust and grass stains, hair half hanging out of his braid and bangs sticking up every way. A large smear of mud across his cheek. Wufei’s shirt was ripped from the collar, hanging off his sleeves and leaving him ragged. He was just as dusty, just as grass-stained, just as bedraggled.

Duo’s eyes were shining and Wufei was smiling at him.

“Good race, man,” Duo said, straightening. He held out his hand. “A respectable tie.”

Wufei straightened too, looking down at the offered handshake. He glanced sideways at the bar, holding his hand out to meet Duo’s. Then he grinned and bolted, Duo catching on a second too slowly to reach him as he placed his palm flat on the side of the building.

He watched Duo jog over with a quirked eyebrow and a smug smirk. Duo shook his head in disbelief, but he was smiling, almost dreamily.

“That was cold,” Duo told him. “Stone cold.”

“I’ll never take a draw when I can win, Maxwell,” Wufei sniffed, moving to meet him. “But also, I didn’t bring my wallet.”

Duo let out a bark of laughter, delighted, and draped his arm around Wufei’s shoulders again, a move he seemed to enjoy, and one Wufei was realising he wasn’t averse to, even when it rested against soon-to-be bruises.

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Helen had taken one look at the pair of them and kicked them out, declaring they made the place look untidy. Duo had managed to barter a few bottles of water from her and they headed back to the park, sitting side by side on the swings whilst they drank.

It was like they were in a little bubble in the park. A palace of solitude within the frames of the swing set, quiet and serene.

“Hey,” Duo said, his voice quiet, as though he was scared to break the silence. “Can I tell you something that no-one else knows?”

Wufei glanced at him as he swung himself slightly, rocking his feet, arms wrapped around the chains. Duo wasn’t watching him, his hands on the chains and legs stretched out, holding himself back at an angle against the swing.

“If you like,” he replied, just as quiet.

“Y’know that piece I did, in the Preventers main HQ, where you are?” Wufei nodded, picturing the falcon, its wings spread and curved as if drawing them up to take flight. “That dove inside? That’s made from Gundanium.”
Duo swung himself forward, the chains squeaking against themselves slightly.

“I mixed bits from all our Gundams and made that,” he continued after a moment. “Just like we all put bits of ourselves into making this peace. And I thought maybe making that out of Gundanium… out of all of us… that would mean that the peace would be as indestructible as the suits.” He paused, glanced at Wufei. “That our friendship would be too. All of us. That no matter what happened, we’d all be together in that one place.”

Wufei caught his breath and met Duo’s gaze, unable to respond but trying to show he understood. They stared at each other for a long moment, before Duo broke away with a slight chuckle and started swinging again gently.

“I know it’s dumb, but I guess I’m kinda superstitious like that,” he said blithely.

“I hope it works,” Wufei told him finally, and swung himself, once, twice, experimental. He’d not played much as a child, been a rather grave infant, and the opportunity to swing hadn’t presented itself often as he’d grown.

“Me too.”

Backwards and forwards. He liked the way the wind blew in his face as he came to the front, liked the feeling of weightlessness at the top of each arch.

“Why didn’t you join the Preventers?” he asked Duo. Their swinging had fallen into tandem - up and down beside each other. The world blurring around them so all that was in focus was Duo, the only clear thing in an incomprehensible scene. “I know Une offered you a job.”

“I guess I figured I had done my bit for peace with a gun,” Duo responded, closing his eyes and savouring the pause before he swung back down again. “And I think I wanted to remind myself that the world wasn’t just full of awful people who want to do terrible things. Just for a little while, remember that decent people are out there, living normal lives. And give it a go myself.”

Up and down.

“Why did you join?” Duo asked him.

“Duty,” Wufei told him after a few swings. The breeze seemed to clear his head, streamline his thoughts. The bubble of the park making things safe, and anything other than honesty seemed like it would be crass in this instant. “Guilt. Fear. Not of losing peace but… of not being able to find myself.”

The swings clinked and squeaked slightly.

“I was an Academic who was supposed to be a Warrior, and people were ashamed that I wasn’t strong enough. Then I became a Warrior and I was supposed to be at peace, and I shamed myself by choosing more war instead.”

Duo slowed his swinging, his feet scuffing noisily on the black rubber beneath them as he watched Wufei continue.

“I’m not ashamed of you,” Duo told him. “I think you’re pretty brave.”

Wufei scoffed, continued to swing, higher.

“I’m serious! It takes guts to throw yourself towards a cause you believe is right and damn the rest.”
Duo’s hand shot out, grabbed the chain on Wufei’s swing, pulling him to a wobbly stop, and waiting until Wufei looked at him, looked him in the eye.

“And it takes fucking balls of steel to admit you were wrong and make amends afterwards,” Duo finished. “Balls of steel.”

Wufei held his gaze as long as possible.

“Vivid imagery,” he said finally, ducking his head and flushing. Duo grinned toothily at him.

“I’m a master of my craft,” he said cheerily, and started swinging again.

The chains squeaked, and the world blurred. Except for Duo.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to maeveauvaise for continuing to be the best beta ever. And thank you to everyone who has left kudos and especially commented! It means so much to hear that you are enjoying this, and that it's reaching people, rather than just being beamed into the void. Every comment really makes me day and I treasure them so thank you!
“You do it.”

“It was your stupid idea, you do it!”

“But he likes you better.”

“He’s barely spoken to any of us, you can’t say he likes me better.”

It was quite obvious that the people having a pow-wow outside Wufei’s office didn’t realise that the vent above his door was open. He’d opened it to try and dissipate the new paint smell without having his door ajar, but the apparent side effect was that he could hear quite clearly everything which was being said in the corridor outside, even though it was being said in insistent whispers.

“He won’t want to come anyway.”

“He might; he doesn’t know anyone here! He’s only been up a week!”

“No chance, I’ve got a buddy in the L4 branch who worked with him for three months on a job. Said he was just always working, they weren’t sure he even went home.”

“That’s different! He’s not on an assignment now, he’s working administrative shifts, just like us.”

Oh good, Wufei thought. They were talking about him. That made things so much less awkward.

“I heard he was locked up in an institution because he was some kind of violent genius psychopath, like Hannibal Lecter, and Une found him and hired him. That’s why he doesn’t go out, because he has to be shut back up at night.”

_That’s a new one_. Wufei rolled his eyes and signed the report in front of him, flipping the file closed and dropping it in his ‘out’ tray. He reached for another.

“What are you, twelve? That’s the most stupid story I’ve ever heard.”

“You’ve gotta admit there’s something not right about him! You saw him take off after that guy on Monday - I’ve never seen anyone move so fast! He jumped down the steps without touching them!”

“He had to be quick to make up for your cock-up.”

“Oh my god, how did you guys get to be Preventers by being such babies?”

There was a firm knock on the door, and Wufei raised an eyebrow, wondering who had taken charge. He paused a moment, weighing up the situation, calling for them to come in.

Agent Merrick pushed the door open. A tall woman, with dark skin and a no-nonsense attitude, he’d
noticed her around the building and been impressed with her. He could see, clustered a short distance down the corridor from her, a group of other agents he vaguely recognised, including Lang and Williams from the kerfuffle on Monday.

“Yes?” he asked finally.

“We’re heading out for a couple of drinks to celebrate the end of the first week in the new place,” Merrick said cheerfully. “Want to join us?”

Friday already, Wufei realised, glancing at his computer. That had gone quickly.

At any other time, in any other place, Wufei would have thanked Merrick for her offer and turned her down. They hadn’t been wrong when they said all he did was work - that was usually the case. But… this week, here, he didn’t quite feel like spending an evening sat working on files that had already been approved in triplicate.

Last night, before they had gone their separate ways, Duo had mused about definitions, and self-defin-itions.

“It’s good if the way you think changes when you grow older,” Duo had surmised. “It shows that you’re learning from the life you’ve got. Otherwise you might as well be a robot.”

Besides, Wufei thought, this was probably the first time all of these agents had worked together. They’d been spread across the colony until this week, in temporary offices. It would be an important opportunity for team building, and it would be valuable for him to observe their interactions and attitudes to inform future partnerships.

Yes, that sounded like a convincing enough justification.

“Agent Chang?” Merrick asked, slightly unsure.

“Sorry,” Wufei apologised, and looked up. “Thank you, I would be happy to join you. I’ll finish up here and meet you downstairs.”

Merrick looked surprised, and then smiled at him brightly.

“That’s great!”

She turned to go, but Wufei stopped her before she could pull the door fully closed. Better to let them know now before they did the same stupid thing with Une.

“For future reference,” he said, and pointed to the vent. Merrick followed his gesture and there was confusion, then comprehension, then dawning horror. She shot a murderous glance over her shoulder at her colleagues, and disappeared from the room quickly, muttering hasty and embarrassed apologies.

It didn’t take him long to lock up his files and shut down his computer, but by the time he joined the other agents in the ground floor reception it seemed apparent that Merrick had given them a ticking-off about what they had said where he could hear, and they seemed embarrassed and slightly sheepish to see him. He quickly began to regret taking up the offer, if they were going to be squeamish around him all evening.

Merrick apparently wasn’t taking that either, and he wondered if it was her idea to invite him. She smiled brightly at him as he approached, waving.
“Williams apparently knows this great bar,” she told him as he fell into step beside her. “We’re heading over to try it out.”

“It’s not another one of his dives, is it?” groaned another agent – average height, sandy blonde hair. Shiels, Wufei identified, remembering the staff files he had read.

“I know it,” reassured Lang. “It’s alright. The food and drinks are good. Williams is only mad for it ‘cause he fancies the pants off the barmaid.”

“I do not!” Williams protested. “Besides, I’m buddies with the owner. He always gets the first round if he’s there.”

“He does that for all Preventers, you nit, getting in good with the law keeps trouble out of the bar.”

The remaining two agents with them were Sayid - a dark-eyed woman with a neat headscarf - and Pearson, a tall, wide-eyed man who was staring at Wufei in a very unnerving manner. Wufei was aware that all six of these agents were at least five years older than him, and significantly junior. But then, that was the case with just about everyone he worked with.

“Don’t mind Pearson,” Merrick said to him in an undertone, obviously having caught the puzzled glance Wufei chanced at him. “He’s harmless. He’s just… a bit of a fan.”

“A fan of what?” Wufei asked blankly, but Merrick just smiled at him.

The bar they arrived at, the bar that Williams had been lauding, was in fact the very bar that Wufei had visited with Duo twice already this week. Did this colony only have one half decent bar?

“I’ll get the drinks!” Williams volunteered. “I’ve got a rapport.”

“You mean ‘report’,” Lang muttered. “As in the one she filed because you were stalking her.”

Williams shot Lang a dirty look as they approached the bar, but before he could grab Helen’s attention, she spotted Wufei and called out to him.

“Third time this week, Chang!” she said cheerfully. “I’m a bit sad you’re fully dressed today. I liked you all nekkid and dirty.”

It was a testament to Wufei’s self control that he didn’t splutter at the comment, although his cheeks did pink slightly. Williams gaped at him, torn between outrage and respect, and Lang choked on a laugh.

“You didn’t seem too impressed,” Wufei observed calmly. “You kicked me out.”

“I didn’t say I liked you nekkid and dirty in the bar…” Helen leered at him and then set a pint in front of him, and moved off to take Pearson and Merrick’s orders. Wufei resigned himself to never choosing his own drink here and hesitantly tasted today’s offering. It was warming, and smooth, with a hint of honey, and he was almost annoyed that he liked it. That was two to Helen.

“Damn Chang,” Merrick laughed. “I think you broke Williams’ heart.”

Williams to his credit was pretending that nothing had happened and ordering his own beer, as Pearson passed Merrick a glass of wine and came to stand with them.

“She’d break him in half anyway,” Shiels said dismissively. “Like a twig.”

“That’s why he likes her!” Sayid chirped, appearing at Wufei’s elbow with a smile and a brightly
coloured cocktail. “He’s terrified and it’s sexy.”

“You’re not drinking are you?” Lang asked, looking shocked.

“Uh, I’m in a bar, and it’s Friday,” Sayid said. “Yes I’m drinking.”

“But… I thought it wasn’t allowed in Islam?”

“And are you planning on telling your Rabbi about the double bacon cheeseburger you had for lunch?” she asked blithely, taking the little umbrella out of her drink and sticking it in her scarf. Lang wisely decided not to answer.

It was busier than it had been the last couple of visits, although that wasn’t too surprising for a Friday night, but at this point it looked mainly like people having after-work drinks. There was music playing this evening too, although it wasn’t too loud to hear the people he was with. Although that was apparently not the boon he initially thought it was.

“Did you really graduate University at seventeen?” Pearson finally blurted, staring intently at Wufei, and the others groaned.

“Goddammit Pearson, have some self control,” Merrick snapped. “Act like a normal person for once in your life.”

“Is he off again?” Williams slid back into the group with a raised eyebrow and a dark pint.

“It’s not a rude question!”

“Yes, he’s off again. If he’s going to be like this all evening we’re going to need more alcohol. Williams where’s your BFF to buy the next round?”

“Over there.” Williams gestured with his pint to a booth in the corner. “Hells said he’s just finishing off a meeting.”

The group turned, craning to try and see who Williams was talking about. At the booth, four men stood, shaking hands, and saying their goodbyes.

“No way he’s the owner!” Sayid said. “He’s way too young!”

“He’s way too hot!” Merrick agreed.

It didn’t take a Wufei much of a stretch to work out who they were talking about. Three of the men left, and Duo remained, holding a folder. He was in tight black jeans and a fitted black shirt, with the collar open and the sleeves rolled up - Wufei wondered why he even bought long sleeved shirts if he always rolled the sleeves up anyway - but even in the dark colours in a dark bar he seemed to draw gazes to him like a magnet.

Duo began to move towards the bar, then paused. Williams waved at him, but his gaze was locked on Wufei. The American was surprised to see him, that was clear, but then a smile spread across his face that was something very different altogether - lazy and pleased and a little predatory perhaps - and he didn’t break eye contact with Wufei the entire walk across the room. Suddenly, Wufei was very glad he had his beer because his mouth had gone very dry from the approach of that expression.

“Well now, Officer,” Duo drawled as he got close enough. “Five days in a row? I think this is starting to constitute police harassment.”
“Oh hey,” Shiels said, suddenly realising something. “You’re that guy from Monday!”

Duo finally blinked, and looked around at the other people with Wufei, and his grin shifted into something more normal.

“Yeah, you took my statement didn’t you? What is this, office party? Or a raid?”

“Celebrating one week in the new building!” Sayid told him with a laugh. “You should join us!”

“I didn’t know you owned this place,” Wufei said, as Duo leaned over to hand the file to Helen with a wink.

“Silent partner,” Duo quipped.

“Except you suck at the ‘silent’ part,” Hells drawled, taking the paperwork.

“Wait, do you guys know each other?” Merrick asked, glancing between Duo and Wufei with a frown. Duo bumped his shoulder against Wufei’s with a chuckle.

“Me an’ Wu go waaaay back,” he told her.

“Looks like someone’s actually friends with the owner,” Lang muttered to Williams with a grin, and Williams ignored him, trying not to look like all his social capital had just been stolen by his boss.

“Hey, if you know Chang from way back, you can tell us if all the rumours are true!” Pearson said.

“Ohmygod shut up !” Shiels growled, stepping on his foot.

“Rumours?” Duo’s face lit up and he shot a glance at Wufei who suppressed a groan. “What rumours?”

“Actually,” Sayid said thoughtfully, “that’s not a bad idea.”

“Don’t encourage him!”

“Agent Chang is a Preventers legend ,” Pearson said, a bit breathlessly, batting away Merrick’s attempts to shush him. His eyes were shining with the fire of a zealot and Wufei had to resist the urge to move back a few steps. “There are so many stories about him!”

“No shit?” Duo’s grin couldn’t possibly get wider without removing the top of his head, but he was trying. Oh he was trying.

“The whole point of this was to get to know everyone,” Wufei offered, attempting to divert the focus of the conversation. “Maybe we could - ”

“I don’t care about getting to know them !”

“Wow.”

“Fuck you very much, Pearson.”

“I’ve got the rest of my working life to get to know these guys,” Pearson amended, although the look Merrick shot him promised that life would be short if he didn’t shut up Right Now. “You’re only here a month, Agent Chang, and it’s such an amazing opportunity that I don’t want to miss it!”

Duo was enjoying this. He was really really enjoying this. Wufei could tell, even though he was
pointedly not looking at him, because he could feel Duo’s wicked and delighted grin aimed full force in his direction. This, this was what happened when you were nice to people and attempted to socialise, he thought sourly. If he’d remained his grouchy, isolated self this never would have happened. Other agents in Brussels didn’t think they could just approach him and ask him nonsense questions. Other agents in Brussels actively tried to avoid him unless they absolutely had to interact with him.

“I think I can help you guys out,” Duo purred, and suddenly all gazes had snapped to him - Wufei was trying to burn a hole through Duo’s skull with his glare, but the others were mixed delight and surprise that they might get answers to questions which most of them would never dare ask.

They were shooed over to a booth and Duo followed a few moments later with a bottle of a clear liquid and eight shot glasses, sliding into the booth and squashing up next to Wufei with a grin. He set a glass in front of everyone and filled it.

“Sambuca?” Lang asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Wufei likes it,” Duo said.

“I’ve never had it,” Wufei snapped, more than a little annoyed about this whole situation, and at himself for being so aware of exactly where Duo was pressed up beside him.

“Aniseed,” Duo told him cheerfully. “I know you like liquorice.”

Wufei stared at him, trying to remember when on earth Duo would have found out he liked liquorice, and whilst he combed the full annals of his memory, Duo turned to the rest of the group and began to explain his devious plan.

“I thought we could have ourselves a little game,” he declared. “You guys take it in turns to give us a rumour. If it’s not true, you all drink. If it is true, Fei and I’ll drink. I’ll be his ‘honesty box’, although full disclosure I don’t know everything so hopefully he’ll enter into the spirit of things.”

Wufei was too busy coming to the conclusion that actually maybe Duo somehow did know everything about him to disagree to the rules and before he could catch up the first round had started.

“Did you graduate University at seventeen?” Pearson asked again, and Wufei stared at him blankly before Duo elbowed him and took a shot. Sighing heavily, Wufei did his own shot and Duo topped them both up.

“Wow really?”

“Une set up the examinations for me,” Wufei said, trying to explain as the shot burned through his chest and up to his head. “I didn’t attend classes or anything, it was just easier to justify recruiting me if I had a qualification. It was only maths and basic engineering…”

He trailed off when he realised they were all staring at him and Duo chuckled warmly.

“That hole you’re in is pretty deep,” he murmured, as Wufei flushed. “I’d start digging up.”

This was why he didn’t socialise, he thought. This was why he didn’t talk much and was standoffish. Because he had a very severe case of foot-in-mouth syndrome and it was exacerbated by company.

“I heard you made Representative Dillon cry,” Sayid piped up, deciding to move the conversation along for the sake of everyone involved.
Duo glanced at him sideways, and Wufei realised that Maxwell was obviously unaware of this story, and if he didn’t want to confess to it, he could get away with it. But… somewhere deep inside he was slightly proud of it, and remembered the incident with a certain degree of satisfaction. He took the shot, and set the glass back on the table with a firm ‘click’.

“The man is a worm,” he declared, as if that explained everything.

Taking that as a sign that Wufei was actually not too upset with this suggested game, the floodgates suddenly opened and the agents with him started throwing the most bizarre hearsay at him, to Wufei’s discomfort and Duo’s utter delight.

“I heard you fell from a 3rd floor window and only got a broken arm!”

“I didn’t fall, I jumped. There was a charge set to take out the whole floor, and I didn’t have time to get to the stairs. And I maintain that I wouldn’t have had any injuries if Agent Yuy hadn’t decided to try and cushion my landing. Concrete is softer than that man’s head.”

“Still counts – drink!”

“Did you really beat Agent Yuy in an arm wrestling contest?”

“He can bend metal with his bare hands, what do you think?”

“Okay, what about drunk karaoke with Une, please let that be real.”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response.”

There was a brief pause in the proceedings when someone pointed out that perhaps food would be a good idea. People threw money into the middle of the table and Merrick scooped it up, heading to the bar to order three large pizzas and returned with two pitchers of water and glasses as well, which Wufei thought prudent. He was beginning to like Merrick.

Taking the moment to catch his breath and get his slightly fuzzy thoughts back into some sort of order, he caught Duo peering at him with a grin.

“You may well look smug,” he grumbled. “This is all your fault.”

“Hey, I’m not the one whose reputation precedes him!” Duo protested. “Your fanclub existed already!”

“And that itself is alarming and perplexing.” Wufei glanced at Pearson who was looking like he was ready to start again.

“It is a bit understandable,” Sheils said, pouring himself a glass of water. “You’re one of the most senior Preventers in the whole organisation, and you were hired before you were even able to vote.”

“The only person who consistently beats you in Physical Assessments is Agent Yuy.” Sayid joined in, offering her support. “And he’s on permanent secondment to the Foreign Minister’s security detail, so you outrank even him.”

“And no-one knows anything about you!” Pearson added, a bit over excited again, flushed from the alcohol. “You just appeared one day, a fully-formed Preventers agent, and began taking on cases single-handed that would normally have taken whole teams to flush out!”

Wufei quirked an eyebrow at him.
“I can assure you that there was a history prior to that,” he said. “All the way back to when Mummy Chang and Daddy Chang decided they wanted to make a Baby Chang.”

Duo choked noisily on his water, apparently having decided that inhaling it was a better idea than drinking, and Wufei thumped on his back with perhaps more force than was strictly necessary as he coughed into a napkin.

“Someone told me that you punched a shark once,” Lang said, with a grin. “Right in the face.”

“That is how you get rid of sharks,” Wufei told him, wondering why that had even been spread around. “It’s fairly common knowledge. They have sensitive noses. Like cows.”

“Why were you even-“ Duo began, then shook his head, pushing the shot glass towards Wufei. “You know what, I don’t wanna know the answer, it won’t be anywhere near as fun as what I’m imagining.”

Duo raised his own shot to clink it against Wufei’s and knocked it back with a cheer of ‘Kanpai!’

“I heard that you jumped from a helicopter onto a moving train and took out twenty guys single-handed!”

“There was a little more to it than that…” Wufei protested lamely. The assignment had all gone more than a little bit to hell, and it was the only thing he’d been able to do. Followed by a mountain of Health and Safety forms afterwards. Duo didn’t care though, and topped up his glass for him to empty.

“There’s a rumour that you turned up at a bust, and once the dealers saw it was you they just put their guns down and surrendered on the spot,” Merrick said, with a wicked grin. Wufei felt a flash of betrayal at the assault from a party he had previously considered an ally in common sense.

“They thought I was dead,” Wufei said. “They didn’t expect someone they’d recently set on fire to turn up an hour later with a rocket launcher.” It had been a very long day. After he had kicked his way out of his intended fiery grave, he had smashed into one of the target’s trucks to get back his sword and picked up a new toy whilst he was there.

The rocket had blown the door off the warehouse and Wufei had stood in the billowing smoke, with the melting remains of the doors around him, black with soot and more than slightly singed himself. His knuckles were bloody, he had his sword in one hand, the bazooka in the other, and his face spoke of painful, grisly murder, white hot fury in his eyes.

The gun runners had carefully considered their chances and decided the odds were better if they let the system take them.

Wufei had been sent home shortly after the arrests were finished and told not to come back until he wouldn’t spook the other agents, because the wide berth they’d been giving him was making processing the paperwork somewhat difficult. Apparently he had rather given the impression he would rip out someone’s spine through their mouth with his bare hands if they so much as breathed at him funny.

And his hair had smelled like smoke for a week.

The pizza arrived and they dived on it, grateful for something to soak up the drinks they’d already had.

“Okay,” said Sayid, catching a bit of mozzarella as it fell off her slice. “One of the stories said you
had a giant tattoo of a samurai riding a dragon on your back.”

“Samurai are Japanese,” Wufei pointed out.

“That’s a no,” Duo translated, and the rest of the team juggled shots with pizza slices.

“No no no,” Sheils said, flapping his hands excitedly. “I’ve got the best one - All Zhao Chan’s action moves are actually based on your life!”

The other agents cheered, laughing. Even Wufei was starting to enjoy himself. The alcohol was warming him, and making things a little softer around the edges. His pilot’s training had built up a resistance to drugs, he was certain Duo’s had too, which had the side effect of needing a bit more alcohol than most to do more than make him tipsy. Apparently, the number of shots he’d had so far was doing the trick.

“That is nonsense,” he said. “The man’s a hack.”

“It is pretty uncanny though,” Duo agreed, as the team had another shot.

“It’s all quick-cuts to hide sloppy technique,” Wufei sniffed. “Any half decent choreography wouldn’t need that sort of low-budget gimmick.”

“Next one!” Williams cried, beginning a drumroll on the table top, the others joining in.

“Une recruited you from an institute for criminally violent geniuses!” Lang threw out.

“Booo!”

“We know that’s not true!”

“Wasted drink!”

At some point Duo had managed to get a gesture to the bar, and another bottle of sambuca materialised. Wufei could see this evening getting rather messy.

Pearson appeared to be considering the next question carefully, and the others were watching him, aware that as the resident ‘expert’ on Wufei’s life, whatever he came out with would certainly be juicy.

“During the war,” Pearson said slowly, “you worked as an assassin, and Une met you when you were sent to kill her.”

Wufei opened his mouth to deny it, then paused, glancing at Duo with a puzzled frown. How to proceed - it wasn’t quite the story, but then… it was pretty damn close. Duo shrugged minutely, clearly not sure either. These things weren’t confidential, but they weren’t broadcast knowledge either. The Preventers he worked with at the Brussels HQ knew, and he was confident they had told colleagues at other branches. It would probably not take very long for the story to reach L2 in the end, although how garbled it would be by the time it arrived was another matter...

The others noticed their hesitation and took it as assent.

“No way!”

“You were like… fifteen during the way!”

“No way!”
“No- no!” Wufei said hastily, realising what had happened. Duo laughed.

“Aw man guys you’re close but no coconut.”

That seemed to be an invitation to guess, and the original game was forgotten as increasingly outlandish suggestions were shouted at them as Duo guided them with ‘warmer’ and ‘colder’.

After a slew of mind-bogglingly ridiculous accusations - ranging from ‘you lied about your age and joined Oz as Une’s personal bodyguard’, to ‘you rescued Une from a sniper attack with a plastic spoon and a rubber glove, and now she owes you her life’, Sayid finally threw out a half-hearted ‘gundam pilot’, realising as she said it that it was lame, in that it was clearly both wrong and not funny.

So when Duo and Wufei both did their shots, it caused a stunned silence as everyone tried to remember what they were reacting to, and then another stunned silence as they processed that.

“Woah,” said Lang, frowning around his alcohol haze. “Shit, if I’d know that I’d have been… at least twice as careful about not letting that guy get out on Monday.”

That was met with jeers and the conversation devolved rapidly again, as they tried to guess which Gundam had been Wufei’s - shouting him down if he tried to just outright tell them, because where was the fun in that - and then turned into an in-depth discussion as to which Gundam was the best anyway, and things got very noisy from there.

*

The lights in the bar had come up a long time ago, and the rest of their group had excused themselves, supporting each other on their way out of the bar, noisily singing old war songs that implied the size of your mobile suit’s weapon was compensating for something.

Duo and Wufei had relocated, sitting with backs against the wall and legs stretched out across the tabletop they were perched on, as Hells cashed up and the other staff cleaned out the remnants of the night.

He hadn’t planned on staying out so long, but now, sat in the muted silence of the bar, watching the cleaning in almost slow motion, he couldn’t quite regret it. And the large glass of water he was nursing would help make sure he wouldn’t regret it tomorrow.

Feeling sleepily satisfied, and relaxed, he glanced towards Duo.

“Thank you for that,” he said. Duo rolled his head to look at him, and smiled, equally sleepy.

“For what?”

“I’m not… good with people. I came out to try something different, and I think… I would have been out of my depth without you.” Wufei paused. “Also for all the free alcohol.”

Duo huffed out a laugh, a heavy breath through his nose, eyes sliding closed.
“They seem like nice guys.”

“There were some concerns it would take the team a while to mesh,” Wufei mused. “Because they’d spent so long working in different offices whilst the HQ was built.” He tipped his head backwards to rest it against the wall and squinted up at the ceiling. “I guess not all recruits are as socially inept as myself.”

Duo didn’t answer, just reached out and patted him on the knee companionably. It took Wufei a minute to notice that he didn’t remove his hand afterwards, and suddenly his knee was the most sensitive part of his body.

“What was your meeting earlier about?” he asked, and Duo opened his eyes, frowning as he tried to remember.

“Oh. That. We bought the unit next door a few months back,” he said, waving his hand vaguely at the far wall of the bar. “Been converting it into an events venue so we can run gigs and stuff. The first one’s next weekend, the big launch show, I was just tying up bits with the band we’ve got coming.”

“Duo Maxwell, entrepreneur extraordinaire,” Wufei drawled. “You really do have fingers everywhere. Dare I ask about your investment portfolio?”

Duo flushed a little and looked a bit embarrassed.

“Aw man it’s not like that,” he muttered. “I make more money than I spend, is all, so when I get asked I can use it to help out my friends. Like Hells. This is her baby really.”

Wufei followed Duo’s gaze across the bar to watch Helen wiping down the tops with precision, turning off lights and locking cabinets as she went. He almost felt a twinge of jealousy, that this woman he’d not known before a few days ago was such a big part of Duo’s life, a part of Duo’s life that until this week he’d been unaware of.

“How did you meet her?”

“At a Halloween party, ’bout a year after the war,” Duo said, with a fond grin. “She was dressed as the devil, I was dressed as the grim reaper. When she told me her name, it felt a bit like a sign.”

“Her name?”

“When I was a kid, I... knew a lady called Helen.” The braided man was looking at the glass he was holding, drawing patterns in the condensation on the side. “She was... very peaceful, and graceful, and serene and loving. Meeting Hells threw me a bit for a loop, ’cause she was... she was so fucking different,” he said with a chuckle. “I mean she’s a whole lotta good things, but graceful and peaceful and serene? But then I realised - Helen’s a pretty fucking common name, y’know? What were the odds that I’d gone so long without meeting another Helen, and then when I did it was this Helen? The total opposite of my Helen. To the point where she was literally dressed as Satan, whilst my Helen...” He paused, shot a glance at Wufei a split-second thing. “Well, she was a nun. I dunno, I guess I read too much into shit, but there seemed something almost poetic about the whole thing. Like it was some kinda catalyst, y’know?”

Wufei watched Helen again, and she looked up, saw him watching and cheerfully flipped him the bird.

“You boozehounds need to piss off,” she called. “Or I’m locking you in for the night!”
Chuckling Duo rolled off the table, Wufei mirroring him, and they plodded towards the door, suddenly feeling heavy and tired to their bones.

Wufei wondered if this was how normal people felt, after spending time with friends. The closest he came to a Helen was Sally, and he was beginning to think that maybe he should have made more of an effort for her. Wondered what he would be like now, if he’d tried to change sooner.

But maybe, he thought, as they stood on the dark street and Duo stretched up tall, the glow from the street lights casting a yellow sheen on everything, and the shadows playing across his face and hair, maybe he’d needed his own catalyst, and he hadn’t come across it before now.

*  

Chapter End Notes

Continued thanks and endless gratitude to maevemauvaise for betaing!

This chapter is dedicated to my friend mariana_oconnor and the Chuck Norris meme, for which she gladly and delightedly helped contribute material for the Wufei version.

I'd be interested to hear any others you guys might come up with! The rest of this fic is already written and is being posted as it's beta-ed, but I have some ideas for other fics in this 'verse' which could keep the joke going.

Thank you again for all your lovely comments and kudos. I really really like hearing from you all. :)
Wufei spent all weekend alone.

He wasn’t entirely sure of his motivations - whether he was trying to clamp down on all the strange, dizzying and frankly slightly alarming feelings that were starting to make themselves known; or whether he was trying to sort through them, analyse them, work out what they meant. He was not successful at either of those goals.

The mornings were spent at the Preventers gym, as every other morning had been, but he stayed until lunch, trying to exorcise by exercise these emotional demons that appeared to be playing havoc with his mental state.

The afternoons were dedicated to meditation, at his apartment, as he valiantly attempted to both strengthen his mental discipline and prepare himself for the changes that he was making in his life, that would be coming regardless of what he did, and that he could make for himself.

The meditation was not aided by Duo constantly sending him photographs of his ridiculous cat and trying to get him to “come out and play”.

Wufei texted back once, simply to say, “I’ve been grounded”, and got a pouty picture of Duo in response.

Life had been easier before Duo had his cell phone number.

Monday arrived with no real progress in terms of psychological balance, but he had achieved a few personal bests in his training so that mollified him a little.

It was just after lunchtime when Merrick came to his office, a pile of paperwork for him in one hand, and a brown paper bag in the other.

“She are the case transfer files from L1,” she told him, passing him the clutch of folders. She dropped the brown paper bag on his desk. “And that’s your lunch.”

Wufei blinked, and peered at the bag.

“I… didn’t order any lunch,” he said.

“No,” Merrick agreed. “And I’m pretty sure you didn’t bring any either. We can’t have you starving before you leave us, or Une will be pissed.”

“Oh. Well, thank you.”

Merrick nodded and peered around the office like she’d never been in there before. It wasn’t like Wufei had done anything to it, it was just like every other office in the building.

“Friday was fun,” she said eventually, moving to squint out the window and watch the people moving through the park below. “Maxwell seems cool. Known him long?”
“About five or six years,” Wufei said absently, peering into the lunch bag. Looked like a turkey club on wholewheat bread, were his tastes that obvious?

“And you’ve had a thing for him for… how much of that?”

She was wearing a shit-eating grin as Wufei’s head snapped up to look at her. The grin didn’t move as his eyes narrowed and he straightened up in his chair.

“You’re overstepping, Agent Merrick,” he said, coldly.

She shrugged and made her way back to the door. Wufei added another reason to be antisocial to his already fairly long list of reasons, apparently familiarity granted a level of immunity to his temper.

“We got a call from L4 to say Agent Po will be arriving on Wednesday to do the physicals,” she told him as she headed out the door. “And Maxwell called to say he’ll be picking you up at five sharp, and we weren’t to let you leave since you’ve been avoiding him all weekend.”

The door closed before he could react, and he was left glowering at the wood hard enough to strip the fresh paint.

*

“I wasn’t avoiding you,” Wufei said, catching the bike helmet that was thrown at him.

“Sure you weren’t,” Duo replied, rolling his eyes. “Mommy Une told you you had to stay in all weekend and finish your homework.”

Wufei had the good grace to colour slightly, and Duo grinned reassuringly at him.

“I get it,” he said. “God knows I’ve wanted to hide after getting drunk with people and telling them too much. But the best way to handle it is to just bull your way through it and style it out like you meant to do it.”

Yes. That was it. That was totally it. He was spared from having to answer though by Duo pulling his helmet on and Wufei followed suit, clambering on the back of the bike.

“Where are you taking me today?” he drawled, once the bike had set off. “Back to laserquest? Or are we just going to skip the middleman and sign up to join the Girl Scouts?”

“You wound me, Fei. Cut to the core.”

They wound their way in a similar direction towards the laserquest, but ended up in an area with a cluster of bars, shops and stalls. Wufei surveyed their surroundings as Duo chained up the bike-shops selling merchandise for archaic bands or movies, albums for local groups with dedicated fans, or wares that branded themselves as ‘one-of-a-kind’, ‘hand made’, and ‘bespoke’.

He vaguely remembered something he had heard during the war about L2. The general poverty and overpopulation had meant that most people couldn’t afford to buy the newest music, or the latest fashion, or go see the most recent blockbuster. The community had instead developed into an area of counter-culture that was a bizarre mix of decades and centuries old music and cinema, because old was cheaper than new, and cheap was better than nothing; but also a thriving internal community of independent traders and musicians - if you wanted something new, you made it yourself, or bought it off someone local so at least the money might come back to you eventually, rather than lining the
pockets of a magnate off-colony. Homegrown.

This area seemed to be the heart of the culture, a strange series of buildings and streets filled with people frozen at different stages in time - punks and rockers, mods, hipsters, and one couple walked past dressed in elegant styles of the 1940s.

It had always explained Duo’s habit of referencing long out-of-date films, playing music that had been old even before the colonies had been built. It was what people on L2 listened to, because it was what they could afford.

“Welcome to Memory Lane,” Duo said, coming up behind him and following Wufei’s gaze. Wufei glanced back with a raised eyebrow, and Duo just pointed up to the building wall they were stood next to. There, mounted high and clear to see, was the street name. ‘Memory Lane’. Apparently someone on L2 had a really lame sense of humour. “Enjoy it while you can - it’ll probably all get pulled down in the name of ‘progress’ before long.”

The words were a resigned sigh, and a sense of melancholy settled briefly, before Wufei decided to steer the conversation to happier things.

“What have you got planned for me, then?” Wufei asked, stepping aside to let Duo lead the way. “Am I to be made over into a punk?”

“You’d be a cute punk,” Duo told him. “You’re already angry enough for it. Naw, I thought we’d get some grub because I bet you skipped lunch, and then I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“When haven’t you got a surprise for me?” His voice was dry, but Wufei was honestly curious, because Duo seemed to have spent all his time since Wufei arrived scheming ways to catch him off balance.

“Just be worried when I stop warning you about them,” Duo advised, with a wicked grin.

The street was still fairly bustling and busy for the evening - a lot of the shops had open fronts with awnings hung with lanterns and fairy lights, as well as market stalls and vans scattered across the pavements. Few cars seemed to pass down this way, and people just walked down the middle of the street, happily calling out to each other and weaving between shops and vendors. It was more like a market than a normal shopping street.

Dodging around buskers and street performers, Duo paused regularly to chat to shop owners and people he passed. Some were letting him know about orders that had come in, others just exchanging pleasantries. Wufei recognised a lot of them from the bar on Friday - apparently local businesses supported each other here.

They were definitely friendly - he was introduced to everyone Duo stopped to speak to, and they all welcomed him and seemed to genuinely mean it. Even if it was just based on Duo’s reputation, it was more warmth than he had expected.

There was almost a festival atmosphere here - people with common interests in a safe space, with music, cheerful lighting and a strong sense of community. He’d been past places like this, but never in them, and the feeling was almost physical, and strangely calming. He found himself hoping that it wasn't pulled down, despite Duo’s grim prediction, because the idea of losing this community seemed a tragedy. He caught Duo watching him as he studied the street, and he was wearing a small smile - approval, perhaps?

He didn’t get a chance to ask before they were bustled down to the next stall, and the next.
The surprise, it turned out, was in an old two-screen cinema - a classic martial arts film, since Wufei had been so damning of the latest releases. *Ip Man* was the offering, and it was one that Wufei had seen before and remembered fondly. Donnie Yen had been something of a secret hero of his for a while.

“So he was a real guy?” Duo asked as they trailed out of the screen - they’d had the cinema to themselves. Apparently Monday nights were not prime movie time, although a handful more people seemed to be heading to the other screen for whatever else was screening.

“Mm,” Wufei said. “A national hero to China, he’s something of a folk legend, but as with all legends the facts got a little… exaggerated for dramatic effect.”

“He was pretty badass though,” Duo mused, grabbing a handful of leftover popcorn from the bag he was holding and chewing it thoughtfully. “I should learn a martial art. G taught me some bits, so I can get by, but… it’d be cool to do something like that, it’s pretty different.”

“I could probably teach you some basics,” Wufei offered, before his brain could catch up with his mouth. “I’m fairly well-versed in Wing Chun.”

“No shit?” Duo’s eyes were wide, and he looked excited. “You’d really teach me a bit?”

“I’m not an instructor,” Wufei warned. “And I’ve never been accused of having much patience, but I can try.”

Duo waved to the man behind the counter as they headed out the door.

“Any time, Duo,” he called cheerfully after them.

“Any time?” Wufei repeated, as they stepped onto the sidewalk. Duo shrugged a shoulder and ate a little more popcorn. Wufei frowned, glancing back up at the sign for the theatre. There was only one film advertised for that day, a years-old action flick that had become something of a cult favourite.

“Maxwell…” he said, dangerously, jogging to catch up with Duo. “I thought it was a little convenient that a local theatre ‘just happened’ to be showing classic Chinese cinema after our conversation on Friday.”

Duo had the good grace to look slightly sheepish and he rubbed his nose with a wry grin.

“Dave owed me a favour,” he said, as if that explained everything. “It’s not like Monday nights are particularly rammed for him anyway.”

Whilst a little part of him was touched that Duo would go out of his way to set this up, he was mostly annoyed and embarrassed. That Duo had put this man out of his way to entertain Wufei. That Duo thought Wufei needed entertaining. That he even was touched that Duo would set something like this up, and that he was hopeful that it might mean something more.

And also that Merrick was right – standing there outside the cinema, he realised that she was right - he did have ‘a thing’ for Duo.
The knowledge slammed into him suddenly like a truck and left him a little breathless. Merrick’s words had been lurking in the back of his mind all day, and apparently the little bastards had been making friends whilst they were there, linking up with all the emotions and confusion that he had been trying to deal with all weekend, and the damn things had unionised to form a coordinated strike on his higher thought processes. He had a ‘thing’ for Duo. A rather large, insistent ‘thing’.

He stared at the other man, suddenly seeing as if for the first time how the light hit the length of chestnut hair. His eyes tracked the length of Duo’s body, up his long legs, where the bottom of his shirt lifted to show a strip of skin under his open leather jacket, as he ran a sheepish hand through his bangs. His expressive face and easy smile and distracting eyes… Yes. Wufei had a hell of a ‘thing’.

And both the fact of the ‘thing’ and that Merrick was right were extremely irritating and embarrassing without the other issues being brought into it.

“I don’t need babysitting or ‘keeping occupied’,” Wufei ground out, finally, looking very intently at the floor as he spoke, not wanting to get distracted by cataloguing everything he’d found attractive without realising, suddenly very aware that the feelings he’d been ignoring included a healthy dose of lust. “I’m perfectly capable of managing myself. I’m also well aware that I’m not the best company, I know you don’t really want to spend every damn day with me – “

“I do!” Duo cut him off, his voice oddly thick. Wufei looked up to stare at him at the same second Duo started coughing. That new, stupid, irritating part of him had perked up at the tone, and deflated quickly when he realised that Duo only sounded so odd because he was choking on another mouthful of popcorn, rather than any kind of overwhelming emotion.

Eventually, offending popcorn dislodged from Duo’s windpipe and the remaining confectionery dumped in a nearby bin, Duo grinned at him red-faced.

“I mean,” he said hoarsely, “We’ve got five years of catching up to do, right? Making memories! And, I guess…” he paused, winced slightly, and then barrelled on with what he was saying, the words coming out in a rush like he needed to get them out before he could stop himself saying them. “I guess I’m kinda half convinced you’ll head back to Brussels at the end of this and it’ll be another half-decade before I see you again. If I see you again.”

Duo’s face seemed almost a little redder than it had before, and he stopped to take a drink from the bottle of water they’d picked up whilst he’d coughed his lungs out. His fingers toyed with the edge of the label, slowly working it loose from where it was stuck.

“And I mean sure,” he continued, “I could come and find you and kick your ass this time if you pulled something like that, but, y’know, doesn’t make a guy feel wanted if your friends only talk to you under threat of violence.”

Wufei couldn’t deny that some frantic part at the back of his brain had been urgently planning that he pack all his belongings, change his name, and live out the rest of his days off-grid as a hermit in deepest darkest Asia. Maybe if he was lucky he’d get eaten by a tiger.

“I get it if you don’t want to hang out every day,” Duo said cautiously, trying to fill the silence. “You’re a guy who likes your privacy. But I like seeing you. And even though you’re a grumpy ass, I missed you.”

Breathing in slowly, Wufei held the air for a second, before letting it out again, centring himself to try and behave like a normal human being. About half of him was screaming that he should absolutely put a significant amount of space between himself and Duo because he had patently gone quite mad and it would be better for both their sakes if he lived a life of total isolation, possibly on heavy
sedatives. What remained appeared to be fuelled by that strange yearning which had motivated his coming to L2 in the first place, and now it had been identified it was becoming rather noisy and demanding, and it had no such desire to separate itself from the sudden glut of attention it had been receiving from the very person it had been driving Wufei to hound. There was also no way of immediately removing himself from the situation without causing offence to Duo, or incriminating himself.

A compromise, then. For the remainder of his time on L2, he would make the most of Duo’s attention, if he wished to give it, and ‘make memories’. See if the novelty of the relationship would wear off and with it these feelings. If that failed, at the end of the month, he’d go back to Brussels and try to purge this from his mind. Now that he could name it, he could handle it. And if after a few months away from Duo, he had resumed normal functioning, their friendship could continue, unimpeded.

It was likely this was all just emotional stress being misread as a result of rekindling a valued friendship anyway, he rationalised. His psyche overcompensating for previous neglect.

“I’ll be in the Preventers gym from 7:00 am tomorrow,” Wufei said, abruptly, and Duo blinked at him, not following. “You can meet me there and I can start showing you the basics of Wing Chun. If you’d like.”

The smile that spread over Duo’s face was bright and earnest and made Wufei’s stomach do a funny flip-flop.

“And no more ridiculous escapades,” Wufei added, bulling forward and trying to ignore his reaction. “I am an adult and perfectly capable of enjoying an evening without the need to book out a cinema screen just for me. That is absurd behaviour and entirely unnecessary.”

“Yes, boss,” Duo quipped, meeting his eyes again and looking much happier than he had a few minutes previously.

They continued back towards the bike, Duo seemed considerably more chipper and Wufei tried not to blame Merrick for all his life’s problems.

“Hey, if I’m only allowed to make plans for already-scheduled events,” Duo said. “Do you want to come to the gig on Saturday? The band are good, and we’re doing a beer festival and trivia in the afternoon. Hells has even booked a hog roast. You could bring the guys from work, if you wanted.”

“What kind of band are they?” Wufei asked, suspiciously.

“They’re… difficult to describe without making them sound lame.” Duo glanced at him. “It’s not a cop-out, it’s the truth! They’re pretty different, but I think you’ll like them. It’s for charity….” he added, batting his eyelashes at Wufei in a ridiculous manner.

“…Sally’s arriving on Wednesday,” Wufei grunted, to get out of answering.

“Good, bring her too,” Duo ordered, unchaining the bike and swinging his leg over it with a grin. “All for a good cause and all that.”

“…Fine.”

“Cool! It’s a date.”

No it wasn’t, Wufei thought mulishly. It absolutely was NOT a date.
A million thanks and cakes to maevemauvaise for continuing to beta this whale of a fic.

OKAY. So I have a lot of thoughts about L2, and it all was generated because of my feelings about Duo and Music. I was going to talk about this in a later chapter, but it's kind of relevant here. So here I will discuss it. BUCKLE UP, FOLKS.

Duo and Music is one of my favourite fandom tropes for him - it features heavily in Mel and Christy's fics, and also in Sunhawk's Ions Arc. And I love it. BUT there is an issue - if we're working on the basis that the series takes place nearly 200 years after the start of life in the colonies, that puts it at a MINIMUM 200 years in the future, probably more likely 300 years, given how long it would take to even develop the technology to build the colonies, I mean yes we have the space station, but we are nowhere near being able to successfully apply artificial gravity yet, as far as I'm aware.

This naturally outdates any music that is well-known now, but by trying to create new music the fic would lose the recognition with the reader, and also that sort of thing can lead to a lot of pitfalls in narrative (future-slang is a real bugbear of mine). So, how to bring across Duo's interest in music, whilst keeping the recognition factor?

I shaped L2 around markets and festivals I've seen in UK cities, such as Camden or Spitalfields in London, or Leicester or Birmingham's international markets, or the travelling vintage fair that sets up in a new city each week - there is even a road called Memory Lane in Leicester. The atmosphere of those is so special, and also there is a real sense of community, and divorce and rejection of the mass-market, a preference for what doesn't make a profit for Big Business. So the idea of L2 as a representative of that culture appealed to me. An overcrowded, poverty-stricken colony isn't going to want to spend loads on the newest stuff. Equally, I can see second-hand clothes and media being sent as care packages by charities to poverty and plague-stricken colonies.

You can also consider copyright law. The most famous of these is the Berne Convention, which protects the copyright of a work of art or literature for the term of the life of the creator plus 70 years. Assuming this is the case for music as well, this gives say a potential maximum copyright term of about 140 years. If we're working on the assumption that the series takes place say 300 years into our future, this sets all the pop culture we are currently aware of as public domain. I.E. Free. Now, considering also the increased level digital presence which we can extrapolate to a point even just by looking at the change in technology between the time Gundam Wing was made and today (e.g. Gundams running on essentially DOS) it wouldn't be unrealistic to assume that there would be huge digital archives, libraries even, of this public domain media which would be the primary source of entertainment for a community that didn't have a lot of spare money for leisure pursuits.

SO THAT IS WHY I think that L2 in particular is likely to be a bastion of historical pop culture, and Duo knows all the songs we know. THE END.

Thanks all to you guys for continuing to read, and give kudos and comics. Each one makes me very happy, so thank you very much!
If Wufei had one flaw, it was that he tended to fixate on things.

Wufei was not deluded - he of course knew that he in fact had many flaws, an almost dazzling array. He cultivated some of them, because they worked to his advantage.

But his habit of fixating on things to the point of distraction had brought about some of his bigger downfalls, so he had tried, in recent years, to learn to let things go a little. Meditation had helped a little, exercise too.

Apparently neither of these was sufficient to counter the latest obstacle to his mental stability. He had returned home the night before and found himself unable to stop dissecting his realisation that he had… feelings for Duo. Feelings. For Duo.

Even though he had hastily made a plan to deal with it, apparently his mind was not happy to let it rest, and the words and feelings and images of the last week, of their encounters during the war, kept cycling around his mind. He knew he managed to get at least some sleep, because he woke with strange memories of bizarre dreams that were slightly too real for his liking, unsettling and painful. It took him a while to separate the fact from the fiction, imagined touches tingling on his skin.

Naturally an early riser, when Wufei finally gave up on sleeping and got up it was earlier than even he would usually brave the day. Deciding it was easier to just be productive than pretend he was going to get any decent rest, he headed to the gym and was there just before 6:00 am.

At this time, the whole place was empty, so there was no fight when he took over the studio and after a brief stretch began working through the Wing Chun forms.

Muscle memory was a wonderful thing. No matter the turmoil his mind was in, his body would settle into the patterns and movements, the rhythms and force. The sequences would soon wash his thoughts away, and he’d fall into a sort of trance, eyes open but unfocused and his brain blissfully, soothingly blank.

The steps and strikes took over his body, and he moved neatly from one form into another, enjoying the flow. There was something calming about the repetition, the familiarity, the feeling of total control over his entire being. Every muscle thrummed, sweat starting to sheen across his skin and his breathing becoming deeper. He began again, speeding up, adding power whilst maintaining precision. He mentally recited the names of the forms, the moves, the meanings of the sequences, a mantra. With each repeated form he got quicker, stronger, his kiyaps louder.

He was aware when Duo arrived. The near-silent scuff of a foot on the floor, the minute ‘click’ of the door closing, and the slight change in air quality that signalled someone else was in here with him. He continued through the forms until he had completed them, and then returned to ready stance, his eyes closed and taking a number of deep breaths. Then and only then did he relax and look at his companion.
Duo was stood just inside the doorway, leaning back up against the wall, arms casually folded. He was staring at Wufei intently, and there was a flush on his face. He must have jogged over to warm up, Wufei surmised, whilst he felt himself warm under the gaze, and the work he’d done to drive things from his mind slowly unravel.

“That was pretty amazing,” Duo said, breaking the silence.

“Those are the forms for Wing Chun,” Wufei told him, inclining his head to take the compliment. “I was revisiting them, so they were fresh.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be as crisp as you.” Duo moved to stand closer to him, and clapped his hands together with a grin. “Where do we start?”

Wufei demonstrated the beginning stances and took the time to correct Duo, pulling his shoulders back, adjusting his feet and his hands before continuing. As they progressed, It became clear that Duo was picking it up quickly.

“Yeah, I’m… a visual learner,” Duo told him with a grin, repeating the technique Wufei had just shown him a few times, to make sure he was happy with it. “I do okay with book learning, but I do better if I can see something, then get in and get dirty. Or at least talk it out with someone.” He straightened and turned to face Wufei. “That’s why I like hangin’ out with you. You make me smarter.”

“I’m not sure we’ve ever talked about anything that was beyond your understanding,” Wufei pointed out.

“Naw, maybe not.” Duo shrugged, careless. “But you make me feel smarter anyway.”

Whilst G may have taught Duo some basics, it seemed that the scientist’s approach was more along the lines of “This is the thing, this is what it does, do the thing”, with no information about the meaning or the deeper practices. As Duo picked up Sil Lim Tao, he listened, fascinated, whilst Wufei explained the origins and motivations behind it. His hands moved with increased surety, and Wufei demonstrated how each maneuver would work in combat, to give him the context.

In focusing so closely on the details, on the lesson, Wufei was able to avoid thinking about anything else. Duo improved quickly, and Wufei found himself impressed and proud of him. The warmth curled in his stomach and thrummed through him pleasantly, unlike anything he’d felt before. It surprised him and he fell back a step, awkward, as Duo dropped out of his stance and smiled at him.

“What d’you think?” he asked. “Do I get to carry on with lessons, or are you gonna vote me off the island?”

“You did very well.” Wufei passed him his water bottle. “We can carry on tomorrow, if you like.”

Duo took a swig of water and glanced at the clock, surprised.

“Oh, wow, didn’t realise it was that late. I should let you get to work.” He trotted over to his bag, and bent down to rummage in it. Pulling out an envelope and a plastic key fob, he held them out to Wufei.

“Tickets for the gig,” he explained, at Wufei’s blank look. “You can get me the cash later, let me know if you need any more.”

“And this…?” Wufei held up the little black fob, peering at it. Duo cleared his throat.
“That’s - ah - that’s a key to my place.”

Wufei’s eyes snapped to Duo so quick he thought they might pop out. His stomach went into freefall.

“Maxwell -”

“I got the spare made for when Heero was visiting.” Duo said hurriedly, standing and hooking his bag strap over his shoulder. “It’s no big deal, just, y’know, I want to hang out more, and you said no more grand plans. I figured if I gave you a key you could just come over when you wanted, and we could just… chill. Hell, if you wanted I’ve got that spare room, you could always just… stay. If you wanted. It’s nicer than the work place you’ve got. Although, fair warning, Heero claimed it as his when I bought the place, so it’s set up how he likes it, which as you know is weird.”

“I…” Wufei clenched the fob in his hand and glanced at anything in the room but Duo, trying to kick his thoughts back into order. “Thank you. I appreciate the offer.”

Duo’s smile was bright, perhaps too bright.

“Well, yeah, anyway. Just come over… whenever. No need to call ahead or anything.” He scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “I’ll, uh, I’ll see you later. Thanks for this.”

Before Wufei could respond, Duo had sketched a cheery wave and disappeared out the door with a flick of his braid. Left, stood in the studio, Wufei was only capable of thinking very rude words. Eventually, he managed to steer himself into the showers and by the time he was in his uniform he was mostly recovered.

The key fob was an unfamiliar shape on his keys in his pocket, and it prodded into him as the day progressed, catching him by surprise and making him lose his train of thought more than once mid-sentence.

His coworkers didn’t know what was happening, but he caught a couple of them smiling fondly at him, and Merrick outright smirked. He went and hid in his office for the rest of the day. He didn’t go to Duo’s that evening though. He stayed in the HQ until past 7, re-reading the same file because it wasn’t sinking in, before he stomped off to his apartment.

And resigned himself to another night of not very good sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Continued thanks to maevemauvaise for her marvellous beta-ing; and to all you guys for reading it! Particularly to everyone who has left a kudos or especially a comment, those are like little presents in my inbox and really make my day! <3
Wufei was notified Sally had arrived by 10:00 am, and had gone straight to the clinic to begin the physical assessments for the L2 agents. He was surprised she hadn’t come to greet him to begin with, and pleased that apparently his constant grumblings that work should come before socialising had finally set in.

He made a note to perhaps meet her at lunch time, positive reinforcement for this sort of behaviour was key to ensuring she kept doing it. If she thought it would make him more sociable, it might make her concentrate more like this.

At approximately 11:30 am, his phone rang, and he was informed that Agent Po needed to see him, immediately. It was urgent. He spent a long moment considering this and wondering if it really was an emergency, or if Sally was being melodramatic again. After weighing the options carefully, he decided it would be better to go see her before it had a chance to escalate either way.

The door to the clinic was ajar when he arrived, and he took this as an invitation to enter. Sally was inside, typing rapidly into the terminal on the far counter, but she looked up as Wufei walked in.

“Ah, good!” she said, and marched over. He opened his mouth to ask what the problem was, but before he could say anything she had shoved a thermometer in his mouth and was steering him towards the bench in the middle of the room. “Don’t talk, just nod or shake your head or that’ll take forever. Have you had any head trauma since I last saw you?” She started shining her light into his eyes and then began to poke at his skull with her fingers. He shook his head and batted her hands away. “No migraines? No dizziness?”

The thermometer beeped and he ripped it out of his mouth, shoving it at her.

“What is this all about, woman?” he demanded. “I had my last physical two months ago and I was fine!”

Sally ignored him and checked the thermometer.

“No fever,” she mused. “Fine, jacket off, I need to take a blood sample.”

“You are not taking my blood until you’ve told me what on earth is going on!” Wufei snapped, folding his arms as she brandished a rubber tourniquet at him with intent.

Sally advanced on him undeterred by the stink-eye he was giving her, tourniquet in one hand and syringe in the other.

“Since I was picked up at the shuttle port, oh… two and a half hours ago, give or take, I’ve spoken to about ten different agents based at this HQ.” She stopped in front of him, her legs against his, effectively pinning him where he was sat. He had long grown used to Sally’s gross invasions of his personal space, but something about her expression made the back of his neck prickle. “Did you know, not a single one of them is scared of you? And I don’t mean it’s just that you don’t terrify them – they seem to actually like you .” Sally laughed, the sound was all at once bemused and
slightly sinister, and Wufei felt an urge to cringe. “I even spoke to an agent who you tore to shreds only last Monday, and he just laughed and said what a good guy you were, and that it was a fair cop. Don’t you think that’s a little... odd? Given your usual habits, I mean.”

Wufei deigned not to answer that, and met her eyes whilst keeping his face studiously blank. Sally leaned in closer, planting a hand on either side of him on the bench and leaning forward.

“I’ve done physicals on them all. No disease, no trauma, no obvious drugs in their systems. No evidence of mass hallucinations, they all seem stable. I’ve even checked the water supply here just to be sure, but that’s all normal too. They just seem to be genuinely… fond of you.” Even though she was saying ostensibly nice things, Sally’s voice would have given a weaker man goosebumps. “Which means, naturally, that the source of this mystery must be you. But of course,” she dropped her voice to a low almost-growl and pressed in closer, her nose almost touching Wufei’s, eyes drilling into him. “You wouldn’t just change your behaviours for no reason, would you? God knows I’ve tried long enough. This leaves head trauma, drugs or disease. We’ve ruled out head trauma and disease, so tell me Chang, what’s your poison?”

“Agent Po, I’ve got those files you - Woah! Sorry, I’ll, uh… come back…”

Sally straightened up calmly and turned to face Shiels, smiling brightly at him.

“Thank you for those, Agent,” she said, holding her hand out.

Shiels handed her the folders he was carrying, gaze flicking between Sally and Wufei consideringly, before apparently deciding that he didn’t need any further explanation and focussing on Wufei entirely.

“I’m glad you’re here - can you talk to Lang about the Trivia team name for Saturday? He’s convinced that we should go as *Chickens with Teeth*, but that’s just a really disturbing image, and not even funny? We’ve tried to convince him, but he might listen to you. I really think you should reconsider letting us go as *Changie’s Angels*.”

“...Trivia?” Sally asked, looking at Wufei with a dangerous expression.

“Oh yeah, are you coming Agent Po?” Shiels asked cheerfully. “The beer festival should be good - it’s all locals, and I think we’ve got enough tickets for the gig after. Sayid’s gonna drop the money round later so if you want to see her about it?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Sally purred, not breaking eye contact with Wufei, who felt something inside him shrivel up and go ‘meep’.

“...Okay then,” Shiels said, after a long pause, clearly realising that he was once again superfluous to proceedings. “I’ll… get back to work then.”

“See you later, Agent Shiels,” Sally called vaguely after him, and rounding on Wufei the minute the other man was out of the door.

Wufei considered trying to say something to explain, to distract her or to outright lie, but before he could do anything, Sally had grabbed his collar and hauled him to his feet.

He didn’t have many problems with his body, but his one frustration was that he had not grown to be any taller than Sally. He had stopped at the exact same height, which meant it took very little effort for her to glower directly into his eyes. He met her gaze glare-for-glare, and at least was thankful he hadn’t stopped growing any shorter than her.
“It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other Wufei,” she said, her voice sweet, his jacket pulled tight in her fists. “Nearly a month. It’s my first night on L2, I think you should buy me dinner and we should catch up. Old friends, you know? There’s clearly been a lot going on since I last saw you. It would be remiss of me as your friend not to ask how things are.”

Wufei knew an order when he heard one. He also knew exactly what would happen if he tried to get out of dinner with Sally, or, as he had once foolishly tried, just didn’t turn up.

“I should be done by five thirty today,” he told her.

“Perfect!” She released him and smiling a sweet, charming smile. “I’ll see you then! Now shoo shoo, I’ve got work to be getting on with.”

Pulling his jacket straight with an irritated huff, he marched out of the clinic and back to his office. On the way, he saw Shiels leaning over Williams’ desk and the two of them were talking intently. Both looked up as he passed, and gave him an encouraging thumbs up with broad grins. Wufei scowled and stomped down the corridor, slamming his door behind him and only communicating via short, to the point emails for the rest of the day. Including one to Lang stating, in no uncertain terms, that there was no way he was going to be involved with a Trivia team named either Changie’s Angels or Chickens With Teeth, and thanking him for the image that would no doubt appear in some of his nightmares.

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Sally had fortunately not taken much convincing to get take-out instead of traipsing to a restaurant to eat, and they retreated to the Preventers accommodation laden down with Chinese food. They stopped at her apartment, along the hall from his, and ended up just about fitting everything on the tiny kitchen table, helping themselves to the contents of the various cartons in front of them.

“So come on then,” Sally said around a mouthful of spring roll. “Who are you, and what have you done with the real Wufei?”

Wufei shot her a dirty look and stabbed at his meal with more force than was really necessary.

“The team went out last Friday, to celebrate the end of the first week in the new building,” he explained. “I was invited, and it turns out there’s this ridiculous rumour mill about me, and Maxwell found out and turned it into a drinking game and now we’ve ‘bonded’ and I think I’ve become their damn mascot or something –“

“Woah woah woah!” Sally held up her hands to stop him talking, eyes wide. “Okay, first things – you were invited out for drinks with them?”

“Yes.”

“And you went?” She was staring at him incredulously.

“Yes.”

“And Duo was there.”

“He part-owns the bar,” Wufei said, as if it was patently obvious, and Sally was being abnormally
“And you let him talk you into a drinking game.”

“Are you just going to parrot me all evening?” Wufei snapped. Sally rocked back in her chair and puffed her cheeks out as she considered him.

“Seen Duo much since you’ve been up?” she asked, finally, voice a little too casual for comfort.

“…A fair amount,” he said, figuring that was vague enough to be true, without actually saying ‘basically every day since I arrived’. He poked at his dinner, trying to find a prawn. This took all his concentration and prevented him from looking at Sally as she stared at the top of his head, chewing thoughtfully.

“So you’ve finally admitted you’ve got a giant crush on him then?”

Wufei’s hand spasmed and his chopsticks snapped. Sally chuckled in a damnably self-satisfied manner as Wufei stood to throw away the ruined implements and wash his hands.

“How did you…” He trailed off, unable to actually say the words out loud, and only able to ask that much because he had his back to her, so she couldn’t see the flush rising on his face.

“How did I know you fancied the pants off him?” she offered, her voice almost gratingly cheerful. He gripped the side of the sink and nodded once, abruptly, without turning around. “I found your stash of newspapers, you loser. Since you hadn’t cut out all the pictures of him and made a collage to Mr and Mr Maxwell-Chang I decided that it was probably sweet instead of creepy.”

“You’re very kind,” he forced out through gritted teeth. This was humiliating. First Merrick had worked it out before he had, and it transpired Sally had been aware of it for even longer than that. He was amazed she’d been able to resist mentioning it before now. Whilst Merrick only suspected, however, he had as good as confessed it to Sally, confirmed it. It was like he’d spoken its name and made it real.

Sally must have noticed the tension in his shoulders and back, and the fact that he didn’t turn around probably clued her in to how uncomfortable he was, because her voice was gentle when she next spoke.

“Hey, it’s no big deal. It’s pretty cute, really. And I’m kind of relieved… I was worried that you were repressing things like this in way that was going to blow up horribly at some point down the line.”

Suddenly, Wufei wasn’t very hungry any more.

“It’s a brief aberration,” he said shortly, turning around and scraping his food back into the container, grabbing his plate and glass to wash. “Symptomatic of emotional stress, my psyche is confusing missing my friend for something… more. It is nonsense and it will pass very shortly, I’m certain of it.”

Sally frowned at him.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “You’ve had those papers for ages. The oldest one is nearly four years old! You’ve had these feelings for years, Wufei. And that’s not a problem…”

“It is a problem!” He slammed the glass onto the draining board, and it cracked from the force. Sally flinched. He paused, taking several deep breaths and when he spoke again he was more in control.
“It is a problem, but I am dealing with it. And we can all carry on as normal.”

He grabbed one of the paper take out bags to wrap the glass up, throwing it into the bin.

“Is it… because he’s a man?” Sally asked, hesitant.

“Don’t be absurd,” he snapped. “I’m not that primitive!”

“Well, what is it then?” she demanded, clearly frustrated with him.

“I don’t have many friends,” Wufei muttered finally, folding his arms, fully aware of how defensive he looked. “As you are well aware, given your little performance earlier. Including you, they can be counted on one hand, and my relationships with them are not… easy at the best of times. I might not have seen Maxwell for years, but I number him as one of them, and I will not do anything to jeopardise that. Not when we have only just got back in contact.”

“Oh Wufei…” Sally’s face and voice were full of nothing but pity. It annoyed him and he straightened, arms by his side, glaring down at her.

“I am in control enough of my own emotions to not impose them on Maxwell,” he snapped. “And I won’t have you saying anything to him - I know you like to interfere.”

“What if he likes you too?”

“...What?”

“What if he likes you too?” Sally repeated, patiently. Wufei stared at her, unable to decide where to start on exactly how unlikely that possibility was. She met his gaze with equanimity, clearly waiting for an answer.

“He doesn’t,” he bit out eventually, deciding to spare himself the humiliation of having to list exactly every reason why there was no way Duo could be interested in him.

“Have you asked him?”

“No! And I’m not going to!” he added hastily, seeing the next question coming a mile away.

“Do you want me to ask him?”

“I am not a twelve-year-old girl!”

“I was a twelve-year-old girl once,” she told him. “Sometimes it gets things done.”

“Woman, don’t you dare…”

She held up her hands, the picture of innocence.

“I won’t,” she assured him. “But I think you should.”

Wufei had a lot of opinions on what Sally thought, but kept them to himself, instead levelling her with an expressive look that fully detailed his distaste on the matter. Sally, however, seemed to not notice, and having rallied past her earlier episode of pity was now clearly coming up with a way to Fix Things.

“I’m going home,” he said with an air of finality, to put an end to whatever further nonsense Sally was planning to say.
He grabbed his jacket from where it had been draped over the back of the sofa, and there was a jingle and a clatter as the keys to his apartment fell from the pocket and landed on the floor. He bent to scoop them up quickly, but Sally was eagle-eyed - a trait he had to grudgingly admit was required as a Preventers agent, even if it was damnably inconsiderate as a friend.

“What’s that?” she demanded.

“What’s what?” Wufei repeated irritably, knowing he was putting off the inevitable, and that shoving the keys out of her sight would only serve to attract her attention further.

“I don’t have a fob,” Sally said. “We should have exactly the same keys. What’s the fob for?”

He could lie. But that would imply he had something to hide, had something to be ashamed of. Sally might read something into this, but that would be nothing to what she would read into it if he lied about it and she found out. And she probably would find out.

“It’s for Duo’s place,” he told her, matter-of-fact.

The look of triumph on her face was enough incentive for him to leave her apartment without another word.

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Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! I hope you all have a great 2017, guys! Let's get it off to a good start. :)

Thanks to maevemauvaise for somehow finding time to beta over the holidays, which is serious dedication because I got nothing done at all.

Wufei's 'primitive' comments was something I thought a lot about. When I was first in the fandom, ten plus years ago, there was a split between authors who had hope that gay marriage would be allowed in the far future of GW, and those who, perhaps for the sake of realism, didn't. 10 years ago, it seemed a pipe dream, and now it has become legal in so many countries around the world. We still have a long way to go for LGBT rights, and after 2016 these things can feel even further away. But I look at what has changed in the 10 years since I was last writing about these guys, and I want to take the Star Trek approach - I think in the future, things will be better, and society will be kinder. Or at least, cynically, we'll have moved past our current prejudices and found new and exciting things to hate people for. Or maybe not.

But New Year is an important time to think we can change things for the better, by being better people.

Thank you to everyone who has commented and left kudos, and to everyone who is still reading. I appreciate your kindness, and it is helping make me remember to be kind too.

Happy 2017!
09.

On Thursday, Wufei avoided Sally all day. It was childish, but he did not feel like dealing with her teasing and goading over his personal life. To the point that he even snuck out of the building slightly early, knowing she would never suspect he would ever leave work early.

And perhaps, two weeks ago, he wouldn’t have done.

Lost for places to go, he ended up taking a detour, and when he arrived at Duo’s place he was at least bearing take out and some beers as offering. He dithered for a moment, wondering if maybe he was making the wisest decision, before steaming ahead with the knowledge that if he wasn’t welcome, Duo would tell him, and this would perhaps aid his own personal bout of ‘exposure therapy’.

He half-expected the key to not work when he got there, but the catches on the little door unhooked with a click, and he was able to push it open with limited resistance, shutting it quietly behind him. The garage was empty, silent. The little blue car that had been there last week had gone, replaced by two sedans, sat side-by-side.

Taking a bolstering breath, he made his way across the floor silently, feeling like he was intruding, like he was going to be caught trespassing. He knew it was stupid, but he felt his senses sharpen and his skin prickle with the same tension he usually felt infiltrating enemy territory. It was a challenge to ascend the metal stairs soundlessly - no doubt an intentional security choice on Duo’s part - but he nearly managed it.

The fob worked on the keypad next to the apartment door too, and he was able to push it open, suddenly wondering what he would do if Duo wasn’t in.

The sound of a voice from further inside the apartment solved that issue, and he hesitated suddenly, holding the door not sure how to announce his presence.

“No, I haven’t yet,” came Duo’s voice, slightly irritated. There was a pause - obviously a telephone conversation. “Because fuck you, that’s why.”

There was a laugh, and it had an edge to it.

“Oh yeah that’s real easy for you to say, you were so good at listening to me when I said it to you.”

“This is different and you damn well know it!”

“What do you mean ‘how’? Quatre was never going to break your neck when you told him.”

“Yes I know he blew you up, but you can’t keep using that to win arguments, that was a very specific - Oh you can shove that tiny violin up your ass, laughing boy.”

Wufei briefly wondered what on earth Duo was talking to Trowa about, but realised that this was clearly a private conversation and he pulled the door shut noisily behind him to let Duo know he had arrived.
The American appeared around the corner with a slight frown, but that melted away into a delighted smile when he saw who it was, and that widened when he registered the bag of takeout and beers that Wufei was bearing.

“I’ve gotta go, Wufei’s here.” Duo paused again, and his eyes narrowed, flashing at whatever Trowa said. “I don’t know why I’m fucking friends with you,” he growled, and hung up without saying goodbye.

Wufei quirked an eyebrow, but Duo was apparently happy to forget his recent conversation, stuffing the phone into his pocket and moving towards Wufei with his arms out, hands making grabby ‘gimme gimme’ gestures.

“You didn’t say you were coming over,” Duo said, relinquishing Wufei of the booze and leading the way towards the kitchen and sliding the bottles into the fridge.

Perhaps it was odd that he hadn’t asked, or mentioned anything when they had met that morning for more Wing Chun sessions, but the plan hadn’t exactly been long or considered in the making.

“I didn’t think about it until I left work,” Wufei confessed. “I’m avoiding Sally,” he added, wondering if the candid confession helped or hurt.

Duo chuckled and turned back to the table with plates and cutlery.

“What’ve you done to upset her now?”

Taking the containers out of the bag and laying out the curries on the table top, Wufei debated his next tactic. He had a little voice in his head that sounded remarkably like the woman he was trying to avoid, insisting that he tell the whole truth. It had never occurred to him that Duo might like him back - the idea had not crossed his mind to even deny until Sally had raised it yesterday. His previous preoccupations had been entirely on his feelings and how to handle them, only certain that they could not, would not be revealed. When Sally had asked if Duo could like him, something had speared through his resolve a little.

“She is… interfering with my love life,” Wufei hazarded, finally, the words sounding like they tasted unpleasant.

There was a clatter and Wufei looked up to see that Duo had fumbled with the cutlery, nearly dropping it, and was staring wide-eyed at Wufei. The slip was unusual for the normally nimble-fingered man, but chuckling nervously, he recovered and set the implements on the table.

“You have a love life?” Duo teased as he did so, although his voice seemed a little strained.

“No,” Wufei said quickly, firmly, and he surely imagined the near-imperceptible lessening of tension across Duo’s shoulders. “But she thinks I should have one.”

“...You disagree?”

“I disagree with everything that woman says, on principle,” he sniffed, shucking off his jacket and reaching to grab a plate. “Also, I think we are all aware I am uniquely unqualified for that sort of thing.”

“I dunno,” Duo said, after a pause. He toyed with his knife, watching the light bounce off it. “I think if you found the right person you might be perfectly qualified.”

“And who would you recommend?” Wufei asked sourly.
Duo opened his mouth to respond, but then clearly thought better of it, and shook his head, banishing whatever he was thinking of saying with a bright smile and changing the subject to the food. Wufei half-regretted that he had killed the conversation, curious what Duo had been planning on saying, but his chatter of enthusiasm about the food soon dispelled that and they were both relaxed by the time they had dished up their meals.

After dinner they moved to slouch across the furniture, a beer each and Duo flicked the stereo on, the music providing background without requiring attention. Wufei found himself hyper-aware of Duo’s presence, and his own stiffness in relation to the other man’s languid relaxation. The only time Wufei didn’t feel awkward was when he was training, or working, or angry. The rest of the time he covered his awkwardness by being antisocial, and his stumbles with bad temper.

Everything seemed natural to Duo. He moved through life like water, bubbling his way over or around obstacles with little apparent difficulty. If something knocked him off balance, he always seemed to find his level.

Wufei was more like a volcano. He didn’t adapt to change well having established his footing, and any kind of unexpected alteration to his life lead to some kind of explosion, followed by a number of grumbling aftershocks.

Hrothgar appeared through the open door to the roof terrace, squeaking her arrival as she trotted across the floor and jumped up onto Duo. She circled a few times before curling up on his chest, head tucked under his chin and nose resting against his throat. Duo reached up absently to skritch behind her ear, and Wufei could hear her purrs from where he was sat. It was a picture of utter contentment and bliss, Duo sprawled across the sofa with his eyes closed, listening to the music, his cat curled up exactly where she wanted to be and purring happily.

The scene in front of him illustrated perfectly what Wufei’s life was lacking, and he suddenly found it difficult to swallow. The differences between he and Duo were too stark to get past, and he couldn’t understand why Sally didn’t immediately see that, so obvious as it was. Duo absolutely didn’t need to be dealing with misplaced affections from such a social maladjust.

Wufei jumped slightly, when Duo spoke, and wondered if he’d been caught staring, but the other man’s eyes were still closed, and his voice was a low, relaxed rumble, clearly on the edge of a food coma following the large dinner.

“I miss it sometimes, y’know,” he said. “Even though I shouldn’t, and I know it makes me a bit of a psycho.”

It took Wufei a moment to realise what he was talking about, and before he could work out how he was supposed to respond, Duo continued.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad we’re at peace, and the world is definitely in a better state now than it’s ever been, but… nothing else’ll ever feel like that.”

“No…” Wufei agreed quietly.

There was something unique about being in the cockpit of a Gundam, in the screaming heat of battle, straining and striving against the odds, the machine an extension of him. The pounding of the gunfire, of his heartbeat, and the driving pumping adrenaline and strange ecstasy that came with it. He would not wish for it back, and he would defend the peace with his life, but sometimes there was a strange feeling, almost like a missing limb, when he realised Nataku was gone and the war was over. These moments came with an almost breathless moment of loss and a sense of directionless confusion before the world snapped back into focus.
He was surprised to hear Duo had the same feeling, he had thought he was the only one.

“You seem so… settled with Peace,” he said, trying to explain his thoughts.

“Sure I do.” Duo blew idly across the top of his beer bottle, the low noise indicating it was nearly empty. “I like peace. But… piloting got me out. If I hadn’t had Deathscythe, who knows what fucking hell hole I’d have ended up in. Odds are pretty good I’d be dead already. I wasn’t just fighting for peace and justice, I was literally fighting for a place in the world. And man, in Deathscythe I was strong enough to carve out exactly what I wanted, bend the world to me. I felt indestructible.”

“That’s… another reason I didn’t join the Preventers,” Duo confessed, opening one eye to gauge Wufei’s reaction. “I was worried that it wouldn’t be enough to… replace that, but it would be enough to make me want it again. And that maybe it would stop me ever being able to live without it, or ever stop fighting - ’cause at the end of the war I wasn’t even sure what peace meant, or if I even deserved it for a while there. So I went cold turkey. I needed to work out how to live without feeling like everything I did was some kind of battle, like I had to beat someone to get it.”

Wufei met Duo’s gaze, showing no judgement, saying nothing. The eye slid closed again.

“I’m not like you. You’re so disciplined and focussed and driven. You know who you are, you’re certain of everything. I… have a little bit of trouble working out exactly where I’m supposed to be, and how I ended up here, and I can take things real personal. I’ve got a million different things going on with my life, and none of them proper, worthwhile, just ‘cause I can’t trust myself not to ruin something, and ‘cause things like that hurt more than they should.” He chuckled, and it was self-deprecating and a little hollow. “I think it’s called ‘commitment issues’,” he drawled. “I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I’m not so good at throwing myself in full. The closest thing I’ve got to a commitment is this furball, and that’s on a basis of mutual self-sufficiency.”

Both his eyes opened and he looked directly at Wufei. It was intense, dark and considering, and it felt like he was being pinned to his seat.

“You, though…” Duo’s voice was thoughtful, and Wufei started flushing under the unwavering gaze. “You do nothing but commit. You’re all or nothing. In or out. I wonder if I’m ready to deal with that…”

“…What?”

“Oh nothing.” Duo waved his hand, tone airy. “Just somethin’ Trowa was saying. Basically he called me a chicken. ‘Cause of previously discussed commitment issues.”

That explained the swearing, Wufei thought dryly. If ever there was goading Duo was going to rise to, it was saying he was a coward. He’d be no different, if anything he would take it with significantly less grace than Duo had.

“You see,” Duo continued, “There’s something I want, but I’m holding back on trying to get it. That’s why Trowa thinks I’m chicken. ‘Cause I’m worried about how things might… turn out. And what that might mean.”

“I always had the impression you were someone who got what you wanted, no matter the cost to yourself,” Wufei said, looking at his beer bottle and trying not to feel Duo’s eyes on him. “If you’re hesitating, it must be because other people are involved.”

“Aw, I knew you were more than just a pretty face!” The other man stood, dislodging Hrothgar, who
made her feelings known with a displeased squeak and trotted off with her tail in the air. Wufei watched him walk to the kitchen, setting his empty bottle on the side to grab a fresh beer from the fridge. “Yeah, there’s someone else involved. One person.”

“And could they be hurt by… whatever this is?”

“...Hurt is probably not the right word.” Blowing across the top of his bottle again, Duo pondered the situation, enjoying the note he produced. Wufei tried not to look at his lips, tried not to think about his lips. “Perhaps… discomfited if things don’t work out, it’d probably be worse for me in that case. But if things do work out... it could be great. More than great. For everyone.”

“If the potential gains for both parties outweigh the potential risks, then surely it’s logical to proceed?” Wufei shrugged a shoulder, casual, not at all awkward under the strangely intense stare Duo had been fixing him with since this conversation started. “In the event things don’t work out, I’m sure you can charm your way out of it as you usually do.”

“Fei!” Duo said, smiling brightly and fluttering his eyelashes. “You think I’m charming?”

“You know full well your powers of persuasion, Maxwell,” Wufei told him, dryly but not without humour. “If you think it will be worth it you should go for it.”

Duo didn’t say anything for a long moment. Instead, he sipped his beer and surveyed Wufei from where he stood, leaning against the kitchen counter. He had one arm crossed across his chest, hand tucked under the other arm holding his beer, but the stance wasn’t defensive. Crossing his legs at the ankle he seemed to be weighing something up, studying every detail of his guest, and Wufei suddenly felt like he was being assessed. He hoped he wouldn’t be found lacking.

“Well then,” he said finally. “Now I’ve got your blessing, I’d better get started. But keep in mind, however it turns out, you were the one who told me to do it.”

Oh good, Wufei thought. This wouldn’t come back to haunt him at all.

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Chapter End Notes

We're nearly at the halfway point! Oooooohhhh will anything happen soon? Maybe, maybe!

I really really appreciate all of you reading, and thank you for your comments and kudos. I've had three essays to do over Christmas which have just about killed me dead, so these little bright spots make a big difference!

I fully and strongly believe that Trowa will use Quatre blowing him up to win any argument with anyone ever. Like,

"Trowa, it's your round. Get the beers in."

"Did I ever tell you about the time I was floating, left for dead, in the blackness of space? Harrowing, chilled to my bones..."

"Oh for fuck's sake fine I'll get it."
I headcanon Trowa as a giant troll.
Sally let herself into Wufei’s office unannounced just before lunchtime. She didn’t knock, just waltzed in with a small, smug smile, closing the door behind her. Offering no explanation, she settled herself in the chair across the desk from him and made herself comfortable.

He glared at her, waiting for her to explain herself, but no elaboration was forthcoming, she continued to smile back at him in self-satisfied silence. The woman had an innate talent for broadcasting smugness without saying a single word. It was oozing out of her very pores and making him increasingly worried that she had done something drastic under the illusion that she knew better than he did how his life should be run.

A second before he was about to demand what she was doing there, a call notification popped up on his computer, with a cheerful trill. Wufei narrowed his eyes and glanced at Sally suspiciously, and she just raised her eyebrows in an expression of innocence. He kept the gaze a moment longer, waiting to see if she would give anything away, before answering the call in his usual abrupt manner.

“Chang.”

Une appeared on screen, unruffled by his lack of greeting.

“I hope I’m not interrupting you,” she said, although Wufei knew very well that wouldn’t have stopped her. He shook his head and she clasped her hands in front of her on the desk. “You seem to be doing an excellent job implementing the structures for the L2 HQ. Well done.”

“Paperwork is hardly strenuous,” Wufei said dryly. “You haven’t called me to compliment my administrative talents.”

“No.” There was the faintest hint of a smile on her face but it disappeared before it had a chance to get comfortable, and she cut straight to business. “You are aware that the opening of this branch brings an end to the original 5-year-plan which was established when the Preventers was founded, and the first phase of implementation that was proposed.”

Wufei nodded. The impending completion of this phase had been contributing to his concerns about his place in society, and part of his motivation to come to L2. Which apparently had been the start of his inevitable descent into mental instability and the development of a stress-borne attachment to the most inappropriate person possible.

Initially the ever-looming event was a source of anxiety and discomfort. But as he realised that his ‘exposure therapy’ technique was doing nothing to lessen his feelings for Duo, he was beginning to anticipate the opening as a sign he could remove himself from this situation and start sorting himself out. Some intensive training, heavy meditation. He might even take some of that gargantuan amount of Leave he had stockpiled and go away somewhere, far out of society, until he could trust himself to behave rationally again.

“This opening is to be a more significant event than previous HQs. As such, there will be somewhat
more…” She paused, her mouth twisting slightly. “Pomp and Circumstance to it.”

Feeling his stomach drop, Wufei stared at the screen in dawning horror. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sally’s smile widening.

“Commander - “

“There will be a significant number of diplomats and supporters of the Preventers attending this event, as well as the media. The security arrangements have already been planned, I have sent them over to you this morning.” She leaned towards the camera. “I have also arranged for Agent Po to bring appropriate formal wear for you for the occasion. As one of the most senior agents in the organisation, your representation is required.”

“Absolutely not,” Wufei said firmly. “I have no desire to attend such a self-congratulatory event.”

“Which is why I did not tell you about it before you accepted this assignment,” Une snapped. “You will be there, Chang, you will dress appropriately, and you will be polite.”

Wufei scowled at her, hands balled into fists on his desk.

“I was copied into the memo Agent Po sent you a few months back entitled Why Chang Can’t Have Nice Things,” he said, trying to keep his voice level, with some significant effort. “I cannot remember the full text, but I believe the reasoning was, and I quote, ‘Because he ruins them for the rest of us’. With that in mind, do you really think it appropriate that I attend a diplomatic event that is integral to Public Relations?”

“You know full well that was because you blew up the new gyrocopter on the first mission you took it on. That is not relevant to this situation at all.”

“There is absolutely no need for me to be there!” he snapped. “I have no wish to be paraded around like some… prize pony! If that is the only reason you have deployed me here, you are wasting my time and Preventers resources. I’d be better placed on a more pressing mission, and Agent Po can take charge here.”

“It is not your place to tell me how to utilise Preventers resources,” Une said, her voice icy cold, eyes narrowed. “Agent Po will also be attending the opening, and between the two of you, you will be a shining example of the work we can accomplish. This is not up for negotiation, it is an order.”

She cut off the call and Wufei was left scowling at his screen. His fingernails were digging into his palms, his hands were fisted so tightly, and it was taking all his self-control not to call Une back and tell her, at length, exactly where she could stick her order.

“So,” Sally said cheerfully, looking like she had thoroughly enjoyed herself. “Are you going to ask Duo to be your date?”

*

Sally must have realised she was putting herself in the line of fire with her comment, and Wufei had no qualms in letting loose all his fury on her - particularly because it had not escaped him that she had been aware of the situation and declined to warn him in advance. She took the assault with good humour, grinning a shit-eating grin at him as she strolled out of his office with a jaunty wave.
The security arrangements for the ‘Gala’, as it was apparently being called, were sat in his inbox waiting for him. They were thorough, well-considered and appropriate, and that only served to annoy him more, as this was clearly an event that had been long in the planning.

He was busy typing a response to Une with perhaps more violence than his keyboard deserved when another incoming call popped up on his screen. A brief flash of hope that it was Une calling to tell him he didn’t have to attend after all was squashed when he answered and saw the blonde young man smiling back at him.

“Wufei!” Quatre said, looking positively delighted to see him. Wufei managed to tone down his expression from ‘incandescent’ to ‘fuming’, but that was the best he could do. “You’re looking… well?”

Wufei snorted and Quatre’s smile turned into a wry grin, tilting his head to the side to study him fully through the camera.

“I just got off the phone with Lady Une, and she told me you would be attending the HQ official opening!” Quatre sounded delighted by the idea. Wufei was seriously considering stabbing someone in the eye with a pencil to try and get out of going. “Of course, Trowa and I will be there, and I understand Heero and Relena will be coming too. And Duo lives on L2 - have you seen much of Duo whilst you’ve been up? - anyway, I thought it would be a good opportunity…”

Dread coiled around in his stomach, having only just settled from his encounter with Une earlier.

“Winner, no…” he said dangerously.

“Winner, yes ,” Quatre disagreed firmly. “I’ve been trying to get all five of us in the same place for years, but you always manage to get out of it. Not this time. Une told me you were there until the end of the month. If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed…”

The noise Wufei let out was quite alarming, a strangled growl of frustration. Quatre had been dead set on the pantomime of a reunion since the war was over, but Wufei detested the idea of sitting around telling ‘old war stories’ like infirm old men, and the idea of scheduled reminiscing made his skin crawl. Never mind that he had absolutely no desire to hear how wonderful, happy and fulfilled their lives all were now, whilst having nothing more to report than that he spent all his life working.

“Shut up, Chang,” Quatre said, and while his smile was pleasant, his voice was firm and his eyes took on an unsettling shine. “You are going to come and see all of us, and you are going to have a Nice Damn Time. Because I want to have a Nice Damn Time, with the people I care about all together for the first time since the war. You don’t want me to not have a Nice Damn Time, do you, Wufei? Because so help me God if you try and duck out of this again I will hunt you down and drag you there myself.”

This day was rapidly turning into Wufei’s worst nightmare. He surreptitiously pinched himself to see if he was asleep and could rescue himself, but it was all tragically real. Why did people want to spend time with him, all of sudden? He had spent his life making an art out of being antisocial. It was one thing to try and change the habits of a lifetime with Duo - and look how well that was turning out - but to try and do it at the beck and call of everyone else...

He hid his face in his hands and let out another long frustrated groan.

“Good,” Quatre said happily. “I’m glad we understand each other. I’ve already spoken to Sally, and she’s excited. She, ah…” Quatre paused and looked briefly puzzled. “She said to tell you that it’s okay to bring a date? Is… were you wanting to bring a date?”
Wufei hung up on him without lifting his head.

* 

He stayed late to work that night, into the evening and when the rest of the building was long empty. Making notes on when each Official, Donor and Diplomat would be arriving, what their itineraries were, where they would be staying… And then he mapped out the security arrangements he had been sent, and how they fit over the itineraries he’d noted.

And then he scoured through all the files they had for signs of any threats which had been made against any of the guests due to arrive, and arranged them by level of concern.

The work was tedious, but it kept his mind occupied, and by the time he left for the night he was drained and unable to build up his anger further than a mild grumble. He slouched his way out of the building and back to his apartment, managing to strip his clothes and crawl into bed. His eyes were so dry they stung even when closed but he fell asleep quickly after, more emotionally drained than anything else.

When he woke the next morning with a sense of foreboding and unbalance. Things were all spinning very rapidly out of his control and he was not prepared to handle them in the slightest. He was off-kilter enough just dealing with Duo, and his own apparent mental disintegration. He had to readjust, put things back to normal and resume standard operations. That was the only way he was going to get through this.

He cancelled the planned training with Duo that morning and went straight up to his office instead, continuing his project from the night before. Going through each threat individually now and noting where the groups were, and their known associates.

When things did not go to plan, Wufei had a tendency to overcorrect to try to reaffirm normalcy. This usually involved him throwing himself into his work to the exclusion of everything else, and assuming that once he finally surfaced for air, all the problems which had been bothering him would have magically gone away. This seemed to work for him. During the war this usually meant that he had blown up whatever had been causing him the problem in the first place, but the method still worked. Often if he disappeared on a mission for several months, by the time he returned, life had continued and the issues had been swept away like so much dust in the breeze.

That was basically how he had managed to avoid all Quatre’s previous reunion plans. There was no arguing with an Urgent Mission for the sake of world peace. Even if it had been dug out of the bottom of a pile of dead files as Wufei had scoured the area for a reason to be Anywhere But There.

Maybe lurking in all these diplomatic threats was the lifeline to get him off L2.

Which was why he was in the office on Saturday morning, hip deep in files, reading glasses sliding down his nose and hair coming out of his ponytail, glaring at the paper he was holding so hard it was considering spontaneous combustion to relieve itself from the pressure.

He flinched bodily when the door was flung open and Sally stood there, bag over one shoulder, glowering at him. She studied him carefully, and her glare deepened.
“No,” she declared.

“Excuse me?”

“No,” she repeated, and marched over to the desk, snatching the file off him and slamming it closed. “You are not pulling this shit again.”

Wufei’s eyes stayed fixed on the folder as she threw it down onto the chair opposite side of his desk. He didn’t bother trying to deny anything, Sally knew him well enough to grasp his patterns of behaviour. Normally, she just muttered darkly at him about how he was ‘unhealthy’ and ‘abnormal’ and ‘poorly socialised’, but apparently she had decided action needed to be taken.

He just about caught the bag that was hurled at him before it hit him in the face.

“I have work to do,” he said coldly, as she stood over his desk, hands on her hips and a face like thunder.

“No you don’t! You’re on Administrative Shifts! You work 9 until 5, Monday to Friday, because all the other HQs are covering the L2 cases until this place is up and running! And you damn well know that!” Sally gestured sharply at all the files piled around him, her pigtails swinging with the force of it. “You’re trying to find work because you’re a little chickenshit who runs and hides if you have to deal with anything like memories or society!”

Wufei stood, slamming his hands on his desk and leaning towards her, about to snap a response back, but instead found an accusatory finger inches from his nose. Sally drew herself up to her full height and set her shoulders.

“\textit{This is why you weren’t told about the opening in advance. Because you’re an emotionally stunted, whiny pissbaby, and every time - every time} someone tries to do something nice with you, something which means you might have to think about something other than work, you self-sabotage and disappear for months on end!”

“\textit{How dare - “}

“But this time,” she continued, unabated, ignoring that Wufei’s face was almost puce with fury, and the desk was creaking under his white-knuckled grip, “this time seemed different. In the week and a half you’d been up here you’d relaxed, and changed. So, what, you can spend time with strangers but not your own fucking friends? What makes them so special?”

“\textit{Because they don’t know me!”} Wufei bellowed, catching them both by surprise.

“What?” Sally stared at him.

“They don’t know me,” he repeated, through gritted teeth. “So they aren’t aware that this behaviour is… an aberration. It doesn’t strike any of them as… out of the ordinary. They don’t question it.”

“…what about Duo?”

“He’s not seen me since we were sixteen,” he snapped. “His only preconception was the assumption that I would have changed, given that time has passed. He has no idea that I’ve become even less able to cope with society as I’ve aged.”

The look Sally gave him was equal parts pity and inexpressible levels of frustration. He looked away, prying his fingers off his desk and straightening, his fists dangling clenched by his sides.
“I’m not equipped to deal with this. They haven’t realised yet that none of this nonsense is me. It’s all happening around me, it’s spiralled out of my control.” His shoulders sank slightly from where they had been tensed. “They haven’t worked out that once the momentum of this farce stops I am not capable of continuing whatever side show they’re expecting and…”

And they’ll leave. He trailed off and left it unsaid, it was too pathetic to be voiced, even coming this close to acknowledging it made him want to sneer. What a feeble, spineless drive. He didn’t have anyone, but he didn’t need anyone. He didn’t.

“Oh Wufei,” Sally sighed. “You’re such a moron.”

He glowered at her and she flopped down in the chair opposite him, unconcerned as she squashed the file she’d thrown there earlier in the process. Levelling him with a flat look she began to elaborate.

“You’re worried that everyone’s going to dump you if they find out what you’re really like? Is that why you’re such an ass to everyone you don’t know, and avoid spending too much time with your own damn friends? Does it ever occur to you, genius, that they already know what you’re like, and like you anyway?”

A caustic comment leapt to the front of Wufei’s tongue but he suppressed it. It was excruciating enough having this on display and dissected. He didn’t need to draw it out any further.

“It’s natural for you to have a few abandonment issues, after… everything,” Sally settled for, euphemistically, managing to cover War, Widowhood and Complete Destruction Of Home and Family in that one loaded word. “But at some point you’re going to have to trust that people aren’t going to leave you, and take that risk. Like Duo.”

He flinched at that.

“I told you, I’m sorting it,” he said sharply.

“I’ve been talking to Merrick, and I’m well aware that you’ve seen him basically every day since you got up here.” Wufei pressed his lips together but didn’t answer her accusation. “That’s more time than you’ve consistently spent with anyone. Has he run screaming yet?”

“…That’s different,” he muttered, aware that it was both feeble and petulant.

“Because you have feelings for him.”

“Because he’s done all the work!” Wufei was aware he was flushing, and not from anger now but shame. “He’s directed everything and I’ve followed. Even where I’ve… initiated things, it’s only been aping behaviours I’ve seen in him.”

“Oh my god that’s how social interaction works!” Sally tilted her head back and covered her face with her hands, clearly unable to handle looking at him. She was likely repressing the urge to throw something else at his face. “Nobody is born an expert, you learn from the people around you. And to do that you need to actually have people around you, instead of running off to get blown up every time people ask you to socialise!”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

Sally snorted. It wasn’t ladylike.

“Only just.”
Wufei sank down into his own chair, tense and angry, and unsure how to proceed. The silence stretched between them, awkward and obvious.

“Why are you even here?” he asked, irritably.

“I was coming to help you get ready for today,” Sally told him, slouched down in the chair with her eyes closed. “Wanted to make sure you looked your best for your big day with Duo, because you have no fashion sense. And you weren’t there and I thought to myself, ‘Where does a loser like Wufei go on a Saturday, when I know I’m involved in the only plans he has?’ And I hoped I was wrong but oh no, look, I know your every loser habit, and it makes me sad that valuable space in my brain is being taken up by this. I’d probably have cured cancer if I wasn’t wasting valuable cerebral energy remembering how terrible you are at being a normal human being.”

“Well you can leave,” he told her brusquely, and leaned to reach for another file. “I’m not going.”

Sally’s hand slammed down on top of his to stop him picking up the paperwork, grabbing his wrist so he couldn’t pull it back. Of course, had he wanted to he could have, but no matter how poor his social skills he knew that breaking a friend’s hand was not considered acceptable.

He settled instead for glaring at her. She smiled sweetly at him.

“I beg to differ,” she said, her voice saccharine although her eyes held a martial light. “You are going to go, and you are going to enjoy yourself. I’m not letting you self-sabotage this time.” Her grip tightened and her eyes narrowed. “You are going to shut down that computer, you are going to get changed into the clothes I brought you, and we are going to leave to meet the others. Are we clear?”

Maybe breaking her hand wasn’t entirely out of the question…

“After all,” she continued, going in for the kill. “You promised Duo you’d be there, and Chang Wufei never goes back on his word. Or have you decided dishonour is better than a bit of social discomfort?”

God damn that woman to hell.

Chapter End Notes

Look, I just... I just really like writing fancy events. I'm a sucker for it.

Thank you all for reading still, and leaving such lovely comments and kudos! It makes me so very happy, and I am really touched you're enjoying this.

Thanks again to maeveauvais for the beta, she managed to battle through no internet access to get this done, because she is an absolute superstar.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey, you made it!” Duo advanced on Sally and Wufei as they entered the bar, a giant grin on his face. “Sally Po, always a delight! And Wu! I was beginning to think you’d only packed uniforms and workout clothes for this trip! Looking hot, buddy.”

Wufei carefully did not look at Sally, who he could feel actively radiating smugness as she clasped Duo’s hand in a firm greeting. He was aware that Duo was teasing him. She had broken into his apartment to find him a change of clothes, and he was entirely at her mercy. The t-shirt was from the University he had ‘graduated’ from. It had been bought for him as a joke, but he’d liked the dark blue colour and the material was soft so he’d kept it. Only after three years the white logo on the front had started to fade and it was perhaps a little tighter than he was strictly happy with, a side effect of his filling out.

The jeans at least were respectable. Sally had insisted he buy them so he wasn’t wearing his uniform trousers, his traditional loose pants, or his workout clothes all the time. It seemed unnecessary, but he had relented to shut her up. They were his only pair, and rarely worn. Unfortunately this meant they hadn’t quite loosened enough to be truly comfortable, and were a little too constricting still for his preferences, but he knew they were neat as a very minimal requirement.

Although, Wufei had to begrudgingly admit that Sally had evidently judged the correct clothes for the occasion. Duo himself was dressed similarly, in his usual black jeans and boots, and a black t-shirt which declared ‘I am your secret, scary friend’ in white lettering, above a white line drawing of a little blobby devil creature, tiptoeing across his chest with a cheeky grin. A grin not unlike the one Duo was currently wearing.

“The others are already here and bagged a booth at the back.” Duo jerked his thumb over his shoulder, and Wufei glanced across to see the rest of the Preventers shift piled into a booth and apparently still arguing over the team name. “Grab a beer and get comfy! I’ve got a few last things to sort out, but I’ll try and swing by before the Trivia starts. Don’t expect any answers though, can’t play favourites!”

He clapped Wufei on the shoulder, smiled brightly at Sally, and then disappeared into the clusters of people, waging to someone else as he went.

Taking the moment to study the room, Wufei saw that the bar had been extended around the corner and along a second wall. Behind the additional counter were racks with kegs upon kegs piled up, signs hanging over the taps declaring what was within. On the end nearest the kitchen was a rotisserie with a roasted pig, and a griddle with onions, serving up buns for the hungry patrons.

Sally sauntered over to the extended bar, where Helen was coordinating the bar staff manning the taps. The redhead woman smiled broadly as Wufei approached, and reached for a glass.

“Wait!” he said, a little too quickly, trying to stop her before he ended up with another beer he didn’t
“Pick. Helen quirked an eyebrow at him and paused. “Any chance I could choose my own this time?”

“Do you know anything about ales?” she asked, her eyebrow still raised but a challenging smile on her lips.

Wufei opened his mouth to respond, then realised that he couldn’t answer that honestly. Despite living in Brussels, he’d never become interested in beer culture, instead staying usually with the light and frothy weißbiers which were so common, and which were fairly inoffensive. He preferred wine, and was more knowledgeable there, but even his limited social skills had told him that wine wasn’t the appropriate drink for every occasion, and often he found that it was easier to get a drinkable beer in a restaurant or bar than a decent wine for the same price. That didn’t exactly speak of a developed knowledge of the beer world.

Noticing his hesitation, Helen grinned and turned to the kegs to fill a glass and pass it to him. He took it with good grace and tasted it. Warm, rich, with a taste of maple that was sweet but not overwhelming.

“Don’t worry, I got your back,” Helen told him cheerfully as he paid for his and Sally’s beers. “Stick with me, you’ll look like you know your stuff. Then you’ll be cute and cool.”

“You’re popular everywhere you go,” Sally drawled, leading the way over to the booth where the others were waiting for them. “There must be something in the water up here.”

Wufei did not deign to respond, and was thankful the bar was dark enough to hide the faint flush he knew he was sporting.

Merrick spotted them as they approached the table, waving them over. Sayid immediately tried to rope Wufei onto her side in the argument.

“Tell him we’re not having Chickens With Teeth!” she cried.

“Absolutely not,” Wufei said, taking a seat. “I thought we’d established that there were to be no eldritch poultry.”

“Well her name sucks!” Lang protested, looking put out.

“What is it?”

“Lord Lucan’s Hide and Seek Club.”

“It’s so obscure, no-one knows who Lord Lucan is!”

“Pre-colony British Aristocrat,” Wufei said, as though it were common knowledge. “Murdered his children’s nanny and disappeared, no-one ever found him or a body. They eventually declared him dead after 40 years.” He paused, thoughtful. “So I suppose it would be a very high calibre Hide and Seek Club.”

Sayid turned on Lang with a triumphant look, and Lang sighed and muttered ‘fine’.

Without Lang arguing about fowl with fangs, the conversation became more civilised. They briefly discussed the upcoming opening and who was coming of note before Shiels banged on the table in frustration and declared that whoever spoke about work next had to buy a round for everyone.

In the pause that followed whilst everyone rerouted their thoughts away from work, Merrick fixed Wufei with a wicked grin.
“Have you seen Maxwell yet?” she asked him, tone innocent, expression otherwise. “He’s looking pretty good today.”

“Ooh yes,” Sayid chipped in, apparently in on this game too, much to Wufei’s dismay and Sally’s clear delight. “Did you see how good he looked in those jeans?”

“No,” Wufei said curtly. “Oddly enough, I did not.”

“Women,” Williams commiserated, rolling his eyes and clearly left out of the ‘Torture Wufei’ club. Wufei sipped his beer to avoid having to answer him, and tried not to think that whilst he might not have noticed the jeans today, he could easily remember them from previous occasions and they did look good. Really good.

His stomach clenched in a way that was not entirely unpleasant and his palms suddenly felt very sensitive, so he wrenched his focus back to the table.

There was the pop of a microphone being turned on and suddenly Duo’s voice purred across the sound system. Looking around, Wufei could see him perched on a stool at the far end of the bar.

“Holla holla, my intellectual adventurers,” Duo greeted, as the chatter quieted to listen. “Welcome to the Low Bar’s inaugural Trivia Tournament!”

Wufei realised that until this point he hadn’t actually known the name of the bar. Somehow it didn’t surprise him that it was an awful pun, with Duo involved.

“I’ll be around in a few minutes to take team names and entry fees. First prize team will get a round of drinks and half the cash pot, with the remaining half going to charity - after all, that’s why we’re all here today, right? To give to charity. Getting drunk and fed is just a bonus. Second prize will get a free round of drinks. Last place will get a bag of peanuts each, ’cause you’ll need to replenish your salt levels after weeping loser tears.”

There was a murmur of laughter. Wufei could see Duo was warming up, waving his free arm around as he spoke, like a conductor.

“You cranial crusaders will have 10 rounds of trivia questions each to answer, with a break in the middle for everyone whose bladder isn’t up to the challenge. There’s also a picture round which you’ll have until the end to complete. No phones out, if I see anyone trying to cheat I will personally drop their phone in the nearest full glass I can find. Cheating’s not the trivia way guys! God is watching.”

With that, the mike was switched off and Duo swept into the crowd carrying two old fashioned beer glasses with handles, one empty and one full of pens, and a sheaf of papers.

“What’s the charity?” Sally asked, twisting back around in her seat from where she’d turned to see Duo.


“Hey, Maxwell,” Lang suddenly said, as if making the connection. “You don’t think…?”

Sayid scoffed.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s a common name.”
“Yeah,” Merrick said. “It’s to do with this church that used to be there which got destroyed during the war.” Everyone looked at her, surprised, and she quirked an eyebrow. “What? I was over there once and walked past it. There’s a big memorial where the church used to be, and a plaque with the history. It got trashed by the Alliance and everyone got killed, including all the kids in the orphanage, and the Priest and Nun who ran it.”

“That’s… awful,” Williams offered, unsure what there even was to say about something like that.

“Yeah. But the memorial’s nice. Classy.” Merrick shrugged a shoulder and tried to describe it. “Big metalwork cross, made out of a load of smaller crosses. They were all salvaged from other churches damaged during the war, and the artist joined them all together. You can still see the shapes of where most of them were damaged, all warped and burned. It’s… sad but all joined together it’s… kind of hopeful?”

As Merrick described the sculpture, Wufei realised that Lang’s initial thoughts were right. He thought back to Duo’s wartime uniform, the priest’s garb, and wondered exactly how he had been involved in the tragedy Merrick described. He was a little ashamed he didn’t know, that such large parts of his friend’s past were a mystery to him. But then, during the war he had not exactly shared his own past, nor had he encouraged sharing from others.

“Wow, you guys worried you’re gonna lose? This looks like the bummer table alright.”

Duo grinned down at them from where he stood - the previously empty glass was now full of coins and notes, the glass full of pens only had a few left.

“We’re just sad because we’re thinking about Chang’s awful social life,” Sally piped up with a grin. “You know this loser was at work this morning? Thinking about his life choices is enough to make anyone sad.”

Wufei scowled at her and Sally kicked him under the table.

“You’ve got to sort him out Maxwell,” Sayid called. “Take him out, make him do wholesome things!”

“I’m not so good at wholesome,” Duo leered at the table and waggled his eyebrows, before straightening up and holding the glass full of money at them. “Come on, pony up!”

Money was dutifully deposited and a sheaf of papers handed to them, along with a pen that was bright purple and smelled faintly of blueberries. Duo scrawled their team name on the scrap of paper he held with a small chuckle, and Sayid pulled a face at Lang again.

“Just so y’all know, the local fire brigade are in the far corner, and the cops from the station down the street are next to the pool table. They heard the Preventers are in and have got a grudge match in mind.”

“I’m sure you’ve done nothing to fan the flames of that,” Wufei said dryly. Duo looked innocent.

“Wu fei !” he chided. “Would I ever? Buuuut the firefighters said they could bench press you with one hand, and the cops said you couldn’t investigate your way out of a girl scout meeting. Plus you’re big girls’ blouses. Toodle-oo!”

He whisked away before anyone could respond, coins jingling and cackling happily to himself.

“Well at least he’s having fun,” Sally said. Wufei leaned out of the booth to see the police team and caught one of the officers trying to scope them out too. The officer smiled sheepishly and shrugged,
but one of the other men saw where he was looking and pulled a face at them, mouthing 'It’s On!'

Shaking his head vaguely, he sat back again and looked at the pieces of paper which were being passed around. Pearson was dutifully putting their name at the top of the numbered answer sheet, whilst Lang, Williams and Merrick were pouring over the sheet of photographs - a collection of apparently prominent figures in a variety of bizarre hats. He thought he saw a picture of Quatre, in a Maguanac fez there, as well as one of Relena wearing one of her giant sunhats.

The mic crackled again and Duo’s voice poured out across the bar.

“Allrighty then my brainy boozers, we’ve got a good competition in today. Twenty teams in the running including a few of L2’s Finest and Bravest -”

Cheers went up from the police table, the firefighter’s table and Williams, Lang and Pearson. Wufei could see Duo grinning from his position at the bar and spinning around on his stool to look back at the list of team names and reading them out, getting a cheer from each table as he went by.

“A Woman Needs a Man Like A Fish Needs a Bicycle - wow things are harsh over in that corner.”

“We’re Not Cheating - Jeff’s On Call. That’s great guys, but if that phone’s out Jeff better be running for the door!”

“The Bar Staff - who will be proving their multitasking skills by getting you all drunk and still winning I’ve no doubt.”

Wufei leaned back in his seat and just listened. The electronic crackle of the sound system gave Duo’s voice a slightly staticy quality, and it was taking him straight back to the war, and hearing Duo’s voice over the cockpit comms of Nataku. The strength of it was surprising, and he was taken aback by how clearly he could remember it - how long had these feelings for Duo been building, that he had catalogued these moments, these sounds in his memory?

The Trivia itself was more fun than he had anticipated. As a former scholar the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of self-improvement and advancement was a worthy goal. But he couldn’t help but be impressed how much knowledge Pearson had about bridges of the world, or Merrick’s bizarre collection of duck facts. And he more than once found himself in a heated argument about answers which he was certain he knew and the others were certain they knew. It was an odd competition, to see who knew the most information which was useless in any other setting. Like rewarding people for inanities. But despite that all, he enjoyed himself.

He drank more than he anticipated too, every time he finished a beer someone placed another in front of him - he suspected Sally - and by the time the results were being read out at the end of the quiz he was feeling relaxed. Not at the stage he had been the week previously, following the bout of sambuca, but certainly mellow. Tuning out the actual words, he just let the sound of Duo’s voice wash over him.

He was aware of cheers and groans, and then a round of applause for the winners, and then the rising general chatter of the bar as life continued following the declaration of victory.

The next thing he knew there was a warm presence pressing up against his side, trying to force its way into the booth.

“Scooch up Chang, lemme in,” Duo ordered, trying to squeeze onto the bench despite all evidence saying he could not fit. Everyone obliged and Wufei found himself with a hair’s breadth of gap between himself and Shiels, and in full contact with Duo from shoulder to knee.
“Can’t believe you didn’t give us the win, Maxwell!” Williams said, as Duo took a generous sip of his beer.

“Should’ve done better then,” Duo replied cheerfully.

“You off duty now?” Sally quirked an eyebrow at him across the table and he grinned back.

“Yep! This is Hells’ party now, I can rock out with you guys.”

Wufei didn’t contribute to the banter which continued, dissecting answers from the quiz and bemoaning things they should have known, and congratulating themselves on the things they had. Instead he focussed on the warmth that was seeping through his clothes, more warmth than sheer body heat could explain. It sent tendrils of desire through the rest of him, which sparked every time Duo moved his arm and their bare skin brushed. It was almost torturous, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself. Had it been like this when they’d sat together before? A week ago, before Wufei had given a name to this monster inside him?

The feeling had been there certainly, but it had kept to the back of his mind. Now it was like all the lust and hormones he had ignored through adolescence were trying to make up for lost time, and it was more intoxicating than the alcohol, and more pervasive, thrumming through his entire body before long. Trying to keep his actions under control and his mind on the conversation was taking all his discipline.

It was an hour, maybe more, before they began to move across the bar towards the gig. Duo led the way, his beer held aloft like a battle standard and his braid swinging behind like a beckoning finger. There was no doubt in Wufei’s mind that he would or should follow, and he somehow managed to block Sally’s presence from his concern.

The venue was set up much the same as the main bar, with dark walls decorated with graffiti art, but a deep stage stood at the far end, bright lights pointed at it. The room was filling up slowly, people drifting towards the stage, but Duo led the pair of them to the side, to stand against a wall. He glanced back at Wufei and smiled reassuringly, knowingly, as he leaned back and relaxed, letting the others carry on past them to the front of the venue.

Taking up position next to his friend, wall solid against his back and cool through his shirt, he took the time to study the stage. Wufei would be the first to admit that there was some trepidation about the upcoming event - he remembered some of the music he’d heard Duo play during the war, the harsh guitars and pounding bass, he wasn’t particularly expecting to enjoy the upcoming musical offering. Although… he noted the strange staging - at least four violins were spread out in front of a number of microphones. A penny whistle and a fiddle hung off the front microphone stand, whilst arrayed around the rest of the stage were instruments including a cello, clarinets, two different types of saxophone and a stand at the back which housed a snare drum, a glockenspiel, a gong and a variety of other paraphernalia - including a tin can which looked to be filled with cutlery. He identified a melodeon, a tuba and… what looked to be an electric mandolin.

“What… is this?” he finally asked, glancing sideways at Duo. The American grinned back at him.

“Trust me,” Duo said.

“I trust you to put me through some very bizarre experiences,” Wufei said dryly. “But I appreciate some forewarning.”

“You know what you need, Fei?” Duo turned to look at him and there was a wicked glint in his eye. Wufei didn’t answer, instead quirking an eyebrow. Duo’s grin widened and his hand shot towards
Wufei, quick as a flash. Instinctively, he dodged, and felt a tug at the back of his head. As he straightened, his hair fell about his face, and he saw Duo ping his hair tie into the crowd with a satisfied ‘ha!’

Wufei stared at him, torn between appalled, amused and wanting to just grab the man there and then.

“You need to let your hair down once in awhile,” Duo finished, and leaned back against the wall with a great big grin.

There was movement on stage and people started clapping and cheering. Eventually eleven figures stood in the lights - ten men and one woman - and took up a selection of the instruments on stage.

A man took the lead mic - tall, slender, and appearing to carry himself from his hips rather than his shoulders - and glanced back at the rest of the group, nodding his head.

The music burst forth all of a sudden, but instead of a wall of sound that battered against Wufei’s chest, it seemed to flow through the room like water, swirling around him and lifting him. The instruments blended, with no aggressive bass or pounding beat, the violins oddly classical but the brass adding a bold twist. It was strange, uplifting and infectious. The vocals were an old folk tune that Wufei vaguely recognised, but the music was new, different. The band were clearly enjoying themselves, dancing as they played, and the audience caught their mood and reflected it back to them tenfold.

Mellowed by the beer, off-kilter from Duo’s proximity, and more than a little relieved that the music wasn’t the aural torture he had anticipated, Wufei found he wasn’t immune to the effect of the melody and the crowd either, and an odd sense of euphoria crept over him as the gig progressed. He wasn’t jumping up and down and singing along as the others were doing, as Duo was doing beside him, but he watched with a smile and felt his mood lift. Sea shanties to disco beats, funk rearrangements of folk tunes, all flittered past, instrumental and otherwise all rolled out across the assembled masses.

Occasionally Duo would disappear into the crowd, jumping and singing through the throng with a huge grin. Wufei could see him leaping his way around the room, like some kind of pogo-powered whirling dervish, but he was never gone for long – a song at most – before he returned to join Wufei, out of breath and laughing, flushed and sweaty. The joy that seemed to be vibrating through him was palpable, a nearly physical thing that curled around the Chinese man every time Duo resumed his position beside him, leaving him feeling strangely light and warm and happy.

He was almost surprised when the gig finished after a raucous encore. He hadn’t been aware time was passing so quickly.

Blinking in the raised lights, Wufei watched the people filter out of the room, chatting happily, some still singing. Duo stayed beside him, a silent presence but seemingly pleased with himself.

“Enjoy that?” he asked finally, and Wufei turned to him.

“It was… different,” Wufei replied, and then smiled. “But pleasant.”

Duo’s gaze was intent on him, violet eyes burning into his own.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile like that,” Duo said slowly, moving to stand in front of Wufei. “I like it.”

Wufei’s throat tightened, and Duo was suddenly very close. He instinctively tried to back away a step, put some distance between them, but he found himself trapped against the wall he had been
using for safety earlier.

Betrayed by the architecture, he broke eye contact with Duo, and instead found himself looking to where the other man’s hands were - thumbs hooked casually in his jeans pockets, fingers relaxed against his thighs as he moved closer. His long fingers and broad hands, the backs of them peppered with scars and the occasional burn, but veins still visible under the skin, corded with tendons. Strong hands, Wufei thought, and then an image of those hands touching him flashed through his brain and he wrenched his eyes back up to Duo’s face.

That was apparently a mistake. Just the heat in Duo’s expression pinned him to the wall - had he not been penned in already he would not have been able to move.

“Just remember,” Duo said, and his voice was a low rumble, “that if this doesn’t work out, you’ve gotta let me charm my way out of it.”

And then there were fingers brushing along his jaw, lightly - so lightly - but they might as well have been hooked up to a car battery for the shocks that rocked through him just at that contact. They stopped just below his ear, caressing the skin there as Duo’s thumb stroked his cheek. Wufei’s mind skittered wildly and every nerve in his body short circuited down to that touch on his face and Duo starting to lean down towards him. He’d never felt anything so incredible in his life, and he had a feeling this was only the start...

“There he is!”

“Chang! We’ve been looking for you!”

Wufei blinked and Duo wasn’t in front of him any more, instead he was to the side, looking towards the door and wiping his hands on the front of his jeans. Following the sounds, Wufei turned and saw Williams and Shiels tottering over to him, bouncing off each other.

“What do you want?” he snapped, face flushed and trying to regain control of his body, not quite trusting himself to step away from the wall steadily. He saw Duo flinch slightly out of the corner of his eye and that just stoked his ire towards their interruption.

“Sally’s leaving!” Shiels said.

“Thought you’d want to walk her home,” Williams continued, with a pantomime wink.

“Carry on where you left off the other day…”

“Tap that Po-tang!”

They crowed with raucous laughter and attempted to high five each other, but missed. Wufei’s face wrinkled in distaste, but Duo questioned further before he could put an end to it.

“Where they left off…?”

“You should have seen it,” Shiels cried, with a broad grin. “She was all over him, right in the med office!”

“On the exam bench!” Williams corroborated, even though he had only gained this information from Shiels.

“She’s got a thang for the Chang!”
“That’s enough!” Wufei barked, furious, and Williams and Shiels instinctively snapped to attention, wobbling a little as they did so. “Agent Po is your superior in every way. Whilst things have been informal recently, if you are ever so blatantly disrespectful again - to any other agent - your descendents will still be running laps. Am I clear?”

“Yes sir!”

“Get out of my sight,” he spat, and they skittered back the way they came. Breathing deeply through his nose in an attempt to calm himself down, he turned to look for Duo - not sure what for, whether it would be possible to continue from where they’d been interrupted - only to see the other man on the far side of the room, vaulting up onto the stage. “...Duo?”

“Ah, hey man,” Duo called back, glancing back at him with a sheepish grin. “I’m, uh, just gonna help get things cleared up here. I’ll... catch up with you later?”

Before Wufei could respond, Duo had sketched a careless wave, grabbed two violins and skittered backstage.

*

Chapter End Notes

Continued thanks for all the reviews and kudos, it means a lot guys. <3 I have a lot of notes on this chapter, but I am also so tired my eyes feel like they are being sucked into my skull, so I apologise in advance for lack of coherence.

- Duo's t-shirt was originally sold as merchandise for the wonderful comic, Scary-Go-Round. I own it, and I always thought it was a particularly 'Duo' shirt. It seems to be available through T-shirt Diplomacy if you want one too: http://tshirtdiplomacy.com/products/secret-scary-friend (I also always wanted the Pangaea Reunion Tour one)

- so, I dunno how it works elsewhere, but in the UK pub quizzes are a Big Thing. Pubs and to some extent bars are a 'third space', social areas away from work or home that serve the role of community social space. People in the UK spend a lot of time in pubs or bars, but not just to get drunk - it's common to go out for lunch there, or spend an evening playing board games, or pool, or darts. Lots of pubs do family days, with events and barbecues, or get special guest ales in.

Also, we fucking love a pub quiz. People go every week, and get very competitive, and team names are used over and over. Usually there's a prize for the best name. We once won for "One Monty short of a Python", although I was fond of "Dexy's Lunchtime Strollers" and the old favourite "the Hindenburg Ground Crew". One I remember vividly was "We used to be called the Smarties, but now we disagree with Nestle's aggressive marketing tactics in the third world".

Given as Gundam Wing was fairly Euro-centric (brief foreys into Africa, Russia, and the Middle East aside), I am understanding the world of the future to have taken a more European view on drinking and drinking establishments. Broadly I'm taking this as a British view, based on what I observe every day, but in my trips to Europe I've not seen
anything to suggest attitudes are significantly different - just adjusted slightly for local drink preferences!

- the band! The band is a very thinly veiled appearance of Bellowhead, probably my favourite band ever, who broke up in April 2016 (sob). They were hugely talented, with every member able to play at least two instruments (occasionally simultaneously), and they did modern rearrangements of old folk songs. I have never experienced anything quite like their concerts in my life so far, and I've seen everything from the Philharmonia Orchestra to Meatloaf. I saw them four times and each time it was like someone had found a way to radiate joy. The events were so wholesome and inclusive and FUN. And, as mentioned, no heavy bass which makes your ribs feel weird. They're a great band, and their albums are wonderful, but there was something just magic about seeing them live.

I think Duo would like them because the folk songs they sang were often about everyday folk getting the better of each other, things he would have seen in his life. Not grand ideas or heroes, but beggars and sailors (spacers), prostitutes and drunks. But, as established in this fic, those figures don't need to mean the place has no brightness, societies adapt and set new baselines for normal, and humour can be found anywhere.

Two my my favourite Bellowhead songs are New York Girls (https://youtu.be/bn0Ff83spQw) and 10000 Miles (https://youtu.be/QCzDjoqEV4c), and they always came back for an encore with Frog's Legs and Dragon's Teeth (https://youtu.be/YHql2Q_1qmm) and London Town (https://youtu.be/kv2T8gUsceA).

I can talk at length about my love for Bellowhead.
Wufei spent the majority of Sunday staring blankly at different bits of his apartment without really seeing them. He kept shaking himself out of his daze and resolving to do something, only to drift off again before he could ever reach his destination.

Duo had nearly kissed him.

*Duo* had nearly kissed *him*.

Duo *had nearly kissed* him.

Wufei had been accused of being many things in his lifetime, in particular having a certain disregard for the more delicate nuances of social interaction, but he was not slow. In light of this new action, he had been able to reassess all the time he had spent with Duo over the last two weeks and see certain words and actions in a different light, and it was all piling into a very large picture that was a little bit alarming if he thought about it too hard.

And he couldn’t help thinking about it.

He had never in his life considered that someone would ever show an interest in him romantically. Even married to Meilan his preoccupation had been less with attraction and more with their warring ideals. After that… rather more pressing matters had taken over his concerns, and he’d found himself twenty, a Preventer, with no particular interest in romantic entanglements and even less notion of how to go about them anyway.

No particular interest in romantic entanglements, but a rather nebulous preoccupation with Duo Maxwell, he corrected himself. Which had developed rapidly into something more on his arrival on L2.

And was apparently reciprocated at least to a certain degree. This fact was what he did not know what to do with. What *did* one do to… further a romantic interest? What happened then? Did he even want to?

That last question was quickly answered every time by the memory of Duo’s touch on his face, and the sheer force of passion which slammed into him even at that ghosting of fingers across his skin. If he had ever had a chance of suppressing his feelings for Duo, that had crumbled away into dust at the lightest brush of fingertips across his jaw. He was pretty helpless on that front now, there was no way he could push this back into the box.

Of course, he was rather certain that Duo now thought, again, that he was with Sally. And under no circumstances should Sally be involved in this *at all*. 
Monday arrived with at least a modicum more focus, and a sheepish apology from Shiels and Williams for getting... ‘carried away’ on Saturday. Wufei accepted their apology curtly, and then shut himself in his office with his pile of folders again.

Most of the threats were from groups which were either in Preventers custody already, or were currently under observation, but now that he’d started the job he might as well check them all. Unfinished jobs left him twitchy, and call it superstition but it would be just his luck for the legitimate threat to be found in the handful of files he didn’t make it through.

At the end of the day, Sally stuck her head into his office to see if he was leaving at a sensible hour, took one look at his expression and left without saying a word.

The building had emptied and Wufei was alone when his phone alerted him to a message from Duo - the first contact with him since Saturday night. A tension he had only barely been aware of lessened at the receipt of the message, even if it was only a photograph of Hrothgar asleep, cuddling her own tail.

He took a moment, then replied with a carefully phrased message, and turned back to his work, waiting for Duo’s response.

Forty-five minutes later, Duo let himself into Wufei’s office with a broad grin and a bag of take-out.

“The cavalry is here!” he crowed, presenting Wufei with a cardboard container and a spork.

Wufei didn’t bother asking how Duo had managed to get into the building. He was certain the details would be provided later so that any holes could be secured. Duo settled down in the chair across from him and propped his boots on the desk, crossing his ankles casually.

“Thank you,” Wufei said gratefully, taking a mouthful of the food within.

“What’s got your Preventerly knickers in a twist then?” Duo asked, picking up a file with one hand to peer at it curiously. Wufei plucked it off him and plopped it back down on the desk.

“Apparently this HQ’s opening is to be a major political and media event,” Wufei said, and managed to mostly not sound bitter.

“Oh, you mean the Gala?” Duo quirked an eyebrow at him and dug into his carton. “Yeah, so?”

“You knew?” Wufei hissed.

“Yeah, sure. I did your art installation remember? ‘Course I’m invited to the ribbon cutting. What’s the deal?” Duo paused. “You okay?”

Wufei’s head was on the desk, his hands gripped in his hair and he was letting out a frustrated groan.

“Everyone was told about this in advance,” he growled out. “Is this some kind of conspiracy?”

“I thought you knew,” Duo said, blinking owlishly. “I mean, why wouldn’t you know?”

“Because I’m a ‘whiny pissbaby’ apparently.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Duo started snickering. Wufei lifted his head enough to meet
his eyes, and then started chuckling to himself as well. Eventually it dissolved into full laughter and they had to look away to compose themselves.

“Aw, well, at least we’ll be there together?” Duo offered finally, catching his breath. “We can get drunk and heckle the others.”

That was the first positive prospect he’d heard about the event since he’d found out about it.

“Has Q-bean got in touch with you about the ‘reunion’ yet?”

“...Yes.”

“...Not keen?”

“He threatened to drag me to it by force if I tried to get out of it.”

Duo chuckled again and tossed aside his empty dinner carton. It bounced off the rim of Wufei’s waste paper basket and landed neatly inside with a muffled ‘clang’.

“So you’ve been ducking out of the other ones on purpose?”

“...No comment.”

Wufei finished his meal and set the box aside more placidly, folding the top down to hold the dregs and spork inside. Sighing heavily, he looked back at his computer and his pile of folders. There weren’t many left, but suddenly they felt like a gargantuan undertaking.

“Anything I can help with?” Duo offered, reading Wufei’s expression.

“It’s classified.”

“Who am I gonna tell?”

A pause, a thought, a sigh, and a file was tossed towards Duo. He caught it and flicked it open pulling a face.

“Good god no wonder you’re bored! Why’re you looking through this shit?”

“Threats, nominal or otherwise, must be considered as real and imminent to ensure the safety of world leaders,” Wufei parroted. “Also, in my experience, it’s the threats you underestimate which blow you up.”

The braided man snorted and chucked the file back onto the desk.

“Well it’s certainly not something you need to be working late into the night over,” Duo told him decisively. “Sally’s right, you need to sort out your work-life balance.”

Folding his own empty carton closed and setting it aside, Wufei studied the other man. Duo hadn’t mentioned Saturday at all, and was possibly hoping Wufei wouldn’t bring it up either. There was a barely-noticeable string of tension running through him, giving a slight edge to his movements and speech - a familiar sight during the war, but rather out of place now. Wufei could work with that.

“You’re right,” Wufei said. “I think I’ve got just the thing to do instead.”
Whatever Duo had expected Wufei to say, he was certain it wasn’t that they continue with Duo’s training. Wufei had raided the stores to find them clothes - only able to come up with a pair of sweatpants each, but that would be sufficient - and then led the way down to the gym.

Duo had beaten him out onto the mats, and Wufei took a moment out of the changing rooms to take in the sight. He’d known Duo was still in shape - the freerunning had definitely abolished any doubts he might have had about that - but it was different to see the play of defined muscles under skin.

During the course of his life, Wufei had not spent a significant of time contemplating his sexuality. He could recognise attractive people but had never stopped to consider any more than an observation on the matter. He was aware enough of himself to know that he probably wouldn’t have thought any further on the subject about Duo, had he not been drawn to the man himself first.

At this juncture it was a rather moot point though, because he was definitely physically attracted to Duo. Very attracted.

The braided man was stretching - and how, he had definitely not grown any less limber as he’d aged - but seemed nervous, stopping and shaking himself off, bouncing and apparently trying to psyche himself up. Wufei cleared his throat and Duo spun to look at him, then tried to make it look casual. After the almost-kiss on Saturday, Wufei could guess fairly confidently what was behind Duo’s gaze as he stared at him.

Whilst he wasn’t vain, he was aware that training had kept him in peak condition. If the slight flush ghosting Duo’s cheeks was anything to go by, the American was definitely aware of that fact too, and the reaction stoked the heat curling in Wufei’s stomach, egging him on.

“Maybe we should leave it for tonight,” Duo said, and his voice cracked a little. “Y’know, you’re not supposed to exercise too soon after food anyway…”

“You’ll be fine,” Wufei told him, approaching, and if there was a predatory intent in his movements, he could perhaps be forgiven. “We can start slow.”

“…Great.”

Duo assumed a fighting stance, and flinched when, instead of mirroring him to begin sparring, Wufei circled around him, correcting his stance minutely. There wasn’t actually much that needed to be altered, but Wufei was honest enough to admit he was enjoying the chance to touch the other man, enjoying the feeling of firm muscles, and particularly enjoying the opportunity to throw Duo as off-kilter has he had felt the last two weeks.

He smoothed his hand down the other man’s spine, under the pretense of straightening his back and adjusting his shoulders, the sensation of warm skin under his palm rippling delightfully up his arm, making his own skin tingle deliciously. Like all of the other pilots, Duo’s body was covered in scars - some bigger, some barely visible - but other than that his torso at least was unmarked. Tattoos would have identified them during the war, easier to check you’ve got a Gundam Pilot if they have marks indelibly inked into their skin. He himself had never had much desire for anything, but he thought maybe Duo might have done. Although, there were places he couldn’t see…

Duo’s body was the tense of someone forcing themselves to look relaxed and not react to anything.
Wufei noted with amusement. Someone trying to look comfortable and not bothered in the situation they found themselves in, but as Wufei moved around the front he could see Duo’s eyes were closed, his mouth tight and his nostrils flaring slightly as he tried to keep his breathing measured.

“You should be balancing from here,” Wufei said, pressing his hand firmly against Duo’s stomach. “Your core is integral for keeping your balance when kicking.” And certainly, Duo’s core felt like it was in very good shape.

“Oh, okay,” Duo said, still not opening his eyes. “I get that you probably wanna thump me for... Saturday. Can we just get it over with, instead of setting up this ‘Gentleman’s Duel’ or whatever? I know you’ve got this whole honour gig and probably don’t wanna hit a defenceless man or something, but seriously, I owe you a free shot.”

“I’m not going to hit you Duo,” Wufei told him calmly, running his hands up Duo’s arms to adjust his guard, noting the strength in the biceps, the muscles in his forearms and wrists.

“...Seriously? Oh shit. You told Sally didn’t you? I swear I didn’t know there was anything - you said there wasn’t - but I guess no-one had made a move yet? Shit she’s gonna kill me…”

“I didn’t tell Sally, and I have no intention of telling Sally. It’s none of her business.” Wufei’s tone was mild, but a smirk was tugging at his lips as a slight frown creased Duo’s face, like he couldn’t believe he was getting off this easy.

“...If you’re not gonna hit me, and you’ve not told Sally, then what…?”

“I’m not involved with Sally,” Wufei said, firmly. “I’m not interested in Sally.”

There was a long pause, and then Duo’s eyes opened, trying to understand what he’d heard in Wufei’s voice. Confusion was clear as he studied Wufei’s expression, then dawning realisation and disbelief, and then - as he saw Wufei’s smirk widen - heat.

The braided man groaned as his control unravelled, the words might have been “Oh God”, and in an instant Wufei’s lips were crushed to Duo’s, a hand on the back of his head holding him in place, another arm wrapped firmly around his waist to pull him against a firm chest.

Wufei couldn’t have said what his hands were doing - he thought they were probably gripping Duo’s shoulders, and not capable of doing much more than holding himself up as his body was overwhelmed by sensation. After the initial crush, the pressure had lessened, but the kiss was still strong, short-circuiting his brain as Duo’s lips moved against his, each brush making his whole body tingle, and the occasional swipe of tongue had him making the most undignified noises he had ever produced. Not that he could find the will to particularly care at that point.

He hadn’t realised quite how much he’d wanted this until now, when every voice in his head quieted except for the one that had driven him to L2 in the first place, and without competition it was a clear, loud, pulsing need for Duo, and it was meeting every sensation Duo was producing with desperate demands for more, more, more.

It wasn’t the first time he’d been kissed, but it was the first time he had been kissed like this. Like Duo wanted to explore every inch of him, like he never wanted to let go. And it was the first time he had ever reacted to a kiss like this - hungry, hot and eager, feeling it through his entire being.

When they finally separated - with reluctance - shudders still ran through Wufei’s body and Duo tilted his head forwards to rest their foreheads together, their heavy breaths mixing in the small space. Evidently Wufei’s arms had decided to go exploring during the kiss, and one hand was buried in the
hair at the base of Duo’s braid, the other arm was curled up and around his shoulders, pulling them even closer into contact.

“Shit,” Duo huffed finally, with a slight chuckle. “That wasn’t quite as… smooth as I planned it.”

Wufei chuckled too, and then his grin turned wicked and he shifted. A split-second later, Duo was flat on the floor, blinking up at him and looking stunned. Once he had realised what had happened, he grinned back, and wrapped his legs around the Chinese man’s ankles, and brought him crashing to the mat beside him. He was over him and pinning his arms to the mat and leering down triumphantly.

“Should’ve known you’d like roughhousing,” Duo purred, and Wufei quirked an eyebrow at him with a lazy smirk, flexing as best he could under Duo’s weight and enjoying the shiver he felt run through his body at that, and the tightening of the grip on his wrists.

“Never take a draw when you can win,” he shot back, and Duo surged forward to kiss him soundly again.

This was definitely a sparring match that Wufei didn’t mind losing.

*

Chapter End Notes

Guys, thank you so much for reading, and all the super lovely reviews you're leaving. I'm so glad you're enjoying this - I hope it continues to live up to how nice you've been! :)

It had been late, and with some significant unwillingness, when they parted ways that evening. The workout hadn’t been quite what he had initially planned, but Wufei couldn’t quite bring himself to regret it. And if he was in a slightly better spirits than usual the next day, no-one commented on it.

Settling himself at his desk, with a large steaming mug of tea - Mao Feng, he’d been surprised to find some in the kitchen, which only contributed to his good mood - he grabbed the last of the remaining files which were awaiting review, anticipating that they’d be done by lunchtime and he’d be free to concentrate on something other than this ridiculous Gala for at least a few days.

That was as long as the hope lasted. The second file flagged an alert from the colony’s security cameras. Cursing, Wufei quickly checked through the others to see how many more he was going to have to follow up on, and noted with some relief that they were clear - all three remaining suspects were in Preventers’ custody already, on other colonies. It was just the one.

Marcus Welch. Links to a fascist group on Earth, had been cautioned previously for sending abusive messages to Relena, defacing peace memorials and aggravated assault. He was low-level, carrying a grudge and only on the watch list because he had managed somehow to get hold of Relena’s private address to send his hate mail to, and had been granted a solid restraining order after being rooted out of her shrubberies on three separate occasions.

The video footage from the port’s security cameras showed the man arriving two days previously, hustling through the crowd with a large duffle and a sullen expression. He’d shuffled out of the doors, climbed into a cab, and disappeared.

Wufei didn’t believe in coincidence.

* 

“You’re like a damn magnet for trouble,” Sally grumbled, flicking through the file Wufei had handed her. “Only you - only you - would have managed to find this.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Wufei said haughtily. “And point out that it’s not paranoia if I keep being right.”

He’d distributed copies of the files to Merrick, Sayid and Pearson and made locating Welch their priority. Lang, Shiels and Williams were reviewing the security plans for the Gala and had been instructed to strengthen any points of vulnerability - including triple-checking the credentials and identities of all media and catering staff. They had, naturally, been thrilled at the prospect.
“What are you going to do if we can’t find him before Relena arrives on Saturday?”

“I’ve already notified Yuy that there’s a potential risk on the colony, he’ll be on the lookout when they arrive. I don’t want to draw more attention to this than necessary - Welch is an amateur, if he panics he might act rashly, which could put civilians in danger.” Wufei took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “I’ve made arrangements to meet Yuy and Relena at Maxwell’s house - Yuy stays there regularly when he’s on the colony, so the visit won’t be suspicious, and I know it’s a secure location. I’m hoping I can coordinate with Yuy and Barton to ensure someone is with Relena at all times, and keeping her secure.”

“...Just Heero and Trowa?” Sally asked, closing her file and quirking an eyebrow at him.

“I’ll need you here so that if the teams find anything they can make contact immediately - “

“That’s not what I meant.”

Wufei folded his glasses up and shut them in their case, meeting Sally’s gaze.

“Maxwell and Winner aren’t Preventers,” he said, carefully. “So I cannot ask them for assistance, or inform them of the situation. However,” he continued, his lips twitching minutely into a smile, “they are close friends of the Foreign Minister, so they will naturally want to spend time with her on her trip. And anything she chooses to disclose to them is beyond my remit…”

Sally grinned back at him.

“I see,” she said, and stood. “Well, I hope that I’m able to spend some social time with Relena and the others. I’m certain this wasn’t quite the reunion Quatre was hoping for, but I bet you’re pleased to have found some work to get out of it.”

Wufei grunted and she chuckled, heading out of his office, with a parting order that he was taking her out for dinner that evening because the cupboard was bare and she didn’t want to eat out of cardboard again.

On Saturday morning, when they had been stood spitting fire at each other in his office, Wufei would have leapt on this work with both hands. Four days later, however, he was now wishing Welch to hell and back - he had a rather more appealing set of extra curricular activities with which to occupy himself, and his patience for low-grade thugs was presently exhausted.

Which meant the sooner they caught him, the better, on all fronts.

* 

Obvious in her manipulations, Sally had insisted that they go to the Low Bar for dinner, barely bothering to disguise her shallow intentions of throwing him into Duo’s path like some kind of human grenade and hoping that an explosion of barely-contained hormones would follow.

That had happened, of course, but her machinations had nothing to do with it.

Unfortunately, Duo was there and Sally waved brightly at him as they arrived, gesturing for him to join them once they were seated. Duo nodded, grinning at Wufei hungrily, but Wufei caught his eye
and shook his head once, minutely. Not here, not now. The other man quirked his eyebrow, tilting his head slightly, curious, but seemed happy to follow Wufei’s lead and continued as if nothing had happened between them.

He seated himself next to Sally, much to Sally’s disappointment, but managed to arrange himself so one of his legs was sandwiched between Wufei’s under table.

“How did saving the world go today, fellas?” Duo asked cheerily, as they tucked into their meals. “Can we continue to sleep soundly at night?”

“I’ve always been able to sleep soundly,” Sally told him coyly. “But I think Wufei could use some help.”

Wufei shot her a dirty look and didn’t dignify her comment with a response, eating his salad silently. Duo chuckled and looked thoughtful.

“Do we need to get you a teddy bear, Wu? Something to chase the boogey-man in the closet away?”

“If rumour is to be believed,” Wufei said dryly, “the boogey-man checks his closet for me.”

Duo seemed delighted by that comment, and even Sally laughed, and from there it was easy enough to steer the conversation onto other topics - how well the fundraiser had gone on Saturday (very), how many Preventers it took to move a filing cabinet (seven), and what Quatre might be planning for this ‘reunion’ (flamingoes were suggested).

The meal actually progressed fairly pleasantly, and Wufei had salvaged his mood by the time they all parted ways. Sally didn’t even tease him when she trundled down the corridor to her apartment, waving vaguely at him as she stifled a yawn with her other hand.

Entering his own apartment, his gun was drawn before he had switched the light on. Once he had registered exactly who was lounging on his sofa though, he holstered it slowly. Why bother with locks when you had friends like these?

Moving away from the door, he waited for Duo to explain how and why he came to be draped across the couch, head on one armrest, ankles crossed on the other, looking very at home.

“Wanna explain what all that was about?” Duo asked cheerfully, swinging his legs to the floor and standing in one smooth movement.

“...All what?”

Duo spread his hands wide, palms open, head tilted questioningly and smiling but there was a hint of something there. Wufei stepped back, cautious. That something was familiar, and not in a pleasant way. Duo was going to get his answer, or his alter ego was going to have to get it for him. That flash of Shinigami had frightened enough people in its time, and Wufei remembered what the full Shinigami entailed.

“I know you said you weren’t gonna tell Sally about Saturday,” Duo said. “But I kinda thought that was in a ‘she’s not my girlfriend’ sense, not a ‘she’s must never know’ sense.” Duo’s eyes sparkled slightly. “Is there something I’m missing here?”

“I’m… not comfortable telling her about… us,” Wufei said, aware that it was lame, but embarrassed to explain why. Duo’s eyes widened slightly, and he glanced around the empty apartment semi-theatrically as if the cheap furniture held the answers.
“Any reason why? 'cause I was getting the sense that she thinks you and I getting it on is a fucking great idea.”

Wufei winced. Damn that woman and her big mouth.

“I… don’t want her to interfere,” he muttered. “She’s convinced I’m madly in love with you, and -”

“Are you?”

“W-what?”

“Are you madly in love with me?” Duo repeated patiently, and he seemed to be studying Wufei’s face very carefully for an answer. After a long moment of stillness, and no answer, he continued. “I’d like to know, is all, ’cause this?” He waved his hand between the two of them. “This is kinda… it for me, if you wanna know the truth.”

It took a second for the full meaning to sink in, and once it had it was like a sucker punch. All Wufei could do was stare, dumbfounded, as Duo prowled across the room towards him, face calm but eyes strained.

“It as in, I didn’t even think I could hope this would ever happen,” he clarified, his voice dropping as he came nearer. Wufei fell back another step, and another, and found himself pinned against the counter in the little kitchenette. “As in, even my wildest dreams couldn’t believe I’d ever get here, whilst every part of me wanted it more than anything.”

Duo’s hands came down on the countertop on either side of him, and their foreheads nearly touched. “So, I guess you could say I’m a little… invested in the answer,” his voice was mild, but his shoulders were tense under his leather jacket. He huffed a short laugh. “I hadn’t planned on telling you this quite so soon, and I thought I’d be a bit smoother when I did, but it’d be good to know now what I’m nailing my colours to here.”

How was he supposed to even begin processing that, never mind responding to it? Wufei was capable of little other than staring, his mouth working silently whilst his mind skittered around like a cat wearing socks on lino, and handling it about as well. Emotional education had not come up much during his younger years – learning how to conduct relationships was a waste of time when a wife was to be chosen for him, and he had a clear path to follow. But Duo’s face was beginning to show the strain of the long silence and he had to say something…

“I… don’t know,” he admitted, quietly, ashamed. Duo breathed in deeply through his nose, nodded once and started to straighten, but Wufei grabbed his arms and held him in place, eyes focused firmly on Duo’s chest, as if talking to his shirt buttons would make this easier than talking to his face. “Whilst I… missed you after the war, I spent most of my time trying to ignore it. I was usually able to distract myself with work, but as time went on it was… harder to block out, and work was winding down and… that’s why I let Une send me here. But I didn’t know… It was only a week ago I realised I wanted anything more than friendship, that I wasn’t missing you as my friend, but that I… I felt something else.”

He huffed out a frustrated breath at his inability to express himself, to be honest and about emotions like this - but then for that he’d first have to understand them, have some experience of them, and… it had never come up.

“I don’t know if I’m… ‘madly in love with you’,” he finished quietly, “because I’m not entirely sure what that even means, or if I’m capable of it. And I don’t want to tell you I am and then find that
I’m… not.”

He jumped when he felt a gentle hand on his face and looked up to see Duo’s expression - a little sad, but understanding - and he flushed. He had thought that it was two healthy cases of lust between friends, but now there was so much more at stake.

“Besides,” Wufei muttered, looking away again, “Sally will think I did it because she told me to, and I refuse to give her the satisfaction. She already thinks she’s right far too often for my own good.”

At that Duo laughed, and then leaned down to kiss him, the tension dispersing like smoke. Unlike yesterday, this kiss was sweet, gentle, and simple, spreading warmth through Wufei’s body and trying to express through the touch of lips on lips all the feelings that Duo had revealed – all the years and dreams and cautious hopes, that Wufei couldn’t even begin to fathom, couldn’t comprehend how or why, and more than the kisses yesterday he felt like he was drowning in it.

When they parted, all he could do was blink dazedly at Duo and whisper

“…Why?”

“Why what?” Duo rumbled, brushing his nose over Wufei’s ear and heading down to nuzzle his neck. It was very distracting.

“Why… me?”

“What, are you fishing for compliments?” Duo chuckled, and straightened. “You because, aside from being extremely hot, which doesn’t hurt any lemme tell you,” he winked and Wufei wrinkled his nose in distaste, “but in all my life, in everything I’ve seen, I’ve never met anyone like you.”

His expression must have been skeptical, because Duo laughed again and stepped away.

“I should probably go,” he said breezily. “Much as I’d love to stay -” Pausing, he took a moment to rake his eyes slowly over Wufei where he stood and the temperature seemed to soar rapidly. He shook his head slightly with a wry smile, and continued. “Much as I’d love to stay, I think until you’re comfortable with other people knowing about this? Maybe we keep things as simple as possible.”

Wufei managed to nod - it made sense, and he certainly appreciated Duo’s understanding; but honestly the way Duo had just looked at him was making him want to throw sense out of the window. He settled for gripping the countertop a little more firmly, trying to kick his scrambled brain back into order, and managed to keep his voice fairly level as he wished Duo goodnight.

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Chapter End Notes

I AM SICK SO I AM POSTING THIS. WHATEVER.

I am basing Wufei's reactions on my own. I am bad at relationship change, and it always sent me spiralling whenever anything new happened. Particularly about sharing it with other people. It's a vulnerable feeling. Doesn't mean I'm not into it, but it very stressful
and leads to lots of overthinking. That's how I think Wufei feels. He is out of his depth and starting to panic, but he just needs Duo to be patient.
Wufei had spent the night drifting between sleep and waking, both of them seemed unreal and bizarre, and he struggled to distinguish reality from fantasy. He still couldn’t get his head around Duo’s confession, everything in him was screaming that it wasn’t possible. It was baffling to him that Duo thought he had anything to offer, enough to have thought about him – wanted him – for years. It hadn’t escaped Wufei’s notice that Duo hadn’t seen him since the end of the first war either. Not exactly a high point in his personality career, although he admitted freely that the chart for that was more of a pancake than a mountain range. He’d spent his time in books, battle or training, improving himself physically and intellectually, but leaving his emotional development trailing in the dust. It wasn’t useful, so why bother. It had taken him a shameful amount of time to realise that the other pilots and Sally weren’t just comrades and allies, but actual friends, and he still struggled to understand why.

He knew Heero had experienced similar difficulties following the war, but he had spent the year before Mariemaia with Duo, and following that he had been taken charge of by Relena, he had rather had a crash course in socialisation forced upon him. If the two weeks he’d spent with Duo were anything to go by, a year with him should have ironed out a significant amount of Heero’s issues.

That actually probably put Yuy at a more advanced stage of emotional self-awareness than Wufei, and that thought rankled.

And there wasn’t going to be much chance to explore the matter further in the imminent future, with the way things were going.

“What do you mean you’ve ‘sort-of’ found him?” he demanded, standing with Merrick and Sayid at Pearson’s desk, clustered around the computer. “Either you’ve found him or you haven’t.”

“We know which area he’s in,” Pearson explained, gesturing at the map on his screen. “But the cameras there are all being upgraded with the regenerations - we can’t track him within a three-block radius.”

“The taxi went in there after picking him up at the port,” Merrick said. “It was empty when it came out again. We’ve got no sign of him leaving on foot, and we’ve done our best to check with other vehicles but that’s unlikely too. None of his known associates are on the colony, or anyone linked to them.”

Wufei scrubbed his hand over his face and counted to three. Whilst this wasn’t what he had hoped for, it wasn’t the worst news in the world. Keeping it in perspective, they’d narrowed the location from the whole colony to a small area of buildings. Small enough that if things got bad they could probably find Welch just by going around knocking on doors.

“What’s in that area?” he asked, hoping the answer was ‘one big building with clear glass walls and no places to hide’, but that was probably unrealistic.
“A mix of old warehouses, converted offices and a few blocks of apartments which are due to be torn down soon,” Sayid told him. “Most of the apartment blocks have been emptied and the people rehomed, but there are a few squatters around. The warehouses are mostly small local businesses.” She glanced down at the tablet in her hand, listing off the information on there. “A packing company that boxes and distributes products from off-colony; an agricultural supply place specialising in organic fertilisers, hydroponic equipment and space-adapted apiaries.”

“Apiaries?” Wufei repeated flatly, bemused at the image of an agricultural company in central L2.


“I know what an apiary is,” he snapped.

“Bees are very sensitive to environmental changes,” Merrick told him with a placid smile. “They need the right conditions to thrive. Gravitational shifts in colonies and changes in artificial atmospheric pressure can upset the hive, and cause swarming, prevent honey production or just cause them to die off. It’s very difficult to be an interstellar apiarist. It’s an important area of orbital agricultural research.”

Wufei scowled at them - Sayid and Merrick seemed to find the situation quite funny, whilst Pearson looked like he was considering which fact about bees to share with the class.

“What else?”

“A storage facility with a load of lockboxes,” Sayid continued with her list, “Although that only opened last month so it’s unlikely he has anything stored there. And there’s a builder’s merchants, a ‘big shed’ evangelical church, and a second hand furniture warehouse. The last two are empty.”

He pressed his lips together in a firm line, holding in an annoyed sigh.

“See if you can narrow it down. By the end of the day I want this down to at least a single block so we can set up surveillance. We can’t move on him unless he does anything, but I want to be in position to intercept before he takes two steps towards the Foreign Minister.”

The trio nodded, although Merrick and Sayid looked less than thrilled about the potential of getting the area so narrowed in such a short time. Wufei ignored them and turned to speak to Shiels, Lang and Williams to see how their end was progressing.

“All the catering staff are legit,” Lang informed him cheerfully. “We’ve asked that they bring photo ID and be prepared for scanning on entry, we’re to be notified of any changes immediately, and any staff changed on the day are to be escorted to us for assessment before they’re let into the building.”

“The existing plans for the Gala look solid,” Williams continued. “Shiels is meeting with the hotel security now to check their systems, and we’ve made arrangements to brief the security contingents for all the delegates as they arrive.”

That, and the emails from Barton and Winner acknowledging the information he had sent, were about all he could hope with for now.

He had another message, on his phone. From Duo.

*What are you doing tonight?*

Followed immediately by another:
How about me?

In the privacy of his office, he didn’t bother to suppress his smile as he replied.

I thought we were keeping things simple.

Duo’s reply was almost instantaneous, and Wufei half-wondered if he’d been waiting to see what Wufei would say.

I’m very simple. Try me and see.

He chuckled at that, and put the phone away. He’d sort it out later.

*

“I fail to see how you continually breaking into my apartment fits with anything we discussed yesterday,” Wufei said dryly, closing the door behind him and shucking his jacket.

Duo shrugged carelessly, tossing aside the book he’d been reading and smiled brightly at him.

“Don’t wanna let you get complacent now,” he chirped. “Dinner’ll be done in about half an hour.”

Startled, Wufei glanced to the kitchen and realised the humming he’d heard was the tiny oven working away, the little light illuminating a casserole dish inside.

“You didn’t need to –”

“I also bought you some groceries ‘cause your cupboards were sad, man. Granola, rice and skim milk? I ate better when I was livin’ on the streets.”

“You really shouldn’t –”

“Have you even used the oven since you’ve got here? It was turned off at the wall and smelled like kitchen cleaner.”

“Duo -”

“I mean seriously, Chang, I’m beginning to wonder if you eat when I’m not here -”

Wufei managed to get him to shut up finally by standing over him and putting his hand firmly over his mouth. Duo stared up at him, and he braced for his hand to be licked - he was confident that Duo would happily stoop to that level of childishness - but instead the other man seemed to relax slightly, and his hands came up to gently hold Wufei’s hips, keeping him in place in front of Duo’s seat.

Unprepared for the rush of lust that slammed into him just from that gentle touch, through clothes, the feel of warm fingers somewhere he wasn’t usually touched - thumbs grazing the top of his thighs - his breath caught and something must have flashed across his face because he could feel Duo’s lips pulling into a smile under his palm, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“Duo,” he began again, quietly now he had his attention, “why are you here, really?”

Duo had the good grace to look sheepish as the hand was removed from his mouth. He didn’t move
his hands though, instead drumming his fingers where they lay as he tried to compile the response. Wufei covered them with his own, stilled the fingers, and waited. The moment was strangely peaceful, warm.

“I realise I kinda… blindsided you yesterday,” Duo started, “with… everything. I was worried you’d panic once you thought on it some more, and start pulling away. So… I didn’t wanna give you the chance to do that.” He glanced up through his bangs, quirking a grin. “And… I wanted to apologise. ‘Cause that wasn’t fair of me, to put all that on you. So, y’know, think of it more as a ‘FYI’, and I totally get it if you’re not interested in anything more serious, and I won’t… pressure you or anything. I got caught a bit off-guard with the Sally thing, is all, and overreacted. Don’t… don’t make any decisions ‘cause you’re worried about upsettin’ me or anything. Do what you wanna do.”

Wufei’s heart clenched in his chest as he met Duo’s eyes, the words echoing back to the that first dinner at Duo’s place - worried about overstepping, worried about taking things too far, worried about offending Wufei because of it.

“You never actually said… exactly what you felt,” Wufei pointed out softly, hesitantly.

“No, and I’m not gonna,” Duo told him firmly, but his tone was for reassurance, comforting, his hands squeezed Wufei’s hips - once, for emphasis. “It’s one of those things that can’t be put away once you’ve said it, and it’s not fair to either of us if I say it now. Maybe if you decide you’re up for this, but… not now.”

“I… appreciate this,” Wufei said. “But… I’m not going to just run off. When I thought it was just my… attraction, then yes, maybe, I hoped to leave without you finding out and… deal with it. But that changed when you showed interest, when we kissed.” He paused, trying to gather his thoughts to explain himself clearly. “Much as I am physically attracted to you, I value you so much more as… as a friend at the very least, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardise that… that baseline relationship.” He gripped Duo’s hands more tightly, waited until Duo met his eyes again, as he’d dropped his gaze. “I’m not saying that friendship is necessarily all I will ever want,” he insisted, “but as a starting point, it’s an important one for me. I wouldn’t do anything as dishonourable or callous as disregarding your feelings and - and happiness based entirely on my desires.”

“I get it,” Duo said gently. “It’s okay. Honestly, you don’t need to worry ‘bout me though. I’m pretty robust, certainly taken enough hits in my time to get used to it.” He gave a little chuckle, then froze, his eyes widened. “But, uh, don’t worry about that - that’s not… that’s not me saying that to get you to pity me or anythin’, it was… ah shit.”

“I wouldn’t be so crass as to pity you,” Wufei told him gently. “We’ve all had our tragedies, but you carry yours with more grace than most.”

Duo stood, the entire length of his body brushed across Wufei’s as he did so, causing tingles, a gasp. One hand stayed on his hip, keeping him close, but the other ghosted along his jaw - like it had the Saturday before, after the gig. Only this time, they weren’t interrupted before they could begin, and Duo’s lips met his.

Slow, and soft, and gentle, it started as a simple brush of skin which gradually deepened, tongues and lips, leisurely and tender. It never sped up, but the heat it caused built slowly, gradually, until Wufei’s hands were gripping Duo’s hips tightly, holding him close against him. The noises he was making were wanton and needy, but Duo was responding in kind, and it sounded so amazing it fuelled his desire further.

In fact he was beginning to lose interest in the plan not to complicate things, as he relished the feeling of being tightly pressed together, wanting to feel the skin beneath the soft cotton shirt and heavy
jeans, and was just about ready to just declare things complicated and have done with it. It was a mixed blessing when the reedy buzzer of the oven timer insistently cut through their blissful haze and brought them bumpily back to reality.

“Uh… sorry ’bout that,” Duo said after they broke apart. His voice was breathless and husky and it made Wufei want to let dinner burn and keep going.

“I’m not,” Wufei said, and the way Duo looked at him he knew they were sharing thoughts about the fate of whatever was in the oven.

It was with intense concentration he was able to drop his hands and step away, giving Duo space to move around him - although he still brushed past him more than was strictly necessary - and cleared his throat. Taking a moment to breathe deeply and try and get his thoughts, body and apparently raging hormones under control.

By the time he joined Duo at the tiny kitchen table, he was feeling more grounded. A plate of shepherd’s pie was set in front of him and Duo sat opposite with a similarly full plate and a cheerful grin.

“So, how come you didn’t bring your sword up with you?” Duo asked.

Wufei quirked an eyebrow at him.

“I’ll take that to mean you were rummaging through my things before I got home,” he said dryly.

“I didn’t go through your undies drawer, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Duo told him, unrepentant. “And you’re welcome to do the same next time you’re at mine. I’ve got nothing to hide from you.”

“You can’t be serious,” Wufei scoffed.

“I am. I’m kinda hoping you decide you wanna go long term here, so it won’t do me any good to hide shit from you.” Duo shrugged a shoulder. “How come you left your sword at home?”

“It’s a weapon, not a security blanket,” Wufei said. “And, evidently, the security here is not as good as at home, so it's probably safer there.”

Duo grinned at him, and waggled his eyebrows.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Chang, I’d probably be able to get in there too.”

“Calamitous. There’s nowhere I can escape you.”

Despite not having much interest in the meal immediately before it was dished up, Wufei had to admit it was a good shepherd’s pie. He watched Duo out of the corner of his eye as he finished up his plate and stood to get a drink. He surely couldn’t be serious about not having anything to hide?

“Where did you learn to cook?” he asked.

Duo sat back in his chair, legs stretched out underneath and feet bumping casually against Wufei’s.

“Back during the war,” he said. “You remember the first time Heero stuck his head between his legs and kissed his ass goodbye?” Wufei pulled a face at the metaphor, but nodded. “Well, I was hiding out with Quatre. We stayed with the Maguanacs a bit, but then had to go solo. About… 6 weeks I think? Start of June to end of July when we headed to space. Just the two of us…”
Duo grinned at the dawning realisation on Wufei’s face and the look of horror that followed.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” he chuckled. ‘I’d never been in a kitchen ‘cept when I snuck in to steal stuff, Q’d never needed to cook anything, so… Well, we could heat up soup from a tin alright, but you get sick of soup pretty quick. Particularly in the Middle East, in the height of summer. And, uh, trying other stuff was a bit messy. Rice – man, that was the hardest to start with. I burned through two pans ‘cause I didn’t put enough water in, or left it too long, or both… then I made Quatre sick giving him undercooked rice… And man, I think the only reason I wasn’t sick more was ‘cause of all the shit I’ve eaten in my life – my acquired immunity must be through the roof, ‘cause I’m certain I ate at least one raw chicken that Q dished up before I realised.”

Wufei could imagine, vividly. Quatre didn’t cook much still – although mostly it was because he was too busy to take the time to cook – but whilst he had a few stock recipes he could roll out when he wanted, if he tried anything new it usually took a few attempts before he managed to nail it fully, and with his schedule he didn’t often have the spare time or the patience for it. He had learned quickly not to volunteer to be Quatre’s culinary guinea pig.

“It was a hole in my skill set,” Duo continued with an off-handed shrug. “I filled it. You’d’ve done the same.”

Would he, Wufei wondered. He wasn’t exactly great at admitting when he was weak at something. Although the last few weeks had made some of his gaps increasingly obvious.

He moved to begin the washing up, and Duo stood next to him with a tea towel at the ready. There wasn’t much room for both of them, and they bumped elbows frequently, but Wufei found he didn’t mind so much. He didn’t have much experience with domesticity in this sense – whilst he had learned more self-sufficiency than Quatre growing up, he had never seen this kind of casual companionship in the home. People of his clan – well, the people he encountered at least – were reserved, strict and not particularly tactile or expressive.

Perhaps that was why Duo’s touches affected him so much. He wasn’t used to tenderness, and he didn’t know how to deal with it. His experience was brusque manners, polite but distant, and chiding for over-dependence. It had taken him long enough to learn to accept support in battle after that.

Could he learn to accept it elsewhere? And was it Duo he really wanted it from, or was his affection-starved brain just latching on to the first show it had received of open, undemanding warmth? Was he even capable of returning it when all he’d ever been taught was to reject such shows of weakness?

Certainly he wasn’t struggling to return the physical aspects. And, realistically, he knew that he wasn’t just latching onto Duo’s interest – he had been thinking of Duo for years before he’d even seen him again.

What it came down to – what it always came down to – was his own fear of failure, and of weakness. Weakness in showing affection, drilled into him from childhood, and weakness in being unable to show affection, and letting Duo down because of his own failings.

“…Can you see the future in those suds, or what?”

Duo’s voice broke through his reverie, and he realised he’d been staring blankly down into the empty sink, all the dishes now done. He pulled the plug abruptly, and took the towel from Duo to dry his hands.

“I’m… not good at this,” Wufei declared, to Duo’s bemusement.
“This what?”

“This,” he gestured between the two of them, a little frustrated and embarrassed. “But not just this, with us – everything, with people in general. I’ve told you that before. It doesn’t come naturally.”

Duo looked at him sympathetically, with a small smile.

“You need to chill out,” he said. “Get out of your head a little bit. No-one’s particularly great at navigating social stuff all the time – that’s just part of bein’ people.”

“I don’t want to get this wrong.”

“You won’t,” Duo assured him. “Promise.”

Wufei wished he were so confident.

*

Chapter End Notes

- Apiary is such a fun word. As is apiarist. I wish there were more occasions in my life where I got to use those words.

- Duo's history of rice cooking is my history of rice cooking. We used to have a steamer, until it melted. The first time I tried to cook it in a pan, I burned one pan, melted a chopping board when I put the pan down on it, then burnt through the next pan. I also made my now husband sick by feeding him undercooked rice. I'd say it's a wonder he married me, but he once superglued his hand to his shoe while he was wearing it. The real wonder is that we haven't burned our house down.

- ALSO OMG GUYS. You may have noticed, but Salvage has topped 1000 hits. I am touched and speechless that so many people are reading this and being so supportive and friendly. THANK YOU.

To celebrate, I'm going to run a little COMPETITION! (unnecessary caps lock to catch the eye of a people who skim the notes)

The prize is that I'll write a fic for the winner on the prompt of their choice. If it's 2x5x2 then I'll post it for 2x5 day on 2nd May! But if it's your choice.

The easiest way to me seems to be to enter people who drop a comment on this chapter, or who reblog the chapter post on my tumblr here:
http://chronicwhimsy.tumblr.com/post/158551201692/salvage-chapter-14

Multiple reblogs will be counted, but please don't spam the shit out of your followers.

I'll do a random draw and announce the winner in a couple of weeks!
They had agreed that they’d see each other again on Saturday, to give Wufei some space to think about things without further distractions. Given as they’d managed to get distracted twice more before Duo made it out the door that evening, perhaps that was a wise decision.

He was amused and touched to see that Duo had packed up dinner into two tupperwares - a portion each for the next two evenings, and as he had gone to put them in the fridge he’d even discovered a lunch made to take into work the next day. Evidently becoming involved with Duo would involve a fair amount of chasing about eating. He’d have to start working out harder to ensure he didn’t inflate.

At work, progress had been made as well. Welch had been tracked to one of the empty warehouses and by Friday afternoon the first stakeout shift was underway.

“Anything, Williams?” Wufei asked. The readings they were getting from the equipment were useless. They’d managed to setup one camera looking through a window high in the warehouse wall, but it only showed half the warehouse, leaving the bit underneath the window totally blind.

“Nothing,” Williams grumbled back over the phone. “This dude is too boring to be a terrorist. Can I come back now?”

“As insightful as that observation is, no,” Wufei told him dryly. “He’s still not left?”

“No,” Williams said. “He’s ordered pizza. Bet it was cheese, because that’s how boring he is. Plain cheese. Is pizza in the surveillance budget?”

“You should have supplies there.”

“We do but fucking Lang got them and he turned up with all these weird potato chips.”

“How dare you!” came Lang’s voice, just about suppressing laughter. “Monster Munch are a corn snack you philistine.”

“Whatever the hell they are, I’m not eating anything that’s ‘Pickled Onion’ flavour.”

“I offered you the Cheetos, you said no. That’s on you.”

“Merrick and Pearson are going to come relieve you in four hours,” Wufei told him. “You’ll have to hold out until then, or eat the… pickled onion corn snacks. And you’ll know next time to bring your own provisions.”

“You’re cold, Chang,” Williams said sourly, but finished all professionalism. “We’ll check in before then if there’s any movement. There’s been no activity on the landline we tapped, so he must be using a cell, but we’ll see if we can get any bugs inside somehow.”

“Don’t get seen.”
“Roger.”

Sayid had already pulled up the details for the pizza company who had delivered, and was calling them up to get the phone number Welch’s order had come from. He left her to it. It would be helpful to try and trace the phone if they could, but it was just as likely he had a data jack that he was using which wouldn’t be so easy to hack into.

Back in his office, he had the arrival times for Heero, Relena, Trowa and Quatre the next day, and all confirmed they’d meet at Duo’s.

“Do you want to head over together?” Sally asked, sticking her head in the door.

“Hm?”

She waved her phone at him, where she’d been copied into the same email.

“Duo’s. Tomorrow. Want to head over together?”

“Oh.” He paused, looked at his desk blankly. He really didn’t want to first time he saw Duo in two days to be with Sally there. Not that he had come to any grand conclusions over Thursday or that morning, and he wasn’t anticipating an emotional epiphany to occur any time that evening, gifting him with the sudden ability to understand and interpret his feelings. “No, I’ve got to come into work first.”

Sally rolled her eyes and snorted.

“Of course you do.” She stuffed her phone back in her pocket and turned to leave. “Don’t you dare turn up in your uniform though. Let’s pretend you’ve got something else going on in your life aside from work.”

“If the alternative is suffering the indignity of you choosing my clothes for me like I’m a child, then yes,” Wufei muttered, and he heard Sally laughing as she headed back down the hall.

He didn’t really have anything to do in the office on Saturday morning, but he went in anyway just to avoid having to outright lie to Sally. The building was empty, and he actually had a long and pleasant workout. After that, he checked his emails for any further updates and checked in with Shiels and Sayid who had just taken up positions watching the lone-occupied warehouse.

“I checked the records,” Sayid told him, “and he’s there legitimately. The owner leased it out to him for a month since their long-term tenant’s not due for another three, so it was just sitting empty otherwise. They never met though, and he paid upfront, through an online payment company.”

“Why would he pay for a whole month? Why a warehouse and not… a motel or something?”

“Beats me, but he’s had pizza for the last three meals. Maybe all the cheese has addled his brain.”

“How are your supplies?” he asked, dryly.

“We haven’t braved the Monster Munch yet, if that’s what you mean,” Shiels called, from somewhere else in the room.

“We’ve got some trail mix, and salads for later,” Sayid chuckled.

“And twizzlers!”

“And twizzlers.”
“I’ve got my phone with me,” Wufei told them with a smirk. “Anything that comes up you can get hold of me immediately.”

“I don’t imagine we’ll see anything yet,” Sayid assured him. “If he were going to do anything today he’d have headed out already, I would think. I’d suspect he’s working from her published itinerary and it’ll be next week we’ll have to pay more attention, when she’s on official duties. Go on, have a nice weekend. We’ll speak to you on Monday.”

*

Walking to Duo’s, Wufei found himself becoming increasingly nervous. It wasn’t a feeling he had encountered often in his life, but somehow in the last few weeks it had become a more regular fixture of his psyche. Largely in his dealings with Duo. True to Sally’s instructions, he wasn’t wearing his uniform – a blue, soft cotton button down shirt and his jeans were the order of the day. His jeans had never been worn so frequently. He was, however, wearing his work boots, because they were comfortable and the only shoes he’d brought with him aside from his trainers.

The boots carried him to Duo’s door, and he hesitated a split-second before letting himself inside rather than ringing the bell. He’d been given the fob for a reason, he might as well use it.

The garage was empty, but he could hear music and headed towards it. It was loud, guitar-heavy and as he drew nearer he could just about make out the lyrics about ‘cheap sunglasses’. Knocking on the door to the workshop, the music cut out and Duo called for him to come in. He guessed that he was the first one here – he should have been, but he wouldn’t have put it past Sally to be early and try to make herself ‘useful’.

Duo was at the drafting table on the far end of the room, perched on a tall, wheeled chair. He leaned back when Wufei came in, twisting the chair to grin at him as he approached.

“Hey,” he greeted Wufei, sounded genuinely and intensely pleased to see him. He twiddled his pencil between his fingers before tucking it behind his ear.

“Hello.” Wufei stood beside him and gave him a small smile back. He gestured at the large pad on the desk. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out.” Duo wheeled the chair back slightly to let Wufei move closer, and manoeuvred himself so he could watch his reactions, one leg propped up on the bar lower down the chair, his thighs either side of Wufei whilst he studied the work, warm against him.

It wasn’t a sketch pad, as he had initially thought, but a mechanical pad – thin blue grid covered the paper. The drawings fit with this – rather than being sketches, they were more technical diagrams of the sculptures planned from a number of elevations, with carefully noted scales and scrawled shorthand memos across the page, exploded illustrations of specific parts or connections. It was like a mechanical manual rather than an artist’s portfolio.

The current image was a half-finished, a recreation of Deathscythe stood proud with its scythe.

“It’s for a museum in Leeds,” Duo explained. “They specialise in the history of warfare and weaponry. They wanted a set of all of them, so… started with my buddy.”

“It seems too recent to be considered history.”
“You’ve been to Budapest, right?”

“Yes…?” Wufei glanced at him, puzzled at the seeming non-sequitur.

“Did you make it out to the statue park?”

Wufei shook his head - all the times he’d visited the city had been for work, with little time for sightseeing.

“Okay, so waaay back after World War 2, Hungary was occupied by Russia - the Soviet Union.” Duo grinned at Wufei’s nod, aware that he was familiar with the history. “Well, when they finally pulled out, most of the countries they invaded destroyed all these statues they’d built, except for Hungary. They rescued as many statues as they could, some from other countries, and built this park to keep them all in. They figured that it was important that what had happened be remembered, so it wouldn’t happen again.”

“A nice idea,” Wufei said. “Shame it didn’t work.”

Duo shrugged.

“Maybe it did, maybe it didn’t. But if we keep making sure people don’t forget, maybe eventually people will learn.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Wufei started to flick through some of the other pages. The owl, stood on the workbench behind him; the falcon from back in Brussels; an elephant, reaching up with its trunk; a firefighter and hose, braced against the pushing force of water; a kneeling angel; and near the start, the cross that Merrick had told him about.

Glancing sideways he saw Duo watching him, chin propped on his hand and dreamy look on his face. Smiling slightly more widely, he brushed his fingers across the picture.

“I want to hear about this one,” he said, quietly, not wanting to break whatever bliss had settled over the other man.

“Okay,” Duo agreed, his voice almost a sigh.

“...Not now, though.”

“No.” Duo seemed to shake himself back to sharpness and straightened, still smiling. “It’s a bit of a long one, we probably don’t have time anyway.”

Almost as if it had been waiting for its cue, the doorbell buzzed. Duo twisted to look at the tablet he had propped up on the shelf beside the desk and peered at the camera feed that had popped up on it.

“Speak of the Devil,” he said cheerfully. “Looks like Relena and Heero are in the middle of a lively discussion. Can’t wait to hear it.”

He stood, grabbing the tablet and unlocking the front door, then slipping his hand into Wufei’s to tug him over to the workshop door and pulling it ajar. Voices echoed across the garage.

“...If I want to go to the bar, I’m going to go to the damn bar! I like the bar. You’re being ridiculous.”

“There is a literal threat to your life on this colony, you don’t seem to grasp that.”

“If I stopped living my life every time someone looked at me sideways I’d never leave my room. Although you’d probably approve of that.”
“Since I met you, you have been kidnapped on four separate occasions. Over five years. That is not a normal ratio for anyone, and it doesn’t exactly speak volumes for your approach to personal security.”

“You need to stop talking to my mother so much. You wind each other up.”

“Your mother has a point!”

“Go be her bodyguard then.”

“One day you are going to get shot. And it will probably be by me, to put you out of my misery.”

“Oh well if you’re the greatest threat to my life, then I’m going to live forever. You’ve been promising to kill me for years, and you’ve not managed it yet.”

Duo let out a delighted cackle and headed out of the workshop. Wufei trailed behind to see Relena and Heero at the bottom of the stairs up to Duo’s apartment. Relena spotted Duo and laughed, skipping over to him for a tight hug, whilst Heero met Wufei’s eyes over Duo’s shoulder and shared a long-suffering look that Wufei understood deeply. He’d helped to guard Relena on a number of occasions, and she never made it easy.

“Wufei, it’s good to see you,” said the Foreign Minister in question, pulling away from Duo and turning to him with a warm smile. He could see why she was such a good politician, you almost couldn’t tell she was lying. Could almost believe she really was glad to see him.

Given as the last time they had spoken, he had been assisting on her security detail and he had chewed her out pretty thoroughly for disappearing into a crowd to talk to people, he was certain that she could have gone a good long while without seeing him again. Heero had agreed with him, at least, but that hadn’t helped his argument in her eyes, and she had made that very clear at the time. Although, dressed in leggings, a pretty blue dress and ballet pumps, with her hair back in a french braid, she looked nothing like the indomitable politician she did in her suit. She almost looked her age today. But he remembered what happened to people who underestimated Relena Peacecraft.

He was fully expecting that they would make their excuses quickly once the business was over, but if they didn’t he would, to spare them the awkwardness. Besides, they would probably enjoy spending time with Duo without him there unbalance the interactions.

The door buzzed again, and Trowa and Quatre were let in, escorted by Sally.

“Look who I found, loitering outside and making the place look untidy,” Sally called. “Hi Relena, Heero. Are we all friends today?”

Heero grunted and looked away.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’, then,” Sally chuckled, winking at Relena. “What’ve you done to upset him now?”

Quatre pulled Wufei into a giant hug. He’d been braced for it, it happened every time they saw each other. Trowa nodded at him over Quatre’s shoulder, and began walking up the stairs with Heero.

“You guys have twenty minutes to talk shop,” Duo told them, chivvying the rest of them towards the stairs and bringing up the rear. “Maximum. We’ve got catching up to do.”

Wufei had time to register that before he was shoved through the door of Duo’s apartment and saw
that Duo had acquired an extra dining table from somewhere and shoved it against his other one. It was surrounded by mismatched dining chairs and set for seven people. Bottles of drinks were lined up on the kitchen counter, and he’d even dragged an extra sofa from somewhere to up the seating space in his ‘living’ area.

“If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed,” Quatre murmured in his ear, as he stood, frozen just inside the doorway. Wufei looked at him just in time to see the smirk before he moved on to go say hello to Relena.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Duo asked quietly, pulling the door closed behind them. “It was Quatre’s idea, but I thought this’d be more comfortable for you than booking out a restaurant or somethin’.” There was a pause. “You okay?”

Wufei realised that his hands had clenched reflexively into fists and he relaxed them quickly. He already had visions of how this was going to go, how it usually went when he got wrangled into being social. Long silences, awkward questions and then everyone wishing that they hadn’t bothered in the first place.

He’d got away with it so far with the Preventers here based on his own novelty factor and Duo’s charm. Neither of those things were going to help him now.

“I’m fine,” he muttered. “I’m not sure how long I can stay though.”

“Oh.” Duo looked a little disappointed, but covered it. “That’s cool, there’s a lot going on. And they’re here for the week, so I’m sure we can sort somethin’ out again later when we’ve caught this guy.”

Yes. That was why they were all meeting here in the first place. He moved over to where Heero was stood, nearly kicking Hrothgar as she tore across the room and began to wrap herself around Trowa’s legs, meowing demandingly. She only quieted when Trowa scooped her up, and she pressed herself against his chest, paws clinging to his shoulders and her nose pressed up into his neck, purring loudly. Duo rolled his eyes and Trowa shrugged.

“I can’t help it if your cat likes me more than you.”

“I hope she dribbles down your collar,” Duo said sourly.

Heero thrust an envelope at Duo, clearly disinterested in the affections of Duo’s cat. Duo took it, and peered inside confused.

“You’re officially a member of Relena’s personal security team,” Heero informed him. “So you can be privy to these talks.”

“Sweet.” Duo pulled out a sleek black earpiece and an ID card, admiring his photograph on the card as he stuck the device in his ear. “Does this mean I get a payrise?”

“No.”

“Wow, who negotiated my contract?”

“Quatre’s currently working with Relena as a personal security consultant,” Heero told Wufei. That made things easier, then. Everyone in the room was now in-the-know.

“We’ve managed to identify Welch’s location,” Wufei told them, passing out his own envelopes to
Trowa, Heero and Relena. “We’ve got teams taking 12-hour surveillance shifts, monitoring him - now you’re here Barton, I’ve scheduled you in to assist with those. Une has been notified you’re on duty. Unfortunately we’ve not been able to get anything but a limited visual feed inside the building, but we are certain he’s not left. As far as we’re aware, he has no contacts on the colony, but we’re not assuming he’s operating alone.”

Heero nodded curtly.

“At least one person is to accompany Relena at all times,” he took over where Wufei left off. “You’ve all got copies of her schedule, I’ve assigned everyone to a shift.”

“And what about when I have to go to the bathroom?” Relena asked mildly, from where she was perched on the arm of the sofa, glass of wine already in hand.

Heero glanced at her.

“That’s why Sally is here,” he said, as if it were obvious.

“Oh for goodness’ sake!”

“He’s joking, ‘Lena,” Duo soothed, although from Heero’s expression he absolutely wasn’t. Sally was trying very hard to keep a straight face.

“Whilst on paper this man isn’t a high level threat, he’s repeatedly attempted to approach you, and has a record for being violent and unpredictable,” Wufei reminded Relena firmly, and got an Olympic-class eye roll for his troubles. “Your safety is important for the sake of a lot more people than just yourself. Aside from the political and personal implications, Welch has shown himself to care very little about collateral damage. If he’s allowed to get into a position where he could cause harm, innocent people could get hurt.”

Relena sighed and looked apologetic.

“You’re right, of course you’re right,” she grumbled, to Wufei’s surprise. He’d expected another fight, like the last time they had spoken. “Fine, just tell me where I need to be and when. I’ll behave myself. At least I’ll have the best looking security team in history.”

Quatre let out a snicker, and Trowa smirked.

“Aw ‘Lena,” Duo purred. “Keep sayin’ nice things like that and I’ll have an incentive to keep you alive.”

“Can we go to the bar and get cocktails?” Relena asked, perking up.

Duo shook his head whilst Heero glared at him, but started nodding when he looked away - seamlessly switching back to shaking his head when the Japanese man glanced back at him suspiciously.

“How are things generally, Heero?” Quatre asked politely, trying to stop their friend attempting to set Duo on fire with his mind, as the braided man headed over to the kitchen, Relena and Sally following to camp out near the wine.

“Fine.” A pause. “Relena’s started reading up on Socialism.”

“Socialism?” Wufei raised his eyebrows. “She lives in a mansion .”
Heero spread his hands and widened his eyes slightly, saying very clearly ‘*I* told her that, do *you* want to tell her that?’

“Don’t worry,” Trowa said, placing a reassuring hand on Heero’s shoulder. “People tend to get more conservative as they age. By the time she’s fifty, she’ll be an excellent Moderate.”

It wasn’t clear whether the comment was supposed to make Heero feel better - instead he just looked mildly alarmed at the prospect of Relena still being in politics when she was fifty.

“Who wants what?” Sally called from the kitchen, waving bottles at them.

Trowa and Heero headed in her direction. Wufei glanced at the door and wondered if he could disappear whilst everyone was distracted, but Quatre was suddenly blocking his escape route and smiling at him innocently. Too innocently.

“I brought some of that wine you like,” Quatre told him, guiding him over to the others.

“You know, you wouldn’t need to bother if you’d just tell me where you got it,” Wufei grumbled, giving in and being steered.

“Yes, but then you’d have no incentive to spend any time with me,” the blonde said with a smug chuckle.

Wufei glowered at him as Sally handed him a full glass of wine. Duo was presiding over two large frying pans with chicken, peppers and onions in, and a spicy smell was starting to fill the room. Relena was setting out bowls of grated cheese and shredded lettuce on the table, dishes with salsa, sour cream and guacamole were placed alongside plates with tortillas on. Fajitas were obviously the order of the day. As she worked, Relena chatted happily.

“And Senator McKinnon asked *again* when Heero was going to ‘make an honest woman out of me’,” she said, putting on a gruff voice for effect. “So I told him that if I became honest my career as a politician would be over, and then added another year on the wait, which means that we won’t be getting married for… Heero, how old will I be when we get married?”

“43,” Heero supplied obediently.

“That’s right!” she laughed.

“How do you feel about her constantly pushing back your nuptials?” Sally asked Heero.

“She can push them back forever, for all I care. It’s nonsense.”

“Shut up, Heero, of course we’re going to get married,” Relena told him breezily, moving around the table and straightening all the cutlery. “But I’m damned if I’m going to do it because some crusty old Conservative wants me to stop offending his delicate sensibilities. And I’m certainly not doing it at 20 years old!”

Wufei glanced at Heero to see how he was taking the declaration, but he had clearly heard this many times before, and was more concerned with selecting a beer. He passed one to Trowa without looking and the taller man took it, shifting Hrothgar up to drape across his shoulder and around his neck like a scarf. The expression on Duo’s face was clearly disgusted.

“I don’t know what you do to this cat when I’m not here,” Trowa told him mildly, “but she’s clearly starved for affection.”
“How’s your MBA going, Quatre?” Sally asked loudly, over Duo’s very rude response.

“How’s your MBA going, Quatre?” Sally asked loudly, over Duo’s very rude response.

“Done!” Quatre looked relieved just thinking about it. “I graduate in July.”

“With a Distinction,” Trowa added, quietly proud. Quatre looked both pleased and embarrassed.

“Of course you did!” Relena looked annoyed. “It was ridiculous that your shareholders made you do one in the first place!”

“No, it’s fair enough,” Quatre said. “I was a very risky bet, given my age. Now they have it on paper that I’m qualified they should settle down.”

“Like the stuff you’d done for the company wasn’t proof enough that you were qualified.” Duo shook his head in disbelief, and began to dish the contents of the saucepans into a few large bowls.

“Wu, could you pass me some big spoons from that drawer?”

Suddenly being addressed started Wufei out of the reverie he’d fallen into, and he turned to the drawer he was stood in front of, mechanically retrieving the large serving spoons from it and passing them to Duo.

The situation was fairly surreal - he was very aware that this was the first time he had been in a room with all these people at the same time since the end of the war. Their rapport was clear and easy, but he was apart - he had always been apart.

Duo’s fingers brushed his as he handed the spoons over and he looked up to see a warm smile and reassurance in violet eyes. Warmth curled in Wufei’s stomach - perhaps he wasn’t quite so apart this time. Perhaps things were different.

The moment must have only lasted a split-second, because the next thing he knew he was being pushed into a chair, with Sally and Quatre on either side of him at the table - blocking his escape routes he was certain - and the others filled in around him, passing dishes across each other with shouts and laughter.

“Music!” Relena demanded. “Come on Duo, what kind of party is this?”

“Jeez, you’re Queen of the World for like three weeks and suddenly you just want everything,” Duo grumbled, sliding into the seat across from Wufei with his tablet. “Alright, alright.” One of Duo’s legs stretched out under the table, sliding between Wufei’s and nudging his foot gently. “Aw, this one’s fun, I think you’ll like this.”

Wufei glanced up just in time to see the wink Duo shot him before the music started playing and the tablet was tossed aside. Peppy guitar riffs rolled out across the room, upbeat and fun. His foot was nudged again just as the lyrics began and his hand twitched as he registered them.

Sitting here so close together

So far we’re just friends,

but I’m wondering whether I -

Am I just imagining?

You -

Have you really got a thing for me?
Like I think you do when I see you smile
And that smile’s for me...

The chorus kicked in and he just about managed to disguise his flinch. Just.

Hey! You! I wanna be your boyfriend!
Tryna say I wanna be your number one!
Hey! You! I wanna be your boyfriend!
Gonna make you love me before I’m done...

Relena laughed delightedly.

“Oh that’s cute!” she declared, clapping her hands and nodding her head to the rhythm.

“I didn’t realise you liked salsa so much,” Quatre observed, glancing at the large dollop of the stuff that had ended up on Wufei’s tortilla.

“I’ve been getting more fond of it,” Wufei said, and was pleased his voice sounded normal. He reached for the bowl of cheese nearby and caught Trowa looking at him, his face mildly curious. Deciding that ignorance was probably bliss, he looked away, turning his attention to folding up his fajita carefully.

“We should all come to your graduation, Q!” Duo declared. “You’re the only one of us that’s done it, we should celebrate!”

“Wufei’s got his degree,” Quatre pointed out.

“I didn’t attend graduation,” Wufei said. “It would have been a charade for me to do so, when I didn’t really work for the qualification. You should do something to make note of this.”

“It’s in London, right?” Sally asked.

“Yes, LSE.” The blonde man looked simultaneously touched and worried that people were going out of their way for him.

“I’ve not been out in London in ages,” Relena said wistfully. “I’m usually there for work. Let me know the date, Quatre and I’ll book it in!”

“You really don’t need to,” he protested.

“Of course we’re gonna come!” Duo waved his spoon at him to cut off any argument. “I’m free then, Relena’s bookin’ in for her and Heero, and it’s an easy trip from Brussels for Sal and Fei, right guys?”

Caught by surprise, Wufei nodded automatically, and then realised what he’d agreed to. Sally was watching him with a broad grin, and he busied himself with his fajita, avoiding looking at her. Ambushed by one reunion and now he’d agreed to another one. He really wasn’t on his best form.

The music wasn’t exactly helping keep him sharp. The song had changed, but it wasn’t any better.

One way or another, I’m gonna find ya,
He looked at Duo but whilst the other man was grinning, he was also chatting happily to Relena, making plans for the trip to London and didn’t seem entirely aware of what was playing. Glancing around the table the others weren’t noticing either, although Trowa kept fixing him with that curious, measuring gaze.

Resolving that perhaps he was just being paranoid - trapped in a social situation he’d had no warning about, it made sense that he was somewhat twitchy - he drank some more wine and tried to continue to at least pretend to be normal. Perhaps once dinner was over he could slip away and go regain his balance.

He should have known better.

*

Chapter End Notes

- Monster Munch are probably the greatest British snack of all time. There are only two flavours - Roast Beef (which tastes nothing like actual beef) and Pickled Onion. The Pickled Onion ones have such a sharp bite to them when you eat the first one your face just pinches up like wow. They're amazing.

- I mentioned the Leeds museum in the second chapter notes! It's the Royal Armouries, and if you ever get a chance you should go. It's free entry, huge, and has a working smithy. They do demonstrations of jousting and falconry as well, plus every year they host a big comic art festival.

- Memento Park in Budapest is where the statues are stored. It's touted in the guidebooks as kitschy, but when I went it was a grey, cold days and not busy, so it was pretty eerie. The statues were incredible and awesome and intimidating. You don't understand until you're stood in front of this gargantuan statue, knowing these would have been everywhere, looming over everyone. It's important these things were preserved, to understand how it felt and to stop it happening again.

- Relena has been held hostage four times! Let's count together: after her father gets assassinated she's grabbed and drugged by the freedom fighters (yes they let her go, but it'd still count as a kidnap), by Romefeller after she surrenders Sanc, by Zechs on Libra (she was locked in her room), and then by the Barton Foundation. That's not counting when Treize sends Noin after her (ostensibly for protection, but lbr she goes where Treize wants her to go), the story of when her whole family were held hostage as a child (and was rescued by Zechs, it's in one of the Manga?) Or the capture from Preventer Force Five (which isn't in line with this fic's timeline).

- I have noticed in a lot of fics that people shy away from having Relena say 'damn', treating it like a swear word. Damn as a real swear is pretty archaic in the UK, and I imagine most of the rest of Europe too. As such, 'damn' is used pretty commonly over here. Given as, based on maps, Sanc is based in Denmark, and Scandinavia is generally even more atheist than the UK, I don't think Relena would be squeamish about it at all.

- My cat dribbles when she's happy, apparently that's a thing some cats do when they
are super content. And that's why she's not allowed in our bedroom at night.

- You can try to tell me Relena isn't a total screaming leftie, but I won't believe you. She espouses pacifism and disarmament, and in the less-than-a-month she was Queen of the World she erased all national boundaries. She gave up her title and kingdom for the sake of peace. She's very European-left in her thinking.

- LSE is London School of Economics, part of the wider University of London. It's a world renowned institution and particularly known for the children of prominent families studying there. Especially those from middle-eastern countries. (Saddam Hussein's son studied there. Poor example, but gives you a sense of the prestige). Currently they don't actually offer an MBA on their own. They offer a Global MSc in Management, which in University-speak means 'we are smarter than those Yanks at Harvard Business School'.

- Duo and music again! Duo likes to make playlists, and he particularly likes jokes that he's in on and no-one else is. The first song played is 'I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend'. It was originally released in the 70s by an American band called the Rubinoos, but I am using here (and will fight for) the version by a British group called Farrah. You can hear this delightful tune here: https://youtu.be/flg9Fm8RHUA

And then he follows that up with some Blondie.

- thank you for all your lovely feedback! I really appreciate it, and your continued support means so much. Also thank you to Maevemauvaise for being the loveliest beta!

I ran the prize draw this week for my 1000-views prize, and the winner was tumbledrylemur! :) I'll drop you a line to chat about what you want!!
If you change your mind, I’m the first in line,
Honey I’m still free, take a chance on me...

“Are you okay, Wufei? Your eye’s twitching.”
Wufei flinched and nearly dropped the bowl he was loading into the dishwasher onto Relena’s foot.
“I’m fine,” he said quickly, recovering. “Just a little tired.”
“What do you expect if you work the way you do?” Sally scoffed, as she moved past and topped up his wine glass with a generous serving.

“Honestly, ‘Fei, you can just leave it and I’ll get it in the morning,” Duo insisted, trying to shoo Wufei away from the dirty dishes and over to the sofas, where everyone else was.
But Wufei wasn’t budging - he’d attempted to sneak towards the door again and been headed off by Sally, so he decided that at least establishing some space between himself and the others to try and catch his breath would be better than nothing.

“You cooked,” Wufei replied simply, continuing to load. “You shouldn’t have to wash up as well.”
Duo scratched his head and huffed out an exasperated laugh, before giving in.

“You hear that guys?” he called, as he moved away. “He’s making you look bad. Y’all need to start earning your keep.”

“Booo!” Relena didn’t look inclined to move from where she had settled, draped in an armchair.

“Teacher’s pet,” Trowa added, agreeing with Relena.

“He’s the only one that’s invited back,” Duo told them.

“I brought wine!”

“Quatre’s invited back too.”

Sally was poking through one of the cupboards, pulling out board games with one hand and carefully trying not to spill her wine with the other. Whilst her head was deep in the cabinet, Trowa quietly removed ‘Risk’ and ‘Monopoly’ from the pile and passed them to Duo to hide out of the way.

“What about Jenga?” she asked, her voice slightly muffled.

“Oh no!” Relena said emphatically. “Not again!”
“Excuse you,” Duo said. “I’ll have you know it’s *Jumbling Tower* .”

“It’s knock-off Jenga, Duo, just accept it.”

Wufei straightened, and turned the dishwasher on. The others were bending over the games that Sally was pulling out from the cupboard and bickering quietly over what to play. This left a clear line of sight across the apartment between himself and Duo.

*And I often wonder why the things that I want are so hard to find*

*But I often fail to see the things that I need are right here by my side.*

*Something in the air is giving me bad ideas*

*Something in the air is giving me dangerous thoughts, like*

*Why don’t you stay at mine tonight?*

*Why don’t you stay with me and be my sidekick, sidekick?*

*Do you, do you, do you wanna be my sidekick, sidekick?*

With the others not looking, Wufei gestured to the speakers and quirked an impatient eyebrow. *Really?*

Duo responded with a careless shrug and a sheepish grin. *I thought it would be funny*. Then, his eyebrows lifted and he pulled an apologetic face. *You’re not mad?*

A sigh, a glance skywards, a small head shake and spread hands. *...No. Not mad. Wrong-footed, perhaps, but... not really mad*. If it had been just he and Duo perhaps it would have made him laugh. But in ‘public’, and off-balance, the joke had been another stressor rather than something he could appreciate. Despite that, he found himself relaxing just having this semi-private moment with Duo, more grounded by the contact, and he allowed himself to give the other man a small smile.

The chorus repeated again - *Why don’t you stay at mine tonight?* - and Duo jerked a thumb towards the speakers, tilted his head and grinned saucily, mirroring the question.

The sensations that produced in Wufei were almost like fear, with an additional pleasurable throb. It felt exciting, heady - his stomach dropped and his heart quickened, his breath catching and throat tightening. His palms tingled, sensitive and he rubbed his fingers across them absently, savouring the feeling and letting his expression show all this. Duo looked a little surprised, and then his eyes darkened and the grin turned hungry - *hot*.

“For the last time Quatre, *no* , the Monopoly Embargo still stands!”

“You’ve been spending too much time with politicians.”

They blinked, and glanced towards their friends who were still squabbling. Wufei cleared his throat and grabbed his glass of wine, whilst Duo rubbed the end of his nose and puffed his cheeks out in a heavy breath.

The music faded back into his consciousness again as he took a deep mouthful of wine.

*Maybe this won’t last very long*

*But you feel so right*
And I could be wrong

Maybe I’ve been hoping too hard

But I’ve gone this far

And it’s more than I hoped for

Rolling his eyes, Wufei moved over to join the others. He had to give it to Duo - he knew how to get a message across.

*

Eventually they had settled on Cluedo. A brief scuffle had broken out over who got to be Miss Scarlet, but after a round of ‘rock, paper, scissors’, Quatre won and Relena had to take Mrs Peacock.

There were only 6 pieces, but Trowa teamed up with Quatre, and spent the time in between turns spelling out rude words on the Scrabble board with Duo, Hrothgar curled up peacefully across his knees.

After his moment aside with Duo earlier, Wufei found it easier to relax and enjoy the game, enjoy the company. It helped that Duo appeared to have run out of pointed songs and the music had drifted into something designed to be ignored. He was slouched beside Wufei on the floor, and his warmth seemed to seep across and prevent his anxieties bubbling up again. All his anger and stress simmered down, dissipated and dispersed by the braided man’s consistent presence. A human grounding rod.

It was the most at ease he had ever felt with these people, the most at ease he had felt with himself.

The game ended with a win to Heero, who had noted down every suggestion made on each round, and who had showed a card to who at each round, and with eight pages of notes fastidiously declared the murderer with the tone of someone who had actually solved a vicious killing.

Sally, the murderer, showed no sign of guilt, but instead rolled over to help Trowa fill in the gaps on his profane Scrabble board. Standing and stretching, Duo surveyed the ruins of their evening scattered across the kitchen counters, pushing his hand up through his bangs.

“These are gonna take a few trips to get down to the trash,” he observed cheerfully. “...I might take some now.”

“Want a hand?” Wufei asked, standing.

“Boooooo!” Relena called.

“Teacher’s pet,” Trowa reminded him.

“Don’t let him bolt, Duo!” Sally shouted.

He ignored them, and scooped up an armful of bottles and cans, following Duo out of the apartment and down the stairs.

The air outside the building was a bit fresher, and the silence of the late night was almost a relief after the apartment. Whilst he had relaxed as the evening had gone on, and even enjoyed himself, there
was a sense of freedom in the peace and the space.

Bottles deposited in the recycling, Wufei started back towards the front door, only for his wrist to be grabbed and he was pulled back into the shadows of the building and Duo’s arms. A warm hand settled on the small of his back, pressing his hips against Duo’s. The other hand cupped his face, a rough thumb skimming gently over his lips, locating them in the dark before he was kissed.

Hips against hips, lips against lips, tongues against tongues, and the soft sound of fabric against brick as they shifted against each other, trying to press closer, feel more. Duo tasted like alcohol and fajitas and smelled like metal and spice and something uniquely Duo and Wufei’s senses were filled with him, and he couldn’t get enough. Two days suddenly felt like a lifetime and he wanted to reacquaint himself with everything he had explored before.

He surged forward, his hands sliding under Duo’s shirt and smoothed his palms over the warm skin beneath, feeling the shiver that ran across it, the tingle that ran up his own arms and directly to his groin. Duo groaned and Wufei answered, the other man’s hands moving down his back to grab his ass, pull his closer, shifting their hips together and -

Duo pulled back with a soft gasp and tried to catch his breath, tilting his head back to rest against the wall.

“Shit,” he breathed. “Shit, shit hang on. Oh man.”

Wufei chuckled quietly, bracing his hands on the wall either side of the American, and enjoying the feeling of being so close, feeling his pounding heartbeat through their clothes. It took a moment for him to pull himself together, and then Duo’s head dropped forward, forehead touching Wufei’s.

“Sorry ’bout that,” he said, and his voice was husky. “I just… I still can’t believe you’re really here; I can really do this and the way you looked at me earlier… Jesus you’re fucking addictive.”

The words sent a flash of heat through Wufei and he tilted his head, capturing Duo’s mouth again for a few more blissful moments before Duo pulled away again.

“I’ve been thinkin’,” Duo managed to say, “and I know we were gonna keep things simple until you knew whether you wanted long term or not but… I figure if you decide you don’t and then we never do anything, I’ll regret that way more than if I at least get one night with you…” His eyes were dark and heavy-lidded, there was caution in them as well as lust, his voice a low purr. “And I kinda get the impression you might be up for at least one night with me? Whaddaya say, Chang? Give me something to keep me warm in winter?”

“Making memories?” Wufei said wryly, repeating the phrase Duo had used the week before.

“They’re usually all I’m left with,” Duo quipped with a grin, and then a flash of panic when he realised what he’d said.

Wufei leaned back to look at him as best he could in the shadows, trying to read past the grin that had a slight rictus to it now, ignore the slight, ever-so-slight tension that had appeared in the previously pliant body. Something inside him clenched and twisted at everything evoked by those few words, and the sudden vulnerability that quivered through the usually confident man like a plucked violin string.

“Not tonight,” he said finally.

“No,” Duo agreed, relaxing again when he realised Wufei wasn’t going to press the issue. “Heero and ‘Lena are staying tonight.”
There was the sound of a door opening and closing, footsteps.

“Duo? Wufei? You out here still?”

Wufei leaned forwards and pressed a quick kiss to Duo’s lips.

“Another time,” he whispered, before they moved apart and headed towards the search party.

Quatre, Trowa and Sally were stood at the end of the passage waiting for them.

“What happened to you?” Sally asked. “It doesn’t take that long to put bottles out.”

“One of the bins had been knocked over,” Wufei lied, not missing a beat, trying to ignore the mild stare that Trowa had focussed on him. “We had to pick it up.”

“Relena’s poured herself into bed,” Quatre told Duo, “so we thought we’d best head off too.”

Sally tossed Wufei’s jacket to him and he slid into it as Duo said goodbye to Trowa and Quatre. He turned to salute Wufei and Sally with a grin.

“See you all during the week, I guess.”

“Come on Chang,” Sally said cheerfully, looping her arm through his. “Be a gentleman and walk me home. Protect me from the dangers of the night.”

Wufei snorted, falling into step beside her.

“Woman, they’ve got more to fear from you.”

“Fine. Be a conservationist and protect the dangers of the night from me.” She squeezed his arm and smiled at him. “Wasn’t so bad today, was it?”

It didn’t take a genius to work out what she meant. He took a deep breath and looked up studying the lights of the colony curving overhead, thinking back on the day. In retrospective, the stress and awkwardness didn’t seem so huge, and certainly there were a few moments he had… particularly enjoyed. But it had been nice to see everyone, surprisingly so. Whether the difference was that everyone was there this time, or just that a specific someone was there he couldn’t say.

“No,” he admitted with a small smile of his own. “It wasn’t really.”

“I’m proud of you Chang,” she said quietly, as Quatre and Trowa drew nearer to walk with them. He grunted a response but somewhere inside he was a little touched.

Perhaps he should have come to L2 sooner.

*

Chapter End Notes

- continuation of the playlist! We've got 'Take a Chance on Me' by ABBA, 'Sidekick' by Walk The Moon (a song which heavily influenced the writing of this fic), and 'The
Longest Time' by Billy Joel. Also almost certainly featured but not in the fic 'Born to be My Baby' by Bon Jovi.

- Heero plays Cluedo (Clue) like my Uncle plays Cluedo. He is a nightmare to try and beat.
“Barton’s arrived.”

Wufei looked up from his desk, nodding at Merrick.

“I’ll be there in a second,” he said, and she disappeared to pass the message on.

Things had progressed as smoothly as could have been hoped over the last few days. Welch had not moved - although he had continued to order pizza, and the general feeling around the team was that he was definitely in need of a few veggies and a little less dairy - and the rota of people guarding Relena seemed to be effectively keeping her safe and also not making her too grouchy.

He hadn’t seen Duo since Saturday, their ‘shifts’ had not aligned. Wufei had spent his time wishing Welch to the far end of the Universe, but even he had to admit no news was good news.

Shutting down his computer, he grabbed his jacket and headed to meet Trowa, so they could head to their turn on surveillance. As he rounded the corner, he saw Trowa leaning against Pearson’s desk, listening politely as Pearson expounded on a topic that he was clearly very excited about. Wufei hoped the topic wasn’t him.

“...and he really did survive a fall from a 3rd floor window with only a broken arm!”

Damn. Too much to hope for.

“Yeah?” Trowa said, with mild interest evident in his voice. “Well, I heard that he can go into a meditative trance so deep, he practically doesn’t need to breathe.”

“No way…” Pearson looked torn between disbelief and delight.

“Seriously. One time he got down to three breaths a minute.”

“ You …” Wufei growled, as he drew closer, identifying the source of all his problems. Trowa looked up, and pulled the most sarcastic ‘Whoops, busted’ expression that had ever graced a human face. Pearson was staring up at Wufei with a look of delighted awe.

“Is that true?” he asked.

“Yes,” Wufei grunted irritably. “But I’m not doing a shot.”

He grabbed Trowa’s elbow and started dragging him out of the office before he could do any more damage, but apparently the taller man wasn’t done.

“Once he got caught in the middle of a pack of hyenas and, he yelled at them until they ran away,” he called back to Pearson. “He was the Alpha Hyena.”
“You are a despicable human being.”

“Quatre compensates for me, it’s fine.”

*

The apartment that they had set their surveillance up in was grimy. Old, abandoned and very musty, the wallpaper was peeling off the walls, the ceiling was grey with muck, and it wasn’t clear what colour the carpet had been originally. But the convenience of its location – directly across the street from the warehouse they were watching – significantly outweighed the dubious hygiene of the interior. At the very least, they could be thankful that the electricity and water for the building hadn’t been disconnected yet, so the tiny grubby bathroom could still be used, and they hadn’t needed to lug a generator up the stairs for their equipment.

“Nothing to report,” Shiels told them, pulling his jacket on and yawning. “Although I wish he’d hurry up and do something so I can get back to my cushy admin shifts.”

“Maybe he’s making the Foreign Minister a really big cake,” Sayid suggested. “To apologise for being a creepy stalker.”

“Live in hope,” Trowa murmured with some amusement, settling into one of the camping chairs that had been set up with a view of the window and the monitors.

Sitting in the remaining seat after Sayid and Shiels left, Wufei played through what little footage they had of the inside of the building, but as he had been warned there was nothing there to note. Whatever Welch was doing in there kept him mostly out of the line of view of the camera. Not for the first time, Wufei found himself wishing that the L2 branch had opened a few weeks earlier, to allow for delivery of all their tech and weapons. A person couldn’t get up onto that roof without Welch spotting them, but he knew for a fact the skylight would be perfect for landing one of their surveillance drones. If he’d thought it would be any quicker, he’d have asked for one to be loaned from another branch, but the requisition would probably arrive before the loan did.

He sat back in his chair and let out a huff of breath. This was going to be another boring shift. At least Barton would be better company than Sally had been on Sunday. That woman was like a dog with a bone. If nothing else it should be a fairly peaceful twelve hours.

“What are you planning to do about Duo?” Trowa broke the silence, apparently intent on proving Wufei’s assumptions wrong.

The Chinese man tensed and glanced sideways, but Trowa’s expression was neutral and his gaze was focussed out the window at the door to the warehouse.

“What do you mean?” he asked warily. Trowa looked at him then, his eyebrow quirked.

“Even if Duo hasn’t told you how he feels yet, you’re certainly not so stupid you can’t have worked it out yourself. And you didn’t immediately break his neck, or he wouldn’t be acting so besotted right now; but you obviously haven’t flung yourself into his arms or he’d have told me.” He folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out in front of him and looking for all the world like he was relaxing in front of the TV. “So, what are you planning to do?”
Turning his own gaze back to the monitor in front of him, Wufei frowned. How could he explain this to Trowa when he couldn’t explain it to himself to his own satisfaction?

“We’re here for twelve hours, Chang. You might as well answer me or the rest of this shift will be very uncomfortable.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Wufei snapped. It was alright for him to be so calm - nothing seemed to ruffle Trowa’s feathers. Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to have such control over his temper, to have his resting emotion be so zen. Trowa rocked his chair onto its back legs, balancing effortlessly. He was probably a nightmare at dinner parties.

“Are you even interested in him that way?” Trowa asked blithely, apparently disinterested in the answer.

“I - Yes.”

That got Trowa’s attention. The chair dropped to the ground with a thump, and both his eyebrows were raised behind that fall of hair.

“Huh,” was all he had to say, studying Wufei’s flushed face and clenched fists, as if cataloguing his discomfort for future reference. Cause: Duo Maxwell and Interpersonal Relationships. Cure: unknown. His head tilted to the side slightly, not unlike an animal presented with a curiosity. “And… he’s aware of that?”

Wufei grunted, which Trowa took as affirmative.

“Huh,” he said again, and scratched his chin thoughtfully, turning to look back out the window.

The silence stretched between them, that ‘huh’ balancing on it like a member of Trowa’s circus troupe, precarious and attention-seeking, with a drumroll accompaniment until it toppled with a crash of cymbals and Wufei snapped.

“Is that it?” he demanded.

“What?”

“You pry information out of me, and all you have to say is ‘huh’?”

“Would you like me to say more?”

“I - uh…” Wufei floundered, surprised. “Well… no, not really…” But that had never stopped Sally, he added silently.

“There you go.” Trowa shrugged a shoulder and turned back to the window again, and another silence stretched between them for a handful of heartbeats, before - “Has he offered to sleep with you yet?”

Wufei didn’t answer, but he looked away and turned even redder if that were possible. Trowa nodded.

“That means he’s panicking.” Trowa informed him. At Wufei’s questioning look, he continued. “You remember, the summer after Mariemaia, when you found me in Budapest with Une’s job offer?”

Wufei nodded. The city heat had been searing, and the offer had been basically what he’d been
given - “Name your price”. He had stayed overnight, long enough to deliver the letter and be bullied into dinner with Quatre, who had also been in town at the time. Probably to see Barton, since apparently that was when their relationship began. He failed to see what this had to do with anything though.

“Duo was with me,” Trowa continued. “He’d signed up to travel with the circus that summer, and we had fun. He wasn’t settled, though. He was certain you were a lost cause so he instead threw himself into chasing sensations, new experiences. Making memories, he called it. Drank a lot of European booze. Fucked a lot of European people. Fought in a lot of European brawls. He wasn’t stupid, or dangerous, but… he was on edge. Like he had to keep running to the next new thing before it left and he missed it, couldn’t store it up for later, to make up for not having what he really wanted.”

Staring at the floor, Wufei listened and tried to process what he was hearing. That Duo had been so close, so many years ago. But… he knew he wouldn’t have been ready to consider anything like this back then - he’d been too shamefaced and angry at himself still for everything. And that Duo had… felt something for him, so long ago, when there was so little of worth to be considered… Duo had said as much, but to hear it from someone else seemed to make it more real.

The phrase ‘making memories’ was rapidly becoming one of the saddest things he’d ever heard.

“He came by when you were talking to me, but disappeared before you saw him. Got into a fight, ended up in a police station and I had to sweet talk him out of it. But… he saw you and thought you looked steady, grounded, whilst he was too scattered to stop. Your visit changed that - he thought if he couldn’t be with you, maybe he could be someone you’d at least respect. And he came back here. Started actually making a life for himself instead of running after the next thing before he got abandoned. Got a fucking cat.”

Trowa was watching him carefully, clearly checking to see that Wufei was hearing him, really hearing him. There was nothing to be worried about on that score - he had almost forgotten how to breathe, he was concentrating so hard on what the other man was saying.

Just in case he wasn’t getting it, Trowa continued.

“She’s offering to sleep with you because she’s already convinced you’re leaving, and he’s bracing for the inevitable.” Trowa stood, and moved over to the cooler by the door, fishing out a bottle of water to toss to Wufei, snagging another for himself. “So, he might know you’re interested, but he’s only certain about one thing, and not the rest.”

Lapsing into silence again, they drank their water and split their attention between the window and the monitors. Occasionally Welch drifted into view across the bottom of the screen before heading back to their blind spot. Nothing to report, as had been the case for days now.

In the absence of anything to do, Wufei’s thoughts circled around his head in a never-ending loop, repeating all his questions, all his confusion, and getting nowhere fast. He had drained his bottle and stripped the label off it before he spoke again.

“How do you know?”

“Hm?” Trowa blinked at him, and Wufei almost wondered if he’d fallen asleep with his eyes open, staring blankly out the window at the front of the warehouse.

“Duo… Told me that I was ‘it’ for him,” Wufei said. “I don’t want to mess around if I don’t feel the same way, but… how do you know?”
Trowa tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

“Fucking hell, Maxwell, no pressure,” he muttered to himself, before huffing out a breath that blew his hair away from his face for a moment and looking back at Wufei. “Do you like Duo?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re attracted to him?”

“...Yes.” Where was this going?

“You enjoy spending time with him?”

“Of course, but I fail to see -”

“Believe it or not, that’s usually the only criteria involved in starting a relationship,” Trowa said with a small, wry grin. “The requirement isn’t usually to be in love before you start seeing someone - that normally comes after the dating and going out bit.”

Wufei’s eyes narrowed.

“You and Winner,” he said accusingly, and Trowa rolled his eyes, understanding.

“That was... a little different.”

“And Yuy and Relena.”

“Well if you’re going to try and hold any one of us up as a shining example of normality, you’re going to struggle,” Trowa drawled.

“But Duo-”

“Duo loves what he knows about you, sure,” Trowa said, shrugging. “But he’s not seen you for years. Everything he knows about you now is from what we’ve told him and what he’s seen since you’ve come up. Which,” he added, with a reassuring smile, “he seems pretty pleased with. But that’s not everything - you’re both in the same boat really. Duo’s just named it sooner. He’s impulsive like that.”

Turning his bottle over and over in his hands, Wufei frowned into middle-distance, still not satisfied. His companion sighed somewhere to his right, and tried again.

“Look, there’s a certain amount of choice involved in this,” he started. “It’s not always easy to love someone, to be with someone, but you make a choice to work through it. Duo’s made his decision already. You’re worried about hurting him - do you think you could do that on purpose? Intentionally hurt him?”

“...No,” Wufei replied.

“So you already care for him on one level, you’re physically attracted to him, and now you’ve got to decide whether you want to take that further. Obviously it’s not always that simple - if you’re not good for each other, there’s only so far making that choice will get you. But if you already worry about hurting him, and you think you’ll help each other to keep growing as people rather than stagnating or bringing out the worst in each other, I think the two of you are stubborn enough to make it work, and not to quit when it gets hard.”

That... made sense. And certainly even in the last few weeks Duo had already managed what Sally
had been trying for years to achieve - he had got Wufei to relax, to try new things, to socialise and take risks. He had the potential for a complete life with Duo, more so than he had ever thought possible.

He wasn’t sure what he had to offer Duo in return, but he realised that was up to Duo to decide. And if Duo had already seen something that he could… that he could love, then Wufei wasn’t about to try and put him off. Given the changes that had already been wrought in his personality, maybe whatever the braided man saw just needed to be discovered.

“Thank you,” he said gratefully, and Trowa graced him with a small smile.

“I’m no expert,” Trowa warned, leaning back in his chair. “That’s what I’ve observed.”

Wufei snorted. Given Trowa’s skills of observation, it was probably more accurate than he realised. The man had the ability to read nuance in the way people stored their toilet paper - it was why he was so good at infiltration, and why Wufei would never play poker with him.

*

They had reached the halfway point of their shift without incident. Welch had been out of camera view for a good two hours, and aside from a short period where they had contemplated cracking into the multipack of Monster Munch - as yet untouched, no team brave enough to risk it - just to see what they could possibly be hiding, nothing had really broken the monotony.

“Would it be worse if he did something and we had to act?” Trowa asked vaguely, balancing his empty water bottle on the end of his finger. “Or worse if he didn’t do anything and we wasted all these hours for no reason?”

“If my life had to resemble a Beckett play, Waiting for Godot isn’t the worst I could end up with.” Wufei leaned against the windowsill, frowning down at the road.

“True. And at least it wouldn’t be Pinter.”

“I’d hope for Ibsen, but then I’d invariably end up killing myself just to make some kind of point.”

“Quatre took me to see a Middleton play the other month,” Trowa told him. “That’s more my sort of thing. Sex and fart jokes and women prancing around in their undies.”

“Sounds like Duo would enjoy that too,” Wufei mused, wondering if that was something they’d do together eventually. And he wasn’t averse to some Jacobean farce. It worked as a palate cleanser for some of the more dense plays of the era, yet still - he had to admit - worked for his own vanity to maintain his appearance of an intellectual. Sally would never go see something so “old and dusty” with him, so she was none-the-wiser.

“I think my favourite part was the parents who had splurged for front row seats, determined that their children would get some culture,” Trowa reminisced, with a chuckle. “By the interval the kids looked like it was the best day of their lives, and the parents realised they’d made a huge miscalculation about content.”

Wufei smirked too, and was about to respond when the laptop bleeped urgently, notifying them of an incoming call. Trowa leaned over to answer, and Wufei moved around him to see the screen. There
was no picture, a call from a mobile.

“Have you got eyes on Relena?” came Heero’s voice.

“No.” Wufei frowned. “What’s happened?”

“She’s late for her next appointment,” Heero said, his voice the cold, crisp tones of someone on a mission, no sign of worry for his girlfriend. “We can’t get hold of either her or Duo on their cell phones.”

“Welch hasn’t left the building,” Trowa told him.

“Who was her last meeting with?” Wufei asked.

“It was one of those charity ones she insists on doing,” Heero replied, and there was a hint of irritation there, an old argument. “Some company wanting to talk to her about proposals they had for increasing agriculture production in space. Something to do with bees.”

Wufei froze, his stomach dropping, and he brought up the overall map of the industrial estate.

“Bees?” he repeated.

“Yes, bees,” was the snippy reply. “It’s not relevant what the meeting was about.”

The warehouse layout suggested otherwise. Welch’s unit backed on to the agricultural business. The one which sold ‘new and improved space apiaries’.

“Welch has them,” Wufei said. “Get out here, I’ll arrange for a support unit.”

Heero hung up with only a grunt of acknowledgement. As Trowa called into the base to get a tactical van sent out, with whatever equipment they had on-site from the latest delivery, Wufei stared at the monitor and tried to get the camera to move using sheer force of will, to allow them to see more of what was happening.

*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again to maevemauvaise for her excellent betaing, and to you all for your support! It means an awful lot, it really does.
Heero and Quatre had arrived at the same time as the tactical van, driven by Sally and Merrick. Wufei had been pleased to see them as they relocated from the manky apartment to the back of the wired van, and everyone kitted out in flak vests and armed themselves.

“I’ve got some good news,” Merrick told Wufei, and held out a small, hard black case. “We had another set of tech arrive just after you left.”

“Do you know how to fly it?”

“I did a training course a couple of months back, might be shaky at first and I won’t be doing tricks.”

She opened the case to reveal the tiny drone inside and its controller. It took seconds to fit the battery and sync the camera to the van’s computer system.

“We need it on the skylight,” Wufei said. “That should give us a view of the whole floor.”

“Roger.”

“We’ve got a call!” Sally’s fingers flew across the keyboard to bring whatever she was hearing on her headset to play across the internal speakers in the van. “I think it’s Duo.”

The sound playing was echoey, and distant, like they were on speakerphone. Adjusting the settings made the voices a little clearer, but it wasn’t Duo who they were hearing.

“...says you’re a mechanic,” came a sneering voice. “What’s a mechanic doing guarding the Foreign Minister?”

“A buddy hooked me up with it.” That was Duo, unmistakably, definitely Duo. “I needed a little extra work.” There was a pause, the sound of shuffling clothes, Duo fidgeting.

“Drone’s in place,” Merrick told them quietly, and the feed appeared on the monitors.

Duo was sat on the floor, arms tied behind his back, propped against a large pillar. Welch stood over him, holding a gun - probably Duo’s - and smirking. Relena was away from them, on the other side of a large pile of boxes, tied to a chair. Her head was slumped forwards, but it was nodding slightly, as if she were coming around from being knocked out. Another man stood with her, looking a little uncomfortable with the whole thing, and holding a bucket, probably in case the former Queen of the World decided to be sick.

“I thought Welch didn’t have any contacts on the colony?” Wufei snapped.

“He didn’t,” Merrick said. “No known contacts, anyway. There’s not much we can do if we don’t know about them.”

“That’s James Heath,” Heero told them, leaning over the screen as Merrick zoomed in on the other
man. “That’s who Relena’s last meeting was with.”

“Look at the back wall,” Quatre pointed out.

There, blocked by a large pile of wooden crates but still visible, and out of view of their original camera, was a clear hole knocked through the brick. A direct passageway into the warehouse behind.

“Heath was picking them up,” Heero growled. “He was supposed to be driving them out to see the hives in action. He must have drugged them in the car somehow and brought them here.”

“I know you guys chucked my phone,” came Duo’s voice again, “but I don’t suppose you kept that earpiece I had? It’s not mine, and they’ll take it out of my pay if I don’t bring it back at the end.”

“You really think they’re going to pay you after this?” Welch asked incredulously, gesturing with the gun.

“Well if they don’t. I can at least sell it and get something out of this,” Duo grumbled. “It ain’t my problem what you do, but a guy’s gotta make a living.”

Welch snorted, but fished the little black device from his pocket and fitted it over Duo’s ear, patting his cheek patronisingly.

“She’s waking up!” Heath called, as Relena’s head lolled upright, and she blinked blearily, frowning in muzzy confusion.

“...Duo?”

“I’m here, Minister,” Duo called.

“...What happened?”

“The gas we used to knock you out may make you feel a bit sick,” Heath told her, as Welch moved around the crates to see her. “There’s a bucket here for you to use if you need to.”

“...Seriously?” she said, staring at him, and he straightened, looking awkward, moving out the way to let Welch approach.

“If he didn’t have that gun,” Wufei muttered irritably, “we could just go in and get her. But I don’t want to start a firefight with her sitting in the middle. Welch’ll use her as a shield.”

“Who is Heath?” Quatre asked. “How does he know Welch?”

“Pearson’s looking into it now,” Sally told him.

Straightening, Wufei studied the kit available in the van – a small selection of weapons and tech, that could be adapted for various situations. There, on the far end, was what he was looking for. Pulling down the case, he tossed it to Heero.

“Take the roof,” he told him. “Get line of sight and be ready. Hopefully Maxwell can handle the situation without it, but if necessary…”

Heero took the rifle case and nodded curtly, hopping out of the van and disappearing around the corner to find his way onto the roof.

Welch was circling around Relena’s chair, hands clasped loosely behind his back and a self-satisfied grin on his face. As she came around more, a tension returned to Relena’s body and she started to
straighten in her chair, lifting her head and watching him with an unimpressed expression.

On the other side of the crates, out of sight of Welch and Heath, Duo’s hands appeared from behind his back, holding a phone that he must have stolen from one of their captors, where the feed was coming from. One hand reached to his earpiece, and as he synced the two pieces of equipment the sound suddenly became clearer, more crisp. He then hastily stuffed the phone into his inside jacket pocket and resumed his position.

“Maxwell,” Wufei said quietly, “can you hear us?”

Duo inclined his head minutely, once, and Wufei felt the tension knotting up inside him ease a little.

“We’re outside and monitoring your situation. We’ve got eyes on you and Relena.” At those words, Duo’s shoulders relaxed a little. “Yuy’s headed to the roof to take point, he’ll be your backup. Are there any other targets we need to worry about?”

A single firm headshake confirmed that they only had to handle the two men currently stood by Relena. That made things easier at any rate.

“We’ll be here if you need to contact us,” Wufei assured Duo. “We’ll contact you if there are any changes on our end.”

Duo nodded again and Wufei cut the microphone, so their ambient noise and conversations wouldn’t distract the other man. Welch was still speaking to Relena, and she looked considerably less than pleased about the plan.

“I can’t vote against the bill to allow free movement between Earth and the Colonies,” she retorted, her voice ringing clear in the mostly-empty room. “I proposed that bill. I’ve been proposing border dissolution since I was fifteen!”

“If you don’t agree to do it when we ask nicely,” Welch growled, “we’ll make you do it.”

Sally snorted quietly, clearly thinking what Wufei was thinking – someone needed to check what they understood by ‘nicely’. Relena stuck her chin out mulishly and glowered at him.

“How?” she demanded. “You have to let me go in order to vote, and once I leave here I’m out of your sphere of influence.”

It seemed that Welch had been waiting for her to ask that question and he grinned darkly. Grabbing the back of her chair, he spun her on the spot, with a shriek of chair legs scraping on concrete. He gestured to the two trestle tables across the room and the items on it. Clearly the items had no significance to the Foreign Minister, as she turned her head to Welch and looked at him blankly, waiting for him to elaborate.

“It’s a bomb,” he snapped impatiently, and Relena’s eyes widened.

Wufei’s hand snapped towards the microphone, but before he could activate it, Duo was pushing to his feet.

“Verifying,” the braided man muttered, barely moving his lips.

“You- “ Relena’s expression was furious and she scowled at Welch. Heath was still stood back, looking extremely tense, nervous and… a little surprised.

(In position,” came Heero’s calm voice over the comms. “Clear line to target.”
“Woah woah woah!” Duo cried, staggering around the wall of crates, hands still firmly behind his back. His expression was panicked, and every sinew of him was the out-of-his-depth, down-on-his-luck mechanic who called in the wrong favour at the wrong time. Heath jumped as he rounded the corner, and flinched away, even though every bit of Duo’s manner screamed he was no threat. “You guys have a bomb!? That’s insane!”

(“Watch Heath,” Wufei told Heero. “He seems erratic, and may move unexpectedly.”

“Roger that.”)

Duo had started towards Welch, but Heath grabbed him and pulled him back as Welch spun and levelled the gun at Duo. Everyone in the van held their breath, tension radiating through the cramped area. Wufei clenched his fists, Sally bit down on her thumb, and Merrick’s grip on the drone controller tightened. Not obviously affected, Wufei could still see some tell-tale signs of anxiety on Trowa and Quatre’s faces as well – firming of mouths, a wrinkle between eyebrows and tensed jaws.

“You stay out of this,” Welch snarled. “You are entirely disposable, and I’d be doing the world a favour getting rid of another bit of colony trash.”

“Wow, hey, no need to get personal.” Duo craned his neck around, trying to see the bomb as it sat on the table. “I’m allowed to be concerned when I’m in the same building as a fucking bomb! What kind of bomb is it? How worried do I need to be?!”

“What do you mean ‘colony trash’?!” Relena demanded, clearly focusing on the important part of the sentence. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those ‘Earth Superiority’ zealots!”

“Shut up!” Welch barked.

“What’s to stop me from going to the police and telling them about the bomb as soon as I’m out of here?” Relena pointed out.

“We’ve got him,” Welch said, and jerked his head towards Duo. “Even if you stop the bomb, he’ll be history.”

“This wasn’t what we agreed,” Heath said, and his voice was high and tremulous, nervous. “Where did you get a bomb, Marcus?”

“I made it.”

“You made it?!” Heath’s voice seemed to get more strained. “Why do you know how to make bombs?”

“What the hell did you make it with?” Duo added. “You can’t have got on-colony with anything that could be used.”

A sneer blossomed on Welch’s face, and he pulled himself up to his fullest height, trying to look down on Duo – a difficult manoeuvre when Duo was taller than him, but the American’s assumed mannerisms had him slouching more, appearing smaller.

“My brother was kind enough to furnish me with the ingredients,” he said, and Heath looked horrified.

“What?? No, I didn’t! What are you talking about?!”

(“Brother?” Wufei hissed, scrabbling to bring up Welch’s file. “It never said he had a brother!”)
The background data on Welch flashed up and Wufei scanned it, keeping half an ear on the bickering in the warehouse. Welch, 27 years old, only child… adopted.

“If he came through the foster system while the Alliance was in power, those records were probably destroyed,” Sally muttered. “They weren’t exactly the best in the first place. It wouldn’t surprise me if they were separated and the records lost.”

“You stole from me?” Heath was demanding, aghast.

“I mean, he’s kidnapped a couple of people and built a bomb, but sure, okay, let’s focus on the stealing. A-plus priorities,” Duo muttered. He was edging away from Heath, back to the crates, trying to get closer to the table and see the components for the bomb. Welch and Heath were currently distracting each other, and he was edging so slowly and so silently that attention wasn’t drawn to him just yet.

“You said you just wanted to talk to her,” Heath carried on, his voice rising. “You said that this restraining order was all a misunderstanding! You said that you wanted to clear things up and get the order dropped!”

(“Jesus Christ,” Trowa muttered.

“The man’s a moron,” Wufei agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose, and more than half-wistful for cases involving people with plans, and a modicum of intelligence. That had felt worthwhile, and a decent challenge. It was insulting to think that the current most pressing threat to their safety had the IQ of a sedated goldfish.

“I’m sure it seemed like a good idea at the time,” Quatre said dryly, folding his arms and rolling his eyes.)

“Bomb’s a dud,” came Duo’s murmured confirmation, barely audible under the sounds of Heath and Welch shouting at each other. “He’s used commercial fertiliser from the other warehouse – there’s too much stuff in it for the ammonium nitrate to be any risk.”

(“Roger,” Wufei told him, and then to Heero, “No bomb threat, you can disable Welch when ready.”

“Wilco.”

There was a pause of maybe five seconds, before Wufei activated the mic again.

“Disable,” he said firmly. “Not eliminate.”

“…Wilco.”

“Hey, what are you doing over there?!” Welch had finally noticed that Duo was not where he should have been, and whirled on him, gun pointed with a less-than-steady hand.

“Just keepin’ out the way of the family spat, man,” Duo insisted. “Calm down, I’m not goin’ anywhere - where would I go?”

“It’s nothing to do with him!” Relena tried to get Welch’s attention over to her, much to Duo’s frustration. He shot an exasperated glare her way and started to move towards Welch, drawing the wildly swinging weapon back towards him like a magnet.

“How ‘bout we try putting the gun down and talk? Nice and calm?”
Welch scowled, furious, and apparently what little control he’d possessed over his rage slipping away. His hands were shaking and the veins on his neck were standing out. Apparently he hadn’t anticipated people arguing with him.

“I don’t want to talk!” he roared.

(“Taking the shot,” Heero advised.)

Time seemed to slow as Wufei watched the monitor, with Welch’s finger on the trigger aiming at Duo and Heath leaping towards Welch. Two gunshots cracked the air, seconds apart, and Wufei had time to register Duo dropping to the floor and Relena shouting, as Heath tackled Welch to the ground, shards of concrete flying up on the floor behind where Welch had been stood as glass rained down from the shattered skylight.

“K’so,” Heero muttered.

Welch wrestled with Heath and the gun ended up pointed at the ceiling. There was another gunshot, and the picture provided by the drone wobbled before spinning and disappearing into fuzz. The tension in the van increased, like a steel wire pulled taut. Trowa checked his gun for the umpteenth time and Merrick set the controller for the drone back in the case with the slow care of someone trying to keep their reactions under control. Sally’s fingernails were digging into the skin on her cheeks, eyes fixed on the screen, and Quatre was very pointedly breathing through his nose in the manner of someone who has practised staying calm.


“Gun discharged through the skylight,” Heero said, sounding a little irritated. “Clipped the drone and knocked out one of the propellers, so it tanked. He’d have never managed that if he was aiming. Relena’s still uninjured, but Welch is now using her as cover – Heath dragged Duo around some crates while Welch was down. Can’t verify his status.”

“Maxwell?!” Wufei tried. There was no response. “Maxwell!?!” The silence on the line stretched out further, but they could make out Welch raging in the background about all the wrongs he had suffered in life, and exactly why this was all the fault of space-born scum. “Dammit Duo, answer me!”

“Is that you God? It’s me, Margaret.” Duo huffed a laugh at his own joke, then coughed, then groaned. “Mother fucker, forgot how much fun getting shot isn’t.”

There were some shuffling sounds and grunting as Duo moved around.

“What’s going on down there?”

“Winded,” Duo said, sounding a bit grouchy about it, and the loud sound of a flak vest being unvelcroed buzzed across the line. “Bruised ego – fucker shot me with my own gun! Can we add that to the list of charges?”

“What’s going on down there?”

“I wouldn’t’ve been hit if this moron hadn’t decided to be a Big Damn Hero,” Duo muttered and there was a soft ‘thump’ and a half-hearted grumble from someone – probably Heath. “His shot was gonna go way wide.”

“Focus, Maxwell,” Wufei said, although he felt some of the tension in his chest ease as Duo’s irrepressible personality worked the same magic it had during the war.
“Well, I think the technical description of this situation is ‘bit of a shit show’,” Duo told him dryly. “I’ve secured Heath with the cuffs they kindly provided. Welch is with Relena, and probably regretting it with every second that passes. As you can hear - ”

There was a shuffling noise, and then Relena’s voice grew clearer.

“– it’s not just that you’re a raging xenophobe, or that you kidnapped me and shot my friend; your proposal is inherently flawed. Listen, historically it’s been proven that having open borders and greater international cooperation can actually increase economic and cultural growth significantly, and combat isolationism, preventing terrorism and larger-scale conflict. If you’re going to be a zealot, at least do your research and base it on some facts.”

“Can I shoot Relena?” Heero said, clearly having caught that over his comm. “It would save us all a lot of work in the long run.”

“You don’t want to shoot Relena,” Wufei told him firmly, as Trowa and Quatre suppressed snickers. “Don’t I?” Heero asked, and his voice had a tone that Wufei would have described as almost wistful in anyone else.

“What does Heath know?” Wufei asked, steering the conversation back on task.

“Dunno.” There was another soft thump from Duo’s end. “Hey Darwin Award, has Brother Dearest got anything else planned? Are there any others coming?”

“I don’t know,” Heath said, and he sounded a little miserable. “I only managed to track him down a few months back. My parents died last year and he’s the only family I’ve got. I thought if I helped him out with the restraining order, maybe we could bond a bit…”

“Yeah?” Duo didn’t sound impressed. “How’s that workin’ out for you?”

“I think I’ll just get a goldfish instead.”

“You’re a big help,” Duo told him. “Well, Wuffers, them’s the breaks. On the plus side, we’re camped out by that lovely hole they knocked in the wall, so if Heero can keep Welch pinned down behind Relena, I can start budging crates and some of you guys can get in that way.”

“Roger. Hold position, we’ll contact you when we’re ready to come through.”

Wufei hooked up his own earpiece and passed others out to Trowa, Sally and Merrick.

“Barton, you’re round the back with me,” he said. “Po, Merrick, you take the front and secure that in case he tries to escape that way. Winner-“

“I will remember that I am not a Preventers Agent,” Quatre said obediently, taking Sally’s recently-vacated seat. “And I will stay here out of trouble, like a good civilian, and if I happen to gain information over the radio I will do my best to communicate that to the nearest agent available to deal with it.”

He smiled beatifically at Wufei, folding his hands on his lap and looking like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Wufei left him there, aware that in this case Une probably wouldn’t care that a civilian was left alone with all their equipment. Especially considering this particular civilian probably paid for a fair bit of it.

Hopping out of the van, he fell into step behind Trowa, and they quickly made their way around to
the entrance of the warehouse that backed onto the one Relena was being held in. The door was locked, but the lock was simple to crack and they were inside in a matter of seconds, winding between wheelbarrows, fertiliser, seeds and, of course, a large selection of apiaries.

At the back of the room was a door leading into an office – and in the office was the hole that had been knocked through the brickwork and then blocked with large wooden crates.

“Maxwell,” Wufei said quietly, activating his comm. “Barton and I are in position.”

“Lo! What light through yonder big-ass hole breaks?” Duo misquoted in reply, and there was the sound of a crate scraping on concrete. “It is the East, and Wuffers is the sun!”

As he said that, the crate shifted enough to leave a thin gap for them to slide through, revealing Duo braced against the side of it and grinning.

“What am I then?” Trowa asked mildly, slipping through, and passing Duo a spare gun.

“You’re the raincloud come to spoil my picnic,” Duo told him.

His shirt was still mostly unbuttoned from when he had taken the flak vest off – Wufei could see the item in question discarded on the floor a short way away, next to where Heath was sat on the floor, hands cuffed behind his back and looking fairly morose. There was a rapidly darkening mark on Duo’s sternum, the bruise from where the vest stopped the bullet. The cross which was usually hidden beneath his clothes was brushing against it.

The American spotted Wufei’s gaze and looked down at the bruise, grinning.

“Yeah, that’s gonna look gnarly when it comes up fully.”

The three of them moved silently over to the crates and Wufei peered around to see Welch crouched behind Relena’s chair, gun pressed against her back. Far from looking alarmed, Relena looked bored and a little annoyed.

“Apparently he didn’t want to listen to her arguments,” Duo murmured to him. “I think she took it a bit personally.”

Trowa snorted quietly and Wufei rolled his eyes, before calling out.

“Preventers!” he announced. “Put the gun down, Welch, and lie down on the floor with your hands behind your head!”

“No!” Welch snapped. “I’ve got the minister, I want safe passage out or I’ll shoot her!”

“If you shoot her there’s nothing stopping us shooting you,” Trowa pointed out helpfully.

“And the guy on the roof with the sniper rifle aimed at you probably wouldn’t mind you shooting her anyway,” Duo added. “It’d help him prove a point!”

Welch didn’t look like he believed that until Relena muttered something about Heero being childish like that, and then he began to look a little worried.

“…I’m going to go to the door,” he said eventually. “I’ll take the Minister with me and let her go once I get out safely.”

“Let him,” Sally said over the comms. “Merrick and I are in position, we can get him from behind.”
Wufei stood and moved around the crates, gun trained on Welch as he began walking, towards the door, Relena held in front of him, angled between him and Wufei, as well as Heero’s position on the edge of the skylight.

“Will you stop kicking me?” Relena asked irritably, stumbling backwards over Welch’s feet. “I’ve got to wear a dress tomorrow, and I don’t need bruises all up my legs from your dirty great shoes.”

“Priorities, ‘Lena,” Duo reminded her, as he flanked to Wufei’s left, Trowa mirroring him to the right. She pulled a face, but shut up, letting Welch shuffle them on a long circuit towards the door, making sure no-one could get behind him.

“You’re mad,” Welch informed Relena, eyes wide and wild. “You’re all mad.”

“That’s rich,” Trowa said, and Duo just about managed to turn a chuckle into a cough.

Keeping his arm firmly wrapped around Relena’s waist, holding her in place, Welch’s gun hand fumbled with the door handle. He finally managed to release the catch and the door swung open behind him, bright light pouring through. Relief was clear on his face and he took one step backwards, two steps, so close to freedom…

“That’s just fine, thanks,” Sally said firmly, her gun pressing lightly against the back of Welch’s neck. He froze, and then all the tension seemed to leave his body and he deflated, sagging where he stood.

He didn’t protest when Merrick took his gun from him, and cuffed him brusquely. Sally smiled brightly at Wufei, before marching Welch out to the street. Trowa holstered his gun and strolled back to collect Heath, half-shoving half-dragging him to catch up with the others and they all moved back to the van.

Wufei watched Duo out of the corner of his eye as he poked consideringly at his bruise, and winced, then shrugged and started to button up his shirt properly. Lifting his head, he smiled brightly and waved.

“Hey Q, who’re your friends?”

Quatre smiled back from where he was leaning on the hood of a police car. Suit jacket removed and shirt sleeves rolled up, he was the picture of nonchalance.

“I realised that as a concerned civilian maybe I should notify the local law enforcement of what was happening,” he said cheerfully as they approached. “Especially since, strictly speaking, this is a police matter rather than a Preventers one. They were pleased to get such an easy arrest. I hope you don’t mind Relena,” he added, as she approached, stretching out her arms and rolling her shoulders, “but I cancelled the meeting we were due to have this afternoon. Said we’d been ‘unavoidably detained’.”

“Oh!” Relena looked surprised, and then gave Quatre a broad, relieved smile. “No, that’s fine. It was just canvassing support for the Open Borders bill, and I rather think this afternoon’s adventures might sway them in my favour.”

As Trowa returned from depositing Heath with the police, they returned their vests and equipment to the van, and saw Heero making his way back. He caught Relena’s eye and held up one of his hands, all five fingers spread wide, and she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, yes,” she said when he drew nearer. “I get it.”
“You’re now averaging one hostage situation per year since I met you,” he told her calmly.
“Congratulations. If you’d like, I can put the data into a chart so you can see how that compares to
the rest of the human race.”

She tutted at him and instead bustled him around the side of the van to put his rifle and flak vest
away. Before they disappeared around the open doors, Wufei saw Heero twist out of Relena’s grip
and drape his arm across her shoulders, dropping a light kiss to the top of her head before continuing,
all business.

“Right,” Duo said cheerfully, clapping his hands together. “Now that’s over with, I’m outtie! Places
to go, people to bother…” He glanced at Wufei and winked, and it was clear who was at the top of
the bothering list.

“Oh no you don’t Maxwell!” Sally called, grabbing his braid as he sailed past the end of the van.
“You’re coming back to HQ so a medic can look you over!”

“Aw c’mon,” Duo whined, looking pleadingly up at her. “It’s just a bit of bruising, I’m fine. ‘Sides,
I’m not even a Preventer!”

“No, but you got injured during a Preventers operation,” Wufei said, supporting Sally. “We’re
legally obliged to make sure you don’t have any serious damage.”

“Wu you traitor!”

“Well, since Relena and I suddenly have free evenings, why don’t we meet at the bar afterwards?”
Quatre put a hand on Duo’s shoulder, consolingly. “Then you can drink away your sorrows.”

“Only if I say he’s allowed to drink!”

“Sally I swear to god if you try to stop me…”

“Oh you wanna throwdown Maxwell? Be my guest.” Sally’s hand shot out and poked Duo firmly in
the chest, right in the middle of his bruise. To his credit, his poker face only slipped slightly and
instead of yelping he let out a long hiss of air.

Smirking, she hustled him into the van, calling over her shoulder for Wufei to follow them with
Merrick, because he wasn’t allowed to start drinking until she could start drinking.

* 

Chapter End Notes

- I can’t write clever plots, so all my bad guys have to be stupid, but have an element of
  surprise in their favour. Sorry.

- The stand-off owes a lot to Mel and Christy’s ‘Death and the Dragon’ arc. As I
discovered when I went back and re-read it for the millionth time after writing this.
  Apparently I have now read it so many times it has become part of my psyche.

- Also, remember how I said that I’m convinced that Relena is a flag-waving Leftie? She
did propose border dissolution at fifteen. She was Queen of the World for like twenty
  minutes before she declared all borders on Earth null and void. She sticks to her political
guns, I think.

- ALSO also. Duo was wearing his flak vest under his shirt, because with Relena being a pacifist it wouldn't be ideal for him to look like he's expecting to be shot on official visits. Right? Right. Didn't JUST want an excuse to get his pecs out. There was a reason.
Once they had arrived back at HQ, Wufei had helped Merrick check all the equipment back in, contacted the other agents to advise a return to administrative shifts, filled in a report explaining why the drone had not made it back to fight another day (and he could just imagine Une's reaction to that - “I’m going to stop ordering equipment, Chang, if you keep insisting on decimating it on first use.”), and a form detailing the events of the afternoon and confirming the case had been handed over to the police, before he was able to go see how Duo was.

By the time he arrived at the infirmary, Duo was sat on the bench in the centre of the room, topless with his shirt draped over one shoulder and holding a cold pack to his bruise. He was swinging his legs and nodding obediently whilst Sally waved an X-ray at him and explained at length why he was lucky she wasn’t admitting him to hospital.

“If you’d been standing any nearer when he hit you with that ridiculous hand cannon of yours, you’d have ended up with a cracked sternum at the very least,” she chided.

“I wouldn’t have had to stand so close if ‘Lena hadn’t kept distracting him!” Duo protested.

“Well if you hadn’t got such a stupidly giant gun - “

“What, instead of those little peashooters you guys carry around? If I’m gonna use a gun, I’m gonna use a gun, c’mon.”

“He’s American, Sally, what do you expect?” Wufei said dryly, sliding into the room and smirking at Duo, who stuck his tongue out very maturely.

“Oh please, that excuse only goes so far,” Sally scoffed, putting the X-ray away. “But the cliffnotes version is that he’s fine, Chang. Or rather, there’s nothing new wrong with him as a result of today’s adventures.”

“You keep sweet-talkin’ me like that and you’ll have to propose, or the neighbours will think I’m a loose woman,” Duo drawled, batting his eyelids at her. She snorted and scooped up all her files.

“I’ll leave you two to debrief,” she said, grinning and making the word ‘debrief’ sound positively filthy, slipping out the door before Wufei could shout any abuse after her.

He glared thoughtfully at the door for a long minute, before reaching out and quietly turning the lock. The action didn’t escape Duo’s notice, and he chuckled low in his throat as Wufei turned back to him and walked over to the bench.

“Wow, Agent Chang,” he purred, “are you actually gonna de-brief me?”

Wufei smirked, coming to stand between Duo’s legs and resting his hands on the other man’s thighs.

“I don’t know if you’ve got medical clearance for that sort of thing,” he said, looking pointedly at
Duo’s chest.

Duo followed his gaze, then tossed the cold pack down on the bench beside him. He spread his arms wide and grinned at Wufei.

“Whaddya know? I’m cured! Miracle of modern medicine! Now you can ravage me.”

Slowly, Wufei lifted his hand and brought it to rest on Duo’s shoulder. The braided man watched him with a lazy grin and the grandest display of come-to-bed eyes Wufei had ever seen, as he trailed his fingers lightly down from the shoulder, across bare skin, and then gently, very gently, prodded at Duo’s bruise.

Duo’s eyes widened and he hissed out another long breath through clenched teeth, his fists tightening slightly on the edge of the bench. Wufei’s smirk widened and he retrieved the cool pack, pressing it against the injury with a pointedly quirked eyebrow. Rolling his eyes, Duo held the pack in place and acknowledged the score with a tilt of his head.

“Why the locked door then?” he asked.

“Privacy,” Wufei said, resting his hand back on Duo’s thigh and tapping his thumb thoughtfully against it. “I spoke with Barton whilst we were working together today. About you.”

The same panic he’d seen whilst kissing outside Duo’s garage flashed across the other man’s face, and when it was gone his grin was slightly more fixed, his eyes wary.

“He’s a pathological liar,” Duo said, jokingly. “Awful human being, can’t be trusted in any way.”

“He also told me that perhaps I should stop worrying and just admit I want a relationship with you.”

“He’s a wonderful person really. A saint. I love him like a brother.”

“Yes, well, he seemed fairly concerned about my intentions towards your honour,” Wufei said dryly. “I’m almost offended he thought that of the two of us, I would be the cad.”

Duo looked oddly touched by the thought of Trowa giving Wufei the ‘what are your intentions towards my daughter’ speech, and a little embarrassed.

“I am fairly emotionally stunted in… this area.” Wufei continued, haltingly, feeling his face heat, and wanting to make it very clear to Duo what he would be getting into. “But, I do… care for you, and I want to be with you, and I want to work for that. And that’s all I can do. If it doesn’t work out…” He trailed off, looked away and shrugged. If it didn’t work out, at least he’d tried, which was significantly better than not trying just because he was afraid it would go wrong. After all, Duo himself had encouraged him to be less afraid of failure, and to take risks.

A gentle hand reached under his chin, tilting his head up to meet Duo’s warm violet gaze. There was hesitance there, wary disbelief, but also wonder and some cautious hope. The disbelief faded as Duo studied his face, and his expression became so inexpressibly tender that for a moment Wufei felt like his heart would stop just from the force of it.

Tilting his face up further, Wufei brought their lips together, the kiss gentle, simple and full of things that they couldn’t quite say. When they parted, they were a little breathless, not from exertion but rather the magnitude of the situation, and the prospects ahead of them.

“Thank you,” Duo breathed, resting his forehead against Wufei’s.
“Thank you,” Wufei said. “For seeing something in me that… I’m not entirely sure is there.”

“Okay first rule, you’re going to have to start thinkin’ better of yourself,” Duo told him, straightening up and poking his shoulder. “Can’t have people badmouthing my boyfriend.”

Wufei flushed a little, and a small, pleased smile tugged at his mouth. Duo’s gaze shot to it, a wide, warm grin answered.

“Yeah, that’s what I like to see,” he declared. “We’ll be seeing more of that.”

“Are you my boyfriend or my dictator?” Wufei asked dryly, arching an eyebrow. The effect was lost on Duo, who instead got a rather goofy smile on face and just stared at Wufei as if he couldn’t quite comprehend how lucky he was. Feeling his face heat further and a similar ridiculous expression trying to claw its way onto his features as his body felt like he had just been submerged in a warm bath, he stepped back and cleared his throat.

“We should get going,” he said. “I’m sure you can get a few drinks out of showing off your war wound.”

“I own the bar, I can get free drinks whenever,” Duo pointed out, hopping off the table to follow, cold pack still held in place.

“Yes, but I rather think it’s a better business model if someone pays for them,” Wufei drawled, and Duo laughed, draping his free arm over Wufei’s shoulder as he unlocked the door. This time Wufei allowed himself to enjoy the contact fully, thinking that he could get very used to having someone so tactile around. Until Duo, he had never been on the receiving end of much casual contact, and whilst he wasn’t sure he wanted it from others, Duo’s was certainly very welcome.

“That’s why I need someone like you around,” Duo chuckled. “Otherwise I would be stoney broke.”

*

Sally had taken very little convincing to leave her medical report and come to the bar with them. Given as said medical report appeared to be only three lines which said ‘Maxwell shot with own gun after it was taken by assailant, injuries minor and his own damn fault’, Wufei rather got the impression she was ready for a drink.

Duo flung the door open and marched inside like he was making a grand entrance to a ball. Sally and Wufei trailed in behind him as he paused for effect, arms wide, a physical ‘ta-daaaa’.

“No shirt, no service!” Helen yelled across the room, clearly unimpressed by the display.

“I’ve got a shirt!” He lifted it off his shoulder and waved it at her to illustrate.

“It doesn’t count if you’re not wearing it!”

Grumbling - Wufei caught the words “hell beast” and “who owns this damn bar anyway” - but grinning good-naturedly anyway, Duo shoved his arms in his shirt and buttoned it up, tossing the cool pack on the bar when he got there.

“Stick that in the fridge? It’s warmed up.”
Helen obliged, grabbing the item and putting it in the fridge full of beer bottles behind the bar.

“I’m not sure that’s exactly sterile,” Sally muttered dryly, and Duo stuck his tongue out at her.

“Someone finally try to solve my biggest problem?” Helen asked, nodding towards the bruise, which was still showing as Duo had left his shirt artfully half-buttoned to display it to best effect.

“Wounded in the line of duty! I’m a hero!”

“Yeah yeah.”

Duo rolled his eyes, and excused himself, disappearing into the office behind the bar. He returned a few heartbeats later as Sally and Wufei were handed their drinks, with a number of darts clutched in his hand and a wicked grin on his face, marching over to the booth where the others were already ensconced.

“Alright, Barton, time to settle this!” he cried, waving the darts at Trowa. Trowa rolled his eyes, but slid obligingly off the bench, following Duo over to the dartboard as Wufei and Sally took up the vacated space.

“Begin round thirty-two,” Quatre said mildly, watching the pair disappear across the room. Helen gestured to the other barmaid who was working, and the girl quickly nipped out and marked off an area much larger than the usual space required for darts with empty chairs, ensuring that no unsuspecting patron drifted into the grudge match between two precision knife-throwers.

“What are you drinking?” Sally demanded, catching sight of the large bright yellow monstrosity that Relena was sipping delicately from an elaborate cocktail glass.

“It’s called a Queen of the World,” Heero said, with a small smirk. “Helen created it for her.”

“It’s delicious so I can forgive the name,” Relena said, holding it out for Sally to try. She did, and then pulled a face.

“How do you have any teeth left?” she said. “What’s in that?”

“Raspberry vodka, midori, mango juice and lemonade,” Relena told her cheerfully. “It’s amazing.”

Sally’s mouth twisted, clearly stating her opinion on that, and she took a deep mouthful of her wine to try and remove the flavour of the cocktail. Wufei settled back in his seat and let the conversation wash over him, instead watching Duo out of the corner of his eye, as he and Trowa began to get steadily more creative with their shots, and - he could just about hear - their barbs and goading to each other.

He didn’t realise he was smiling to himself until he glanced back at the conversation and found Quatre and Heero watching him, with a small smile and a quirked eyebrow respectively. Panic spiked through him and he flushed slightly, wiping the smile from his expression. He raised his own eyebrow back, challenging and was gifted with a widening smile from Quatre and a smirk and a barely-perceptible nod from Heero.

Wufei looked away awkwardly and picked up his drink. Well… that had been more understated than he’d feared. Verification, acknowledgement and acceptance without a single word uttered. He almost didn’t trust it – had been expecting facts to be reeled out and dissected for public judgement, as he had seen done before to others. Demanding details and gossip fodder with little regard to personal comfort. Not, of course, that he was entirely free and clear of that danger. Sally would probably tie him to a chair until she was satisfied she had all the information, and Relena… well there was a
reason she was a politician.

Despite that, he felt the knot of ever-present tension inside him ease a little. He hadn’t been asked to
disclose anything he wasn’t comfortable with, and he seemed to have met whatever standard was
required for the others to accept his interest in Duo. Honestly, he was a little surprised none of them
had pointed out how unsuitable he was for the task, but perhaps they had decided as he had, that
Duo was an adult and could make his own decisions, and they chose to be happy for him instead.

Said adult flopped onto the bench beside him with a grouchy look and a pint. Trowa followed
behind, sliding into the booth on the other side. Across the room, Helen was taking the darts back
into the office, wearing the expression of someone who had confiscated them until people can learn
to play nicely.

“It was a draw,” Trowa said, in response to Quatre’s raised eyebrow.

“He fucking cheated,” Duo said. “He’s been practising.”

“How do you know he’s been practising?”

“Because I’ve been practising and it was still a tie.”

“Draw number thirty-two,” Quatre murmured to Sally, who snorted into her glass of wine.

“Round thirty-three should be exciting,” Heero said, deadpan. “I wonder what the outcome will be.”

*

It wasn’t late when they left the bar. Relena and Quatre had to return to work the next day, so a night
was called fairly early. Heading out onto the street, goodbyes were said, but Duo grabbed Wufei’s
sleeve and pulled him to the back of the group as the others started to move along the street, Sally
near the front with Trowa and Quatre.

“See you later guys,” Duo called, and the others called back, smiling, and waving vaguely as Duo
and Wufei disappeared around the corner.

They walked a few steps in silence, listening in case anyone came after Wufei, but no-one did. Duo
slid his grip from Wufei’s sleeve down to link hands. His skin was warm and rough, and Wufei
could feel the callouses as he curled his own fingers around Duo’s, cataloguing the feelings. He
hadn’t held hands since he was a child, and that had been more out of necessity than any significant
gesture of affection.

The movement of Duo’s palm against his sent pleasant tingles up his arm, but the simple connection
of it seemed so much more significant. He ran his thumb experimentally across Duo’s knuckles and
smiled to himself as Duo squeezed his hand in response.

“You okay there?” Duo asked quietly, sounding amused.

Caught, Wufei blushed a little and hoped the darkening evening light would disguise it as he looked
up to see Duo smiling down at him with a bemused and fond expression.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “This is all… new.”
“Really? You hadn’t mentioned it.” Duo laughed and turned, using his grip to tug the shorter man against him. “It’s weird seeing you like this. You’re usually so confident and sure of yourself, even if things are unfamiliar.”

“I usually approach the unfamiliar with force, aggression and bullheadedness,” Wufei said sardonically. “That doesn’t really seem entirely appropriate for this.”

“I like your bullheadedness,” Duo chided. “It matches my bullheadedness.”

Wufei begrudgingly leaned into the hug as Duo wrapped an arm loosely around him and leaned down to press their lips together briefly. The American hummed as he pulled away, looking extremely pleased with himself.

“I could get used to this,” he mused.

“You do understand that when I say this is unfamiliar, I mean… all of it,” Wufei asked, feeling that perhaps it would be better to raise this sooner rather than later when he had already made a hash of it.

“I know I’m real pretty, but I do have some deductive reasoning skills,” Duo drawled in response. “But in the interests of full disclosure, you should know that I’ve had… a lot of experience with… ‘it.’” He quirked an eyebrow cheekily and studied Wufei’s expression. “Lemme guess, Tro already told you?”

“I shan’t snitch.”

“Silence will be taken as assent.”

Pulling out of the hug, they continued walking, hands still linked. The night was mild in the late Spring settings, and the streets were fairly quiet for a weeknight as they headed away from the city hub and towards Duo’s garage.

“I can’t say I’d’ve waited for you if I thought I had a chance,” Duo said after a while, his tone contemplative. “I was a bit of a mess back then. But at the same time, I never thought I’d have a chance. Hell, I’d planned to tell you while you were up how I felt, but that was on the expectation that I’d never see you again after. The others kept tellin’ me you’d got even more prickly since the war, I was half expecting to at least get knocked on my ass.”

“I am worse than I was during the war.” Wufei paused, frowned.

“No,” Wufei allowed. “Since I got here I’ve… not quite been myself. I struggle to cope with civilian life, so I spend my life working, angry, or both. You… you seem to have made it easier.”

Duo shrugged a shoulder and tilted his head back thoughtfully, squinting up at the lights above as the colony curved over them. In the streetlights, Wufei could still see the lines of his jaw, where it met his neck and down to his collarbone. It was a fascinating shape.

“Sometimes it’s a case of finding the right way to cope,” Duo mused. “If you feel more relaxed having someone you trust around.”

“It’s not just trust,” Wufei interrupted. “I trust the others, but… You take the pressure off. You navigate these issues for me and I can follow your lead. I’ve always felt on the spot and lacking with them. I don’t feel like that with you.”
A sideways glance and a pleased little smile were his reward for that.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

Duo let out another pleased hum and swung their joined hands.

“Sounds like a partnership to me,” he observed.

“Yes.” Wufei smiled back. “It does.”

“So I was thinking,” Duo said, changing the topic. “I’ll be down to Earth in July anyway, for Quat’s grad. Maybe… I could spend a bit longer down there? Maybe… come stay with you, for a bit?”

Wufei considered that. Considered that he was due to travel back to Earth on Sunday - not even five full days left on L2. And then it would be two months before Duo came down for Quatre’s graduation. After five years of no contact, two months shouldn’t seem that long, but things were different… very different from before.

“That… sounds perfect,” he said, and was rewarded with a wide, bright smile.

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Chapter End Notes

- Thank you again to maeve mauvais for all her amazing beta work. It's been so great. And to all of you for being so kind with your feedback! I treasure every comment I get!

- Also, I have NOT tried Relena’s cocktail, so I can’t guarantee how it will taste. THEORETICALLY it should be fine, and it's all things I love in other drinks. So, I dunno, theoretically it should work.
Lady Une arrived late Wednesday night, and was in the HQ on Thursday morning. Wufei found a message waiting for him to see her as soon as he got into work, so at 9:05am prompt he knocked on her door, and at the acknowledgement stepped inside.

“Good morning Chang,” Une said, without looking up. “I assume there was something urgent which prevented you from coming in when you arrived?”

“No ma’am,” he said mildly, standing in front of her desk, arms behind his back. “I went to my office and came directly here once I received your note.”

Une finally glanced up from her paperwork, a little startled. She stared at Wufei for a long moment before sitting back in her chair and studying him thoughtfully.

“You’re usually in much earlier,” she observed.

“I understand that I’m currently on administrative shifts, and as such am only required to work from nine until five.”

“Yes, but you never do.”

Wufei smirked a little. One of the things he admired about Une was her ability to be direct when others would worry unnecessarily about causing offence.

“I had an appointment this morning,” was all he said. He did not feel he needed to elaborate that the appointment was breakfast with Duo. Following a night in Duo’s spare room. Again. After staying up half the night talking. And kissing. Again.

Duo was trying to get some miles in before Wufei headed back to Earth, and Wufei wasn’t exactly going to discourage it.

So far it seemed only the other pilots knew - and possibly Relena. He had managed to avoid Sally’s notice by just pretending that he was still coming into work early and leaving late, following his usual patterns. He was enjoying thinking of the look on her face when she finally was brought into the loop.

Tapping her pen against her palm, Une clearly wanted to ask him what his appointment was, but knew there was no reason for her to do so. After a long moment, she evidently let the issue go, and set the pen on her desk, lining it up neatly with the stack of papers there.

“I received your request for leave,” she began. “I wanted to check it was correct.”

“Yes.”

“…A whole month?”

“Unless I’m mistaken, I should have enough holiday accrued.”

“Enough - !” Une let out a startled laugh and then cleared her throat. “Chang, you’ve got enough holiday accrued to take six full months off – not that I’d be keen on you doing that all at once! But
until this point you’ve never requested *any* leave, and suddenly you want a full month?”

“Yes.”

Narrowing her eyes, Une leaned forward and braced her forearms on her desk, lacing her fingers together. Wufei met her gaze calmly, a small smirk and a quirked eyebrow the only sign that he was enjoying her confusion.

“Chang,” she said, and her voice was suddenly gentle, “if you require leave for… medical reasons, we do have facility to give paid medical leave. You don’t need to use your holiday allowance for it.”

“I am aware of the availability of medical leave,” Wufei replied. “In fact, Agent Po has enforced it quite rigorously on my account on several occasions, when I have felt I would be fit for light duties at least.”

Silence fell again. Une was evidently trying to work out if Wufei was up to something which would cause her trouble in the long run, and Wufei was enjoying watching her. Defying expectations really could be rather fun.

“And the preparations for tomorrow?” Une asked, apparently trying to coax some kind of expected reaction from him by prodding at his tried and tested hot buttons. Once again, he failed to deliver.

“Since the threat to Minister Peacecraft has been dealt with, we have reverted back to the original security procedures which were in place.” He watched her manage to mostly hide her baffled expression and suppressed a grin. “If that’s all?”

“...Yes, that’s it for now,” she dismissed him, still clearly a little bemused. He had the good grace to hold his snickering until he returned to his own office.

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Whilst Une’s attempt to rile him had failed to produce its intended result, it had prodded at the memory of the throwaway comment Sally had made a couple of weeks previously, and Wufei addressed it at Duo’s that evening.

“Did you… Would you like to go on a date before I leave?” he asked, striving for nonchalance as he carefully chopped peppers.

Duo glanced over his shoulder from where he was frying onions, frowning a little in confusion.

“What?”

“Well, I’ve been given to understand that… dating is what people in relationships do,” Wufei said slowly, transferring the last of the peppers into the bowl with the already-diced aubergine and taking them over to Duo. “And it seemed like the sort of thing you’d like to do, so…”

Taking the bowl off him, Duo just stared at him a little blankly for an uncomfortably long moment. It took some effort to hold his gaze and not look away embarrassed, but for the life of him he couldn’t work out why his suggestion was causing so much consternation. He knew it was *a little* out of character, but this was a bit much.
“I mean, you’re kidding, right?” Duo asked finally.

“If you don’t want to you just needed to say so,” Wufei snapped irritably, embarrassed. So much for being nice.

“No, I mean -” Duo tipped the veg into the pan and shook his head vaguely, as if trying to rattle his thoughts back into order. “What do you think we’ve been doing since you got here?”

Wufei stared back at him, mirroring the blank expression he was wearing, and the braided man started laughing. He laughed so hard he had to put his spatula down and brace himself on the counter. Red-faced and wheezing slightly, he held his hand up in the international sign for ‘wait a second’, as Wufei folded his arms and scowled at him somewhat petulantly, not particularly keen on being the punchline of the joke.

“Aw shit,” Duo huffed, as he brought his chuckles under control. He wiped his eyes on the back of his wrist and straightened. “Oh man, sorry, I’m not - hehe - I’m not laughing at you.”

“Forget me if I don’t immediately believe you,” Wufei said, a little sourly.

“It’s just… remember I said I was planning on telling you how I felt while you were up here?” At Wufei’s slow nod, Duo continued. “I had this whole stupid, elaborate plan to take you out on loads of dates to try and convince you being together would be a great idea, and then be like ‘hey, so there’s this’, before you left. And we’d live Happily Ever After, The End. I mean, you hopped onto the bandwagon a bit earlier than I planned, but, y’know, I managed to get a few in there.” Duo slipped into chuckles again. “‘Cept turns out you didn’t even notice they were dates. Some Master Plan that was! That’s why I leave the strategy to Q, I guess.”

“Oh.” Wufei cast his mind back – drinks, dinners, laserquest, cinema, the gig... Wow, he was even more dense than he had given himself credit for. He could set new records for poor interpersonal skills. “Oh.”

The expression of dawning realisation on Wufei’s face was clearly too much for Duo’s tenuous restraint and he started laughing once more.

“I am never asking you on a date again,” Wufei told Duo, although he felt an answering grin tug at his mouth.

“Oh, no no don’t be like that!” Duo forced out around chuckles. “I’ll make it really obvious next time!”

“There’s not going to be a next time.”

“We can get matching ‘this is a date’ t-shirts!”

“Not necessary.”

“We can go to the Gala together! I’ll get you a corsage!”

That did it. Utterly delighted by the image conjured by his own joke, Duo collapsed into helpless whoops of laughter, crouching on the floor and bracing himself on the cabinets, clutching his sides. Rolling his eyes, Wufei stepped around him to continue with the dinner.

“It’s not that funny,” he told the heap of Maxwell just by his left foot.

“Yes it – aw man I’ll make sure the flowers match your dress – ahaahahaha…” Duo hiccupped
between laughs. “Oh man oh man I’m gonna puke.”

“Serves you right.” Wufei added the coconut milk to the pan and stirred. “If you get me a corsage I will set it on fire.”

“Shut up shut up,” Duo wheezed, laughing harder. “I can’t breathe.”

He had only just calmed down by the time dinner was ready to be served. Only just.

*

Sally knew something was up.

Wufei knew it was his own fault – he had managed to remain in a fairly amicable mood for the whole day so far, from the ribbon-cutting with the press, to the politician tours. He hadn’t gone out of his way to be polite, but he also hadn’t been indulging in a temper tantrum in the corner of the office. It had helped that he had managed to sequester himself in the back of the armoury for most of the day in order to avoid everyone, but he had even been on best behaviour when Une had found him, dragged him out and paraded him around for an hour before he’d managed to slip away.

The dead giveaway appeared to have been when Sally knocked on his door so they could head to the hotel together that evening, and found him both ready to go and not in a foul mood.

“Be honest with me, Chang,” she asked in the cab on the way to the Gala. “Are you high? I’m asking as your doctor, to make sure you don’t make yourself sick when you combine champagne and drugs; and I’m asking as your friend, in case you have some spare for me.”

“No, I’m not high,” Wufei said, watching the lights go by through the cab window and not bothering to hide his smirk. “I’m attempting ‘the path of least resistance’ and hoping it will be over more quickly. It seems to be working so far.”

“Bullshit. You’ve never in your life taken the path of least resistance.”

She wasn’t wrong. Wufei made resistance into a competitive sport, and had there been World Championships he would have gone home with the gold every time. However, Duo had promised to make this evening worth his while, and that was certainly the most compelling incentive to shut up and behave himself he had ever been presented with.

“Maybe I’ve found my inner Zen,” he told her, and she snorted derisively, but did not push the matter further, choosing instead to lean back in her seat and survey him critically from the corner of her eye.

The hotel was brand new, an elaborate show of faith in the redevelopment of L2 and its increased marketability. A few tourists mingled in the marble-floored lobby bar, beneath the large statement chandelier hanging from the double-height ceiling above. Wufei and Sally were directed through a set of large dark wood doors and towards the Noventa Suite, which turned out to be a spacious ballroom, cream walls and gold metalwork around a polished wood floor, boasting another elaborate chandelier - this one with glittering white crystals, and a private bar next door. A number of tables with bottles on were arranged down one end of the room, whilst a buffet was spread generously in the bar area.
Possibly there would be dancing later, but for now the room was well-lit, and people were mingling, chatting and enjoying the sounds of the string quartet playing in the corner.

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” came an amused voice from behind them. “Feels like I’ve walked through the door into fucking Narnia.”

Duo slid around beside Sally and grinned at the pair of them.

“I’m so glad you guys have arrived,” he added. “Heero’s stickin’ by Relena so he can’t be rude with me, and Quatre gave me and Trowa a look when we started discussing ‘trickle-down economics’ loudly next to the Finance minister.”

Sally laughed and tucked her hand into the crook of Duo’s offered arm.

“Take me to the bar, Duo,” she commanded. “I think I’m going to need it.”

Duo led the way, glancing back over his shoulder to wink at Wufei, who was frankly a little relieved Sally was giving him time to get his thoughts together. He was pretty certain that when Duo had promised to make this evening worth his while, he hadn’t meant it was because he’d get to see Duo in a suit - but honestly, in that suit, he was beginning to be thankful he’d turned up. And equally thankful Sally had chosen to bring his formal changshan instead of his western suit - the loose trousers and long tunic were a little more… forgiving.

He had never seen the American in a suit before, and it was a hell of a suit. Wufei strongly suspected Quatre’s involvement - the grey-blue material had obviously been fitted by a very skilled tailor, sitting against Duo’s long legs and slim hips like a fabric caress. The jacket sat perfectly on his broad shoulders and followed the line to his waist like it was made to be there. Somehow he looked taller, and the crisp white shirt which was left tie-less and the collar unbuttoned only drew attention to the shape of his neck, and the glimpse of clavicle at the base, and the line where it joined his jaw that was suddenly extremely fascinating…

It was only when Wufei noticed that the jaw was moving that he realised he had… drifted somewhat, and snapped himself back to reality. Duo was watching him with a pleased grin and a slight flush across his cheeks, whilst Sally was leaning across the bar demanding “a decent scotch and now dammit!”

“I was saying,” Duo repeated, stepping closer and dropping his voice, “that I kinda miss the white, but you do look good in red.”

“What? Oh.” Wufei glanced down at himself, remembering his wartime uniform. His black trousers were covered by the deep red tunic, with black silk piping along the hems and fastenings. “Well… I felt it was better not to walk around in my mourning clothes for the rest of my life.”

His clan leaders had traditionally dressed in yellow robes, after their banishment, wearing the Imperial colour to show their superiority, thumbing their noses to history. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to do that, given the additional implications it brought - he wasn’t a hero, and the idea of wearing the symbol of it repelled him. The red and black had appealed to his idea of balance - summer and winter, fire and water, yang and yin.

On reflection, he often thought that Meilan probably had a point when she had accused him of being too cerebral.

“Good job I didn’t bring you a corsage,” Duo murmured with a smirk. “I’d have got the colour totally wrong.”
“Yes,” Wufei said dryly. “That is why it’s good you didn’t get me a corsage.”

“Chang, what do you want to drink?” Sally called. “Some mug’s set up a free bar, so make it expensive!”

“I’ll try not to take offence,” Quatre said mildly, as he and Trowa drew alongside them. Sally jumped a little, and then considered him thoughtfully.

“No, I stand by it - I like you, but you’re a mug if you’re setting up a free bar around this lot.”

“I’m hoping free booze will make pockets deeper,” the blonde commented with a small smirk. “Considering whatever comes out of them will go towards making sure you have nice working equipment, medical insurance and pensions.”

“You’re good people, Charlie Brown,” Sally assured him, raising her scotch in a toast. “You’ll kick that football one day, I’m sure.”

“Speaking of, here comes Lucy,” Trowa said quietly, and snickers were hastily smothered as Une strode towards them.

She eyed them all suspiciously, and then clearly decided that she didn’t want to know why she had caught them all giggling like naughty school children, instead rounding on Wufei.

“Chang, why are my agents going around telling people that your workout regime involves wrestling bears?”

“I don’t know,” Wufei said, maintaining his poker face admirably, despite the others around him barely managing to stifle their sniggers. “It’s a thoroughly ridiculous suggestion. Where would I find bears with enough regularity to make it a feasible exercise regimen? It would be impossible to maintain, and extremely inefficient.”

“That’s not what -”

“You’re Agent Chang?” A portly middle-aged gentleman who had been standing nearby quickly approached and grabbed Wufei’s hand to shake it heartily. “I’ve heard so much! Is it true you out-shot an Olympic champion marksman?”

“Oh. Yes.” The man had deserved it too, more concerned with showboating for his fellow trainees than actually focussing on training. Putting him in his place had provided no small satisfaction, despite how easy it had been. “But I’m certain I could find… four other people in this room who could do the same.”

Sally let out a very odd noise and Quatre turned to face the bar, his shoulders shaking as Une looked around at them all and tried to work out what was going on and when Wufei had been replaced by a pod person.

“He’s so modest!” the portly man cried, still pumping Wufei’s hand and turning to beam at Une, whose expression switched from bemused and annoyed, to professionally cordial at lightspeed. “What a find you’ve made, Une! No wonder you’ve been making such excellent progress, with agents like this!”

“Thank you, Senator Hargreaves,” she said, coaxing him to release Wufei before his new-found patience ran out and the man found himself with a broken wrist. “Agent Chang is one of our most senior and valuable agents –“
“Senior? He’s only a baby!”

Une coughed politely, eyes flicking towards said ‘baby’, who had suddenly tensed slightly, his jaw tightened and his eyes had taken a somewhat less friendly sheen. Duo’s hand lightly touched Wufei’s elbow, prepared to grab him should the implicit threat be delivered.

“We value skill and hard work over age,” Une said, beginning to steer the Senator away. “As you can see, it is evidently working for us…”

There was a long pause before anyone spoke.

“Wufei?” Sally asked after a long moment.

“Did you get me a drink?” he asked in response.

“No, but you can have mine.” She handed over the scotch. He took it and had a generous mouthful. It burned just as it should on the way down and the warmth spread from his stomach. “You didn’t deck him,” Sally observed. “I think that’s genuine character development.”

“The night is still young,” Wufei said, although he was feeling more relaxed already. The man was evidently a moron, and more than half-drunk, and perhaps things like that shouldn’t bother him so much. He found it was remarkably easy to let it go as Duo released his elbow and let his fingers brush down his arm.

“We could make it a drinking game,” the braided man suggested cheerfully. “Every stupid person you don’t punch out, we all drink.”

“I’m not playing another drinking game with you.”

“I think the odds of Wufei punching someone would increase as that game progressed,” Quatre said with a small smile, gesturing to the bartender to replace Sally’s drink, and ordering new ones for himself, Trowa and Duo.

“Naw, Chang’s a surprisingly mellow drunk!” Duo said, clapping Wufei on the shoulder. “Shows he’s really a softie under all those prickles – can’t keep the tension up when he’s been drinking!”

“If you keep declaring my secrets to the world, I’ll have to murder you,” Wufei told him.

“Chang! Chang!”

“Oh my god Pearson will you just-!”

There was a sound of a small scuffle behind them and then Pearson appeared beside Duo, looked flushed and bright-eyed, Merrick and Lang trailing behind him, evidently having tried to keep him away. Wufei raised an eyebrow at the beaming agent, waiting for him to reveal why he had suddenly thrust himself upon them. It took him a moment to catch on, but he did.

“Agent Yuy’s here,” Pearson told him, his voice pitched slightly higher than usual and vibrating with excitement.

“Sorry about him,” Merrick said tiredly to Quatre and Trowa. “He’s a little… overstimulated.”

“He’s not allowed out much,” Lang muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets. “For reasons.”

“Can you introduce me to him?” Pearson asked.
“Introduce you to who?” Wufei looked around, a little baffled. “What, Yuy? No. Go talk to him yourself, you’re colleagues.”

“C’mon Chang, please …”

Sally laughed and pushed off the bar, drink in hand.

“He’s just grouchy that you’re abandoning him for someone else, Pearson,” she said. “Come on, I’ll take you over.”

“Please don’t encourage him, Po…”

Pearson followed, looking delighted whilst Merrick and Lang trailed behind resignedly. Wufei grabbed Lang’s arm as he passed.

“Who came up with the bear-wrestling?”

Lang looked briefly confused, and then grinned, pleased with the in-joke.

“Sayid,” he said, and then trotted off after the others.

Quatre looked up at Trowa.

“How come you don’t have a Preventers Fan Club?”

“I’m not dark and brooding enough,” Trowa said with a small smirk. “Being a clear foot taller than the competition isn’t enough compared to smouldering looks…”

“You are not a foot taller than me!” Wufei protested, as Quatre and Duo laughed. “Six inches at most.”

“At least you admit it, instead of trying to make yourself look taller with your hair like Heero,” Duo chuckled.

“I can make you shorter,” Wufei threatened. “Just say the word.”

Once all the drinks had been handed out, and Wufei had been given a new scotch, they moved away from the bar and to a quieter corner out of the way. Quatre fell into step beside Wufei as Trowa and Duo moved ahead.

“What do you think?” Quatre asked, gesturing at the room with his glass.

“It’s a beautiful building,” Wufei allowed. “But… It doesn’t really fit.”

He was thinking of Memory Lane, of the Low Bar, and of the converted industrial estate where the Laserquest was, with its little stores and entertainments. Duo’s garage surrounded by local firms, relying on local people. Rough edges, unfiltered personality, and warm welcomes. This hotel was too grand, too polished and too… soulless. Quatre’s smile turned a little rueful as he nodded.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “But it was one of the compromises we had to make to get people to invest here. What L2 needs is an influx of money from external sources that can be maintained - tourism. But without luxury brands investing, tourists wouldn’t trust it.”

“Is it really helpful, if the whole place gets taken over by these things though?”

“Ah, well,” Quatre chuckled. “We’ve taken steps to ensure that won’t happen here - Relena and I
managed to get the agreement nailed down today with the Colony Government. Certain areas of the colony are going to be protected. ‘Areas of Cultural Value’. You’ve been to Memory Lane?”

Wufei nodded.

“That’s one of them. A couple of others as well. External companies will be unable to open businesses there - they’ll be reserved entirely for local trades and endeavours. ESUN is also setting up a fund to provide grants to encourage business startups in the empty shops.” Quatre looked down, swirling his drink in his glass and contemplating the liquid. “We cynically had to pitch it as ‘local colour’, and a draw for cultural tourists. I know that left a bad taste in Relena’s mouth, but sometimes to protect something you’ve got to show how it can be profitable.” He glanced sideways, saw Wufei’s expression and laughed. “Yes, I’m not exactly a fan of treating human beings and communities as marketable commodities either, but, how does it go? ‘If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles’. I have no problems with using their weaknesses for my benefit.”

Wufei grunted, but acknowledged the hit – Sun Tzu wielded expertly. Another example of skills adapted for peacetime, apparently battle strategy wasn’t much different between war and business.

Ensconced around a small table in the corner, Duo had apparently stopped off by the buffet on the way, and a couple of plates piled high with fancy finger food were sat in the middle for them to pick at as they sat there. Quatre excused himself to go convince more bigwigs to part with their money, but it wasn’t long before Heero was deposited with them by a very disgruntled Relena.

“He’s getting on my nerves,” she declared, as they approached the table. “He can be your problem for the rest of the evening!”

Heero looked quite pleased with himself as he settled into the chair next to Wufei, although that was probably because Relena couldn’t see his expression, stood behind him as she was.

“Heero, no, what did you do?” Duo asked, a pantomime look of horror on his face.

“I wasn’t rude to a Senator,” Heero said, as though he had his story and he was sticking to it, no matter what anyone else said.

“You weren’t polite either,” Relena grumbled, taking the moment to smooth her hair back into place, readjust her skirt and pull her necklace straight.

“I didn’t say anything,” Heero argued, not looking at her and not bothering to hide his smirk as, predictably, she took the bait he held out.

“That’s the problem! He was trying to have a conversation with you!” She frowned down at the back of his head, then glanced at the others who weren’t even bothering to hide their amusement. “Oh you do this on purpose just to wind me up!”

“Just tell people he’s brain damaged,” Trowa advised. “He certainly fell on his head often enough during the war.”

“It’s the tragedy of our age,” Duo agreed. “Imagine what he’d’ve been capable of had he not had all sense smacked out of him.”

“That’s the real cost of war,” Wufei added helpfully. “He could have been the next Great Mind of Our Times.”

Relena looked like she was thinking about responding, but it was clear that she wouldn’t be able to
do so with a straight face, so she settled for shaking her head and walking away, just about managing to hide her smile until she disappeared, skirts swishing about her legs as she went.

“Is that a new record, Heero?” Trowa asked, as Heero leaned forward and snagged a vol-au-vent from the plate in front of him.

“Not quite,” he said. “I think word of what happened on Tuesday handicapped me – they were too busy being sympathetic and understanding to get annoyed.”

“Heero’s trying to get Relena to stop bringing him to formal events using ‘aversion therapy’,” Duo explained to Wufei. “If he says he doesn’t want to go, she guilt-trips him into going, so he’s working to convince her that his attendance is a bad idea.”

“I’m beginning to think she’s catching on though,” Heero grumbled. “It’s harder work than it used to be. But she’s starting to do risk-benefit evaluations for events, and working out how damaging I could be.”

They stayed at the table for the rest of the evening, and, seated with the other three, Wufei found himself not only relaxing but actually enjoying himself. When he’d been forced to attend formal events previously, he had felt exposed, vulnerable and unsure what to do with himself, which had in turn made him bad-tempered and thoroughly unpleasant to be around.

Sequestered at the table here though, seated out of the way and with Duo beside him and his back to the wall, he felt safe and unobtrusive. People drifted over to see them as the evening wore on, some exchanged a few pleasantries, some pulled up a seat and sat with them for a bit, snagging finger foods and swapping stories. Duo appeared to have agreed a sign language with the bartender, because every so often he would signal to them and a fresh round of drinks would appear.

Une even seemed to approve of the set up, as it meant she could bring Important People past to meet Wufei without having to hunt him down, and the presence of the others seemed to keep him mellow enough to be polite to them. Fortunately, none of the others commented on his age. He wondered if Une had forewarned them.

“How does Relena do this so often?” Sally asked when she wafted by a bit later.

“This is the creche,” Duo told her. “We’re here keeping out of trouble until our Grown Ups take us home.”

She sank into one of the chairs, toeing off her high heels and propping her feet up on the chair beside her, enjoying the freedom the loose, wide legs of her jumpsuit allowed.

“How does Relena do this so often?” she groaned, wiggling her toes and stretching her feet out.

“Years of practice,” Relena told her, appearing at her shoulder. She nudged Sally’s feet over and perched on the edge of the chair with a sigh. She let her shoulders droop and her back bend slightly, legs straight out in front of her, and for a minute she looked like an overtired and overwhelmed girl, struggling to keep on top of everything. Then, a deep breath, and her face was all professionalism again, the lungful of air reinflating her back to her previous poise. “Come on, Heero. They’re about to start the dancing.”

He grunted as she stood, but obediently took her hand and followed her out of the bar and back into
the ballroom. Trowa stood too and held his hand out to Sally, who rolled her eyes but stood as well, using his grip to balance as she stepped into her shoes.

“I suppose I have to be a lady if you’re going to be a gentleman,” she grumbled good-naturedly, and then sailed out of the room with him as if she hadn’t been complaining about her feet two minutes previously.

Left alone for the first time that evening, Wufei and Duo sat in companionable silence, watching all the people drift out of the doors. Duo grinned at him.

“Don’t suppose you wanna -”

“Not even if you were paying me.”

“Thought so.”

Duo stood, straightening and buttoning his jacket as he did so, then holding his hand out to Wufei.

“I said I didn’t want to,” Wufei said.

“I know. Thought we could use this as cover and make a break for it.”

Taking his hand and standing, Wufei spared a glance towards the open ballroom doors as the couples were assembling on the floor and the band started up.

“Shouldn’t we say goodbye to the others?”

“Nah.” Duo waved it off and led him behind the bar, winking as the bartender stepped aside and let them slip through the door to the storage room. A few short minutes later, they were stood outside of the hotel, in a small alley leading to the main street.

Pausing, Duo turned and pulled Wufei against him, kissing him hard and hot. Wufei clung back, giving as good as he got until they parted, flushed and panting, and grinned at each other.

“You look good in red,” Duo said again.

“You look good in a suit,” Wufei told him. “But I don’t want to spend the rest of the night lurking down back alleys, if this is what you had planned.”

“As if I’d plan something so pedestrian for you!” Duo scoffed, laced his fingers through Wufei’s, tugging him into step towards the street.

They walked for a while, strolling seemingly without purpose down the streets. They were busy, a Friday night and a rebuilt city providing nightlife. Couples, groups, individuals all milling between bars and restaurants and clubs, all in high spirits and enjoying the night.

“Didn’t used to really be like this when I was a kid,” Duo mused, watching people go past with a smile on his face. “People drank and danced sure, but it didn’t seem so happy. It’s a bit like relief.”

“It’s not all bad, then?”

“No,” Duo agreed. “Not at all.”

*
Their aimless meanderings eventually brought them past the Low Bar, and Wufei raised an eyebrow at Duo, who grinned sheepishly, and headed in, Wufei trailing behind.

It took him a moment to register all the brightly coloured balloons floating around the bar, and the bunting and streamers that had been strung up. He stared blankly around the room as everyone suddenly seemed to turn and look at him, en masse, with expectant grins. Then the music changed, and suddenly two hundred people were singing ‘Happy Birthday’, and the penny dropped.

“Oh,” he said, flushing from the attention focussed on him, as the song finished and someone started a round of cheers.

“Thought we’d forgotten it’s your birthday?” Duo asked with a grin.

“No,” Wufei said honestly. “I’d forgotten it was my birthday.”

“How can you forget about your birthday?”

“It’s just… not something I usually do anything about. I think Sally sometimes gets me a card? But that’s about it.”

“Aw man, she’s right, your life is sad,” Duo chided. “Good job you’ve got me now.”

“You didn’t –” Wufei glanced around at all the people, who appeared to have gone back to their previous business and were ignoring him completely. “You didn’t invite all these people for me, did you?”

“Hah! No fear,” Duo reassured him, starting to steer him through the crowd. “It’s Friday night, this is a bar, they’d be here anyway. But never underestimate a drunk guy’s willingness to sing Happy Birthday on command. These guys, however…”

They made it through the bustle of people and to the booth in the far corner. Another large table and chairs had been dragged over to make room. Stood around it were the other pilots, Relena, Sally, and a large number of the Preventers from the L2 branch, all still in their finery, and they all cheered when they saw them approaching. Someone had brought stupid cardboard party hats, someone had bought a cake, and ridiculous party blowers.

It was all far too much and far too ridiculous, and they should all still be at the Gala, but they weren’t, they were here and looking delighted to see him, and Quatre was wearing a party hat, Trowa was wearing two…

“You didn’t need to do this,” he told them, as Sayid handed him a drink. “It’s totally unnecessary.”

“We wanted to do it,” Duo assured him. “Any excuse for a party.”

“But… The Gala?”

“Once the dancing starts you won’t get any sense out of anyone there,” Quatre said with a grin.

“And some of them get a bit handsy,” Relena said, grimacing at the thought. “No, I’d much rather be here.”

He didn’t know what to do or say. No-one had ever made a gesture like this for him, and he would never have asked. Until now he wasn’t sure he would have even welcomed it, but apparently Duo
had taken his vulnerability and anxiety at becoming redundant and instead changed it into something else, a desire for friends and closer relationships that he previously had shunned. This… this made his stomach clench and sent warmth through him that he didn’t know how to deal with.

He was spared from having to make a decision, however, by Williams’s party blower smacking him in the ear with an over-enthusiastic toot.

“Cake!” Merrick cried, and he was hustled to the table and pushed into a seat.

A single candle was sat in the cake - a simple Victoria sponge, dusted with sugar - and hastily lit for him to blow out. He obliged, feeling slightly ridiculous but unable to keep from smiling all the same. Another cheer - apparently it required very little to get a cheer on your birthday - and the cake was tugged away to be divided up for everyone.

“What did you wish for?” Relena asked.

“He can’t tell you! It won’t come true!” Sayid said.

Sitting there as he was - with friends, with Duo, feeling more relaxed, happy and content than he ever had - Wufei thought that there wasn’t much else he needed to wish for anyway.

* 

Duo went with Sally and Wufei to the spaceport on Sunday to wave them off. Left with the bags as Sally went to check them in, they took the moment to try to work out just what to say. At least, that was what Wufei was doing.

He had no idea how to handle this. The idea of leaving was making him feel vaguely sick, and he was annoyed at himself for how ridiculous that was, it was only going to be two months, and it wasn’t like they couldn’t be in contact, or that he hadn’t managed just fine without Duo before the trip up.

He’d already been thrown off-kilter when the L2 Preventers had turned up at his apartment on Saturday with a leaving card and a “we’ll miss you” present – a bottle of Sambuca and a packet of pickled onion Monster Munch that he was certain he’d never eat – and they had given him hugs of varying degrees of awkwardness, and he had dealt with that as best he could whilst being totally bemused and out of his depth. Usually the only thing he got when he left anywhere was the poorly-hidden wave of profound relief from the agents he’d worked with, glad they wouldn’t have to deal with him anymore. Reading through the card, he found himself looking on at in-jokes which had developed during his time here, and honest requests to keep in touch (and one hastily crossed-out ‘Happy Birthday’ from someone who hadn’t been paying attention to what they were signing). It’d all been very alien, and bizarre, and he’d briefly wondered if hallucinations were a symptom of hangovers.

That was before he had met up with Duo and the others for dinner, and spent the night wishing for a bit of peace and quiet instead, or at least time alone with Duo, because being ‘on’ and social was a bit beyond him. He’d tried not to think about leaving, about trying to maintain a relationship that had barely begun – and tried not to think about what it said about his emotional dependency that he was dreading going because of something that had only been part of his life for a month.

But as new as all this was, it was almost like he’d come to rely on Duo to ground him, relax him. He
was struggling to remember how he did that on his own.

Oh wait, that’s right, he didn’t.

Duo shifted awkwardly next to him, rubbing the back of his neck and pulling a face.

“Sorry,” he said eventually, before Wufei could apologise himself. “I just… it’s hard to know what to say? Aside from, y’know, the obvious and that’s just gonna sound redundant.”

Wufei grunted in agreement, and Duo huffed out a laugh, a small grin tugging at his mouth.

“Just… don’t get your ass shot off before I get down there, ‘kay?”

“I’ll do my best,” Wufei said, with a reluctant grin of his own.

They fell into silence again, looking at the floor, the other travellers, anywhere but each other until Sally waved to Wufei to come drop the bags and head through security. Duo sighed heavily, then gave him a reassuring smile.

“Guess this is it. Have a safe trip, and gimme a call when you land.”

Wufei nodded, turned to go, then thought fuck it and turned back to Duo.

“Don’t I get a goodbye kiss?”

Eyes widened, and Duo’s gaze darted everywhere from Wufei’s eyes, his mouth, the floor and everyone around them, before he licked his lips and asked.

“You sure?”

No, not really. But he was sure he’d regret it if he didn’t.

“It’ll be two months,” he said, instead.

That seemed to be enough. A slow grin spread across Duo’s face and he got a positively wicked look in his eyes.

“I’d better make sure it’s a good one then,” he purred.

Duo reached out slowly, giving Wufei a chance to change his mind, and then his arm was around Wufei’s waist and they were pressed together, hips-to-lips. Wufei clung back shamelessly as the kiss got deeper and more forceful - there were a couple of surprised laughs nearby, and someone wolf-whistled, but they barely even registered as Wufei committed every sensation to memory.

They broke apart slowly, Duo easing himself away with a series of smaller kisses, like he couldn’t quite bear to have his last touch quite yet.

“I think that’ll do it,” Wufei told him, a little breathlessly when they finally stepped apart.

Duo grinned, and Wufei picked up the baggage.

“Fly safe,” he said.

“See you soon,” Wufei replied.

He headed towards Sally, who looked at once stunned, victorious and infuriated, and worked very
hard not to just drop the bags and turn around.

Sparing a glance back at the gate, however, he saw Duo still watching him. The braided man caught his eye, and looked relieved that he had turned for a final look, giving an almost shy wave across the concourse.

Wufei smiled and nodded at him. Two months. That was all.

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Chapter End Notes

GUYS. This is it. This is the last chapter of 'Salvage' proper! We made it! Thanks to maevemauvaise for being so patient and supportive - the next two chapters are epilogues, to round it off.

- Recipe time again! Duo and Wufei's dinner is this yummy vegetarian curry: https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/1507675/summer-vegetable-curry (I think aubergine is known as eggplant in the USA?)

- I headcanon the boys with the following heights - Trowa at 6'3", Duo at 6'1", Quatre at 5'11", and Wufei and Heero at 5'9", maybe 5'10" on a good day and depending on how fluffy Heero has made his hair that day.

- the last spaceport kiss owes a lot to Mel and Christy's 'Death and the Dragon' arc, because it is now part of my psyche, apparently.

Thank you all you guys for your continuing support and lovely comments - it's been really great of you. You're all very kind and every comment is treasured. I hope, once Salvage is over, you'll check out my other things as well, but if not thank you for sticking with me through this big one! :)


Glancing at the time, Wufei stretched and went to find his tablet.

Since he had returned to Earth, he and Duo had called each other most days. Sometimes they talked, sometimes they just left the video feed on propped up somewhere as they got on with their chores. They usually spoke during Wufei’s evening and Duo’s afternoon, so often Wufei was making dinner whilst Duo tinkered with cars or bits of metal.

It was difficult, though. Sometimes talking just got frustrating because he missed having Duo actually around, and this felt like a poor substitute for company. Sometimes it got frustrating in… other ways.

Apparently after having mostly sat on his hormones for his life, a fortnight of intensive making out and groping had left his libido with a sudden zeal for life that was getting increasingly problematic. Particularly as sometimes it seemed Duo was having the same problem, and his voice would go rough and thick and he’d say something that Wufei would replay over and over again in his head later, taking care of business.

They hadn’t done anything over the calls. Having not got further than heavy petting before he left L2, Wufei hadn’t really wanted the first sight of Duo naked to be on a tiny screen where he couldn’t touch him. But it was getting hard - in all senses of the word.

One more week, Wufei thought. One more week to get through. At this point he had even mostly stopped worrying about how tragic and lonely his life would look to Duo, that seemed like a fairly minor niggle.

He had just reached his study to set up for the call when there was a knock on the apartment door.

He frowned - who would be knocking at this time of night? Who would be knocking on his door?

Assuming it was a lost visitor for one of his neighbours, he sighed irritably and went to set them straight as quickly as possible.

He was surprised, when he opened the door, to see a rumpled Duo on his stoop - rucksack on his back, suitcase on the floor beside him.

“Hey,” he said.

“You’re not due until next week,” Wufei said blankly, surprise robbing him of any more sensible greeting.

“I got my stuff done early, hitched a lift down with Hilde, thought I’d surprise you.” Duo quirked a sheepish grin. “…Can I come in?”

“Yes, sorry, of course.” He stepped aside hastily and Duo shuffled past him, bags and all. Using the moment of shutting the door to get his thoughts in order a little, he turned to catch up with the braided man. “I haven’t got the spare bed ready yet or anything, I’m sorry. Would you like some tea, or -?”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence. Startled for an instant - he had forgotten how damn fast Duo
could be sometimes, and it was good his arms were pinned to his side or he might have reacted before he could process it - it didn’t take too long for him to recover his footing and return the kiss with enthusiasm, extricating his arms from Duo’s grip to bring his hands up to his face, holding his face and burying his fingers in his hair.

“Sorry,” Duo panted, breaking apart briefly to kiss along Wufei’s jaw and down his neck. “I just missed you so fucking much…”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.”

“If you’ve got time to be sassy you’re not doing enough,” Duo growled, and their lips locked again, hands on Wufei’s hips and back pulling him impossibly tighter against him.

He gasped as Duo’s fingers found their way under his shirt and then groaned when Duo’s thigh was pushed between his, rubbing against his embarrassingly eager erection. Oh shit, how desperate did he look, he wondered, as his hips pressed forward of their own accord, chasing the sensation.

“Better,” Duo purred, mouth moving again and he bit and sucked at Wufei’s neck, hands pushing material upwards and out of his way.

The first Wufei realised that they were moving was when his calves hit the couch and he stumbled. Letting Duo pull the shirt over his head, the American gave him a gentle shove, and he fell, sprawled across the sofa cushions. He watched, temperature and heart rate rising as Duo peeled off his own t-shirt and tossed it aside carelessly. There was a distinct flush to his cheeks and he was looking at Wufei with enough heat to melt metal.

Reaching a hand down to squeeze himself through his trousers, Wufei couldn’t quite suppress the groan as his eyes tracked downwards, across the broad shoulders and toned arms, across the muscled chest and abs, and then following the trail of dark hair that disappeared into Duo’s dark jeans, just above a very significant bulge.

“What’re you standing up there for?” Wufei finally demanded, and a wicked grin curved Duo’s mouth.

“Enjoyin’ the view,” he said, and then he was on Wufei.

Duo’s skin felt superheated against his own, and his hands couldn’t stop skimming across it, alternating between caressing and grabbing, holding on as Duo did positively sinful things with his lips and tongue and Wufei dissolved into a whimpering mess.

They shifted, pressing against each other, hips rolling and losing themselves in sensations, in each other, until Wufei tensed and pulled back.

“Stop, stop,” he insisted. “Or I’m going to embarrass myself.”

The noise that escaped from Duo at that thought was nearly enough to finish the job, but he pulled away, lifting his hips away from Wufei’s and burying his face in his neck, catching his breath whilst he peppered kisses against his pulse and collarbone.

It didn’t take long for those kisses to become more purposeful, and then Duo’s hands were skimming down Wufei’s sides, and across his stomach, deftly flicking open his fly.

“Ah! Duo, what…”

The warmth of Duo’s body over him disappeared, and then his trousers were pulled off, and Duo
was pulling his hips to the edge of the sofa, kneeling on the floor between his legs and slowly easing his underwear down. His erection sprung free, hard and red and dripping and Duo’s eyes went dark with lust and Wufei groaned at the expression on his face.

“Jesus you’re so gorgeous,” Duo muttered, and before Wufei could reply, disagree, his hips were pinned in place by Duo’s iron grip and his cock was swallowed.

He let out a strangled cry, and managed to think, ridiculously, this is new, before his brain lost the ability to string words together, overwhelmed by sensation and heat. Duo lifted his head, sucking as he did so and swirling his tongue around the tip, and Wufei’s fingers dug into the sofa cushions, holding on for dear life.

Finding a rhythm, the hand on one of his hips moved down to stroke across his balls, then disappeared completely. Distantly aware of the clink of a belt being unbuckled, and a rustle of fabric, Wufei didn’t realise what was going on until he felt the moan vibrating through his cock and he responded in kind, opening his eyes and seeing Duo with his own erection in hand, dark and heavy as he rubbed at it, matching pace with his mouth.

That sight was what pushed him over the edge. He didn’t even manage to choke out a warning before he was swept away, pressing his hips up helplessly into the hot, wet heaven that was burning through every nerve, gasping and shuddering and leaving him boneless and tingling.

Duo swallowed what he could, and took very little coaxing to crawl back up onto the sofa, kicking his jeans off as he scrambled off the floor, propping himself up with one arm. Lips locked and tasting himself in Duo’s mouth, Wufei reached down and his hands clumsily joined Duo’s, feeling the heat and hardness of his cock. Duo groaned into his mouth as he explored the smooth skin, the ridges, and then just wrapped his fingers around for Duo to thrust into, slick from precum.

It wasn’t long before Duo swelled in his grasp and moaned helplessly as hot come spilled through Wufei’s fingers and onto his stomach, cock twitching and pulsing. He thrust a few more times afterwards, prolonging the sensation before he dropped gently down, twisting to lie beside Wufei instead of flopping on top of him.

Both of them took a moment to catch their breath, before Wufei found Duo’s mouth in a sweet kiss. Duo hummed happily, and reached behind him to grab his underwear, using it to clean up the mess before Wufei could get his words together to protest.

“There’s paper towel in the kitchen,” he said finally, lamely, as Duo balled up the soiled boxers and tossed them off the end of the sofa.

“They’ll wash,” Duo said simply, laying back down and snuggling up against Wufei’s side, head tucked against his shoulder. “I don’t wanna get up.”

Hand stroking lightly up and down Duo’s spine, holding him close, Wufei wasn’t particularly inclined to move either.

“I suppose I don’t need to make up the spare bed then,” he observed after a long, moment of sleepy blissful silence.

“Saves on laundry if you don’t,” Duo agreed muzzily, and punctuated it with a huge yawn. “’Scuse me.”

“Come on,” Wufei said, and sat up, ignoring Duo’s disgruntled noise. “You won’t be comfy here for long.”
With a bit of cajoling and a lot of grumbling, Duo was eventually curled up in the bed, arms around the pillow and inhaling deeply.

“Smells like you,” he observed sleepily. “‘s good.”

“I’m glad you approve.” Wufei smiled indulgently at him and straightened, but a hand as wrapped around his wrist before he could move far.

“Don’t go?” Duo asked, violet eyes pleading but barely open. “Missed you.”

“I’m just going to lock up, I’ll be right back.”

Duo stared at him for a long moment, before deciding that Wufei was telling the truth and releasing him.

He locked up fast, scooping clothes off the living room floor and pulling the blinds shut.

Crawling into bed behind Duo was all at once exciting and soothing. He gently slid up until he was curled against the other man’s back, his long braid pulled up and onto the pillow so it wouldn’t get trapped during the night. Hesitantly, he draped his arm over Duo’s waist and was rewarded with a sleepy hum of pleasure, and the other man wriggling back more firmly into the hug.

His own eyes slid closed, and he let himself be lulled by the warmth and steady breathing in front of him, and found himself thinking that it would be very easy to get used to this.

* 

Wufei learned a lot about Duo whilst he stayed with him.

First, he learned that Duo tended to sleep either curled tightly on his side on the edge of the bed or starfished diagonally right across the middle. And that he liked to cuddle, except when he was too hot, and then he got grouchy that it was too hot to cuddle.

He learned about the little black notebook Duo kept in his jacket pocket, with a pen attached to it by a rubber band. Slightly battered, and with pages and pages full of scrawled to-do lists. Items which hadn’t been crossed out on one page were copied across to the next page where a new list was started and crossed off. Mostly it was chores – do dishes, do laundry, deflea cat, pay electric bill – sometimes broken down step-by-step: sweep floor, mop floor, wash laundry, put away laundry. Flicking through it curiously, he found some lists from when he was staying on L2: finalise band booking, talk to Dave re: cinema, gig tickets to Wufei, check suit clean for Gala, iron shirt for Gala.

“It’s how I remember to actually get shit done like a normal person,” Duo told him, spotting him with it and grinning. “Wasn’t exactly much call for a common routine ‘til after the war. Realised that I could usually remember the big stuff, but remembering the little stuff, the ‘managing a house and business’ and ‘bein’ a responsible adult’ stuff, I gotta work for that.”

For Wufei, it took a bit to process. A creature of habit, self-discipline and routine himself, it seemed alien to him that anyone would need this sort of guidance to get through their day. Duo certainly hadn’t seemed to struggle with tasks during the war, so he watched him curiously to see how it
worked, why Duo needed it.

It didn’t take too long to see that the reason he hadn’t noticed any need for a book during the war was because when it came to big, pressing tasks Duo’s focus was pretty much unbreakable. He’d work and work until long past the time when most people would have stopped to pick it up again the next day, worried that he would lose the thread or the ‘groove’. It was the rest of the time – he’d occasionally be midway through a chore or job and then something else would occur to him and he would disappear, leaving a sink full of dirty dishes or laundry piled on the kitchen floor, as he suddenly decided that right then was the best time to fix the squeaky bathroom door he’d forgotten about until that instant, or call the supplier he’d been meaning to talk to for days.

Duo seemed to have mostly trained himself, however, to stop what he was doing when these things occurred to him and simply write another to-do on his list, so he could finish the job at hand without worrying that he’d forget it again before he had finished the washing up or the hoovering. Each morning he checked the lists to see what he needed to get done – anything growing increasingly urgent got underlined and exclamation points added.

It was almost a little stressful for Wufei to watch such a chaotic system in action – his own way of working was very methodical, things were done in order at the right time, and he just… remembered to do them. But… it seemed to work for Duo. Things got done, it a roundabout order sometimes, but Wufei had to remind himself that it didn’t really matter in the long run.

They had their first real fight about that – Duo’s frustration at Wufei’s inflexibility when it came to getting things done, Wufei’s irritation that Duo seemed to constantly be doing things in an illogical sequence, an illogical way, when his way was much more sensible, and much quicker. They’d yelled at each other for about twenty minutes before Duo had stomped out of the apartment and Wufei had stormed into the study and, after pacing irritably for a long time, muttering darkly to himself, before deciding to reorganise his books into chronological order to try and calm himself down.

Two hours later, Duo returned, with ‘I’m sorry’ wine, and Wufei made ‘I’m an ass’ burgers and they had talked out how best to work around each other’s pressure points and then curled up on the sofa and watched an ancient Chinese period drama about concubines that was ridiculous and melodramatic and visually stunning and Wufei was becoming far too invested in it.

It wasn’t until they were going to sleep that night that he realised that even when they had been screaming at each other, Wufei hadn’t thought about calling it quits, and he hadn’t been afraid that Duo would either. The sense of security was surprising, and he nearly woke Duo up to tell him, before realising that perhaps that wouldn’t be entirely welcomed. That was another thing he had learned – unless something was on fire, Duo didn’t appreciate being woken up.

*  

Duo’s fascination with animals was something that was outstandingly endearing whilst it was utterly ridiculous. During that first week, before his holiday began, Wufei met Duo on his lunch hours – the fact that he had suddenly started taking lunch hours was a point of note amongst the other agents - and usually he would be in the nearby pet shop, staring delightedly at the tropical fish with his face smushed up against the glass, or having sweet-talked one of the assistants into letting him hold one of the hamsters, or rabbits, or lizards.

He could understand – to a point – the excitement. Colony life wasn’t exactly full to brimming with
animals. Occasional stray dogs and cats from people who had been careless with their pets, and pets who had been approved after strict quarantine. Officials kept a close eye on what was running around, and strays nowadays weren’t strays for very long, for better or for worse.

L5 had hosted a fair variety of animals, but it had also been a significantly richer colony than L2. Back when Duo was growing up – scrambling up, perhaps a better term – poverty was at its height so animals would have been scarce, and friendly animals even rarer. Being able to see such a wide array of creatures up close and personal would evidently be a luxury that Duo wasn’t going to take for granted any time soon.

For all his ogling though, Duo only left with a small toy owl for Hrothgar tucked into his pocket and nothing else.

Until Friday, when Wufei came home and there was a tank on the dining table, and Duo was on his hands and knees on the floor in the corner beside the television, elbows-deep in half-constructed cabinet.

“What,” Wufei demanded, “is that?”

Duo crawled backwards out of the cabinet, sitting back on his heels and twisting his head round to see. He grinned at Wufei.

“It’s a tortoise!” he said, as if that explained everything.

“I can see that,” Wufei replied. The tortoise was tiny but it was still clearly a tortoise. Currently it was trying its best to eat a very large strawberry – quite a task when the fruit in question was at least three times bigger than its head. “Let me clarify: what is it doing here?”

“I bought it for you.” Duo stood, dusting his knees off and walking over to crouch by the table, watching the little creature with delight. “As a ‘thank you for having me’ present.”

“You didn’t need to get me a present,” Wufei spluttered, not sure where to start with this nonsense. “And – a tortoise, I don’t know the first thing about keeping a tortoise, and all the kit – it must have cost a fortune, Duo…”

“I wanted to get you a present. I got you a book on tortoise care – the woman in the shop recommended it, and it’s got great reviews online – and I managed to get all the stuff locally for cheap. Some guy’s iguana or something just died, so he had this huge vivarium knocking around taking up space. It’ll go in that corner just nicely.”

Wufei stared helplessly at the tortoise.

“Most people just buy a bottle of wine or something… What possessed you to get a tortoise?”

Rubbing the end of his nose, Duo stood and shrugged.

“Whenever you met me for lunch you always waited by their tank and watched them with this little smile on your face,” he said. “It was cute. And, I dunno, you never seemed to have anyone ‘round when I called, or go out much, so I thought you could use the company.”

Sighing, Wufei looked back at the tortoise. He scrubbed a hand over his face, and then left it on the top of his head, as if the pressure was helping him make sense of the situation. He did like tortoises - one of his old Masters had kept a pair, which had plodded around the garden happily as he had grown up. The way they moved made him smile, and he had to admit this tiny one was very cute.
“What’re you gonna call it?” Duo asked, finally, shuffling closer and draping his arm across Wufei’s shoulders.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Wufei asked.

“...Dunno. It’ll probably say in the book how to tell. But it shouldn’t make a difference to its name, animals don’t care ‘bout shit like that. What about Esio? Or Paul?”

“Do you know how long tortoises live for?”

“Fuckin’ ages man, it’s super cool.” Duo laughed. “Maybe that should be the advert, ‘Tortoises are Forever’, instead of diamonds.”

There was a slightly awkward pause then, as that sunk in. The tortoise continued to tortoise, oblivious to the tension.

“Er,” said Duo.

“Are you saying you just proposed to me with a tortoise?” Wufei inquired, and enjoyed watching the rising panic on Duo’s face as revenge for the surprise reptile on his dining table.

“I mean, not intentionally?” Duo’s voice was pitched a little higher than usual, as he tried to scrabble out of the hole he was in without causing offence. “But, I guess, I mean, if you wanna…”

“I think it’s a little early for that sort of nonsense, don’t you?” Wufei asked mildly, reaching down to pick the tortoise out of the tank and inspect it more closely. Its little shell was rough, and it seemed perplexed at the loss of its strawberry. “After all, you’ve only been here a week. Perhaps we shouldn’t rush.”

The relief rolled off Duo like a wave, and he sagged a little where he stood.

“Maybe think of it as, like, a promise tortoise?” he suggested weakly, with a sheepish grin. “Instead of an engagement tortoise.”

Wufei named it Tu Shen, and wouldn’t explain why to Duo.

*

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY, right? Thanks to maevemauvaise again for the beta - she's so close to being free of this! SO CLOSE!

- The series they're watching, if you're interested, is 'Empresses in the Palace', and it's SO GOOD. I finished it and legit wondered what I was going to do with my life from that point.

- Tu Shen is the Chinese rabbit spirit of love and sex between men. You can find more here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu%27er_Shen
Thank you all again so much for your enthusiastic support, it really means a lot. <3
The staff who worked at WEI’s high end Kensington Hotel had been told that Mr Winner would be staying for the weekend, and had been instructed to prepare his apartment, as well as rooms for several guests.

Excited to see who would be joining the famous young billionaire, the receptionists and porters who were loitering in the lobby were not disappointed when the ever-popular ESUN Foreign Minister glided through the doors, looking immaculate and smiling brightly at them as they checked her in, accompanied by her smoulderingly handsome boyfriend.

They also weren’t disappointed when, a short while later, two long-haired men and a woman stumbled through the doors, looking rumpled, overheated, and bickering intensely about which tube line they should have taken and if it really would just have been quicker to walk.

They weren’t disappointed because they were certain, 100%, without a shadow of a doubt certain, that these people were lost and in the wrong place. The receptionist had even rummaged out a city map for them, ready to direct them to the nearest Travelodge, only to be thrown when the irritable-looking man with the long brown hair had made a beeline for the counter and asked to check-in, whilst his friends glowered at the floor, and pointedly didn’t look at each other.

She stared at him for a moment, looking at their jeans, and sweat-stained shirts, and battered luggage, and opened her mouth to ask as politely as possible if they could just confirm the hotel they were booked into, because it probably wasn’t this one, when the lift doors opened and her boss’s boss’s boss stepped out, caught sight of them and beamed.

“You made it!”

He strode over and pulled the disgruntled Chinese man into a hug, before releasing him and hugging the woman, and moving to join the other man at the desk.

“Yeah, sorry buddy,” the man - American - apologised, rubbing the back of his neck. “We got a bit turned around on the tube.”

“We wouldn’t have if you’d just listened to me!” the Chinese man called, although he already seemed to be fuming a little less following Quatre’s arrival.

“It’s called the Circle line for a fucking reason!” the American yelled back, making the receptionist wince slightly.

“This from Mr ‘ There’s a palace there, must be Buckingham, how many palaces can there be in one city?’ ”

“More than one is unnecessary and you know it! I’m not responsible for that!”

Quatre chuckled good-naturedly and leaned over.

“Give me their keys? I’ll show them up.”

“Uh, yes Mr. Winner, of course!”
She shoved the two room keys into Quatre’s hand and watched them, bemusedly, as he shepherded them gently into the lift and disappeared. As the doors slid closed, she could just hear the American’s last few words.

“There’s two fuckin’ stations for Kensington, man, it’s not that damn big…”

*

After a cool shower, Wufei felt considerably more human. There was nothing like taking the tube, in July, to solidly confirm that hell really was other people.

Towelling his hair off, he stepped back out into their gloriously temperature-controlled room to find Duo, who had showered first, sprawled on the bed munching his way through a packet of custard creams he’d stopped to buy on the way.

“Don’t eat in the bedroom,” Wufei said, reminding Duo of the agreement they’d come to whilst Duo had stayed with him. For Wufei, rooms had a specific function and purpose; for Duo rooms were arbitrary delineations of functional space, and whilst some parts were more suited to some tasks (kitchens, bathrooms) everywhere else was free to use as he wished.

The braided man pulled a face at him, gesturing expansively.

“We’re in a hotel,” he pointed out. “Everywhere is bedroom, unless you want me to eat in the damn bath.”

Wufei had to accept that.

“Not on the bed then, at least,” he said. “You’ll get crumbs in the sheets.”

Rolling his eyes, Duo swung his legs off the bed and stood, pointedly brushing at the spot where he’d been sat. He offered a biscuit to Wufei, who shook his head and hung his towel on the back of the chair.

“Don’t blame you,” Duo muttered, frowning at the packet. “Shoulda gone for the jaffa cakes.”

“You’ve eaten half the pack.”

“Waste not, want not.”

Pulling on a pair of light loose trousers and a similarly light shirt, Wufei felt perhaps he might be able to brave the outdoors again, and perhaps even be civil to people. Although maybe that was speaking prematurely.

“Oh, I told ‘Lena we’d go shopping with her - she wants to get Quat a graduation present, and Heero won’t go with her.”

Yes, apparently that was speaking prematurely.

*
“I only want to go to one store,” Relena had promised them, when they met her in the foyer. The reassurance had lasted only until Wufei had seen which store.

“Harrods doesn’t count as ‘one store’,” he told her, and she laughed lightly, pushing the door open ahead of her.

“It’s in one building,” she pointed out.

“It’s on a 5-acre block,” he retorted.

“Holy shit,” Duo said, and Wufei walked into the back of him when he stopped suddenly and stared around himself. Evidently he had never been in Harrods before.

It was much darker inside than the bright July afternoon they had just stepped out of. All the windows were covered, filled with the elaborate displays which tourists in the street were snapping photos of, and instead it was lit with fairly dim over the top lights.

There was also no way to see into the next room, or any of the rooms which came off the room you were stood in. Or to know how many rooms came off the room you were stood in. Or to even know which floor you were on.

For someone with instincts like theirs, it was a pretty hellish place to be. No wonder Heero had refused.

“Keep up boys!” Relena called, heading purposefully between two large displays. Wufei gave Duo a shove and they scurried to keep her in sight.

*

An hour later, Duo couldn’t decide whether he was horrified by their location or whether it was hilarious. They gone up an elaborately decorated elevator with generous lashings of gilt, inscribed with faux hieroglyphics and overlooked by a ridiculous gold Sphinx, and were now twisting through a room piled high with overly-elaborate dining ware.

“What do you get the man who can buy whatever he wants, and probably already has?” Wufei mused, studying a gold plated cutlery set with some disdain.

“How about this crystal-encrusted jaguar statue?” Duo suggested, leaning down to squint at the price on the monstrosity. “A steal for only 30k.”

“And in three colours,” Wufei observed, coming to stand beside him and looking at the line-up of red, blue and white crystal-covered statues, all baring their fangs at him. “One for every season.”

Duo snorted and straightened, glancing over his shoulder and looking a little uncomfortable when he caught sight of the disapproving shop assistant stood by one of the doorways out of the room. He shifted, rubbing his hands self-consciously on his shorts. Wufei followed his gaze and frowned.
“Don’t worry about them,” he murmured. “They always look like that.”

“I don’t got a problem with who I am,” Duo muttered back. “But I know where I belong, and it ain’t here.”

“It’s wherever you want it to be,” Wufei insisted.

Snorting again, Duo’s mouth twisted and he turned, obviously not wanting to discuss it further. He frowned and suddenly his stance sharpened. Wufei tensed in response.

“Where’s ‘Lena gone?”

Scanning the room, their charge was nowhere to be seen. Quickly striding to the four doorways to the next rooms, she wasn’t visible in any of those either. Wufei swore.

“Stupid woman, she should know better…”

“Should we split up?”

“Then we’ll never find each other!” Wufei spun on the store-worker. “Which way did she go?”

Mutely, the woman pointed through one of the doors and they strode off, finding themselves in another room with just as many doors. Duo pulled out his phone and tried call Relena, but the signal cut out between rooms. Muttering sourly, he moved to where he could find signal and sent her a quick, furious text.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing Wufei’s wrist and dragging him through the doors. “I said we’d meet her by that stupid escalator.”

“Do you remember how to get back there?”

Stopping and looking around, Duo frowned. There was no sense of direction in this shop, all the rooms similarly sized with tiny doors, and limited signs to tell where they had been and where they needed to go.

“I think we came this way,” Duo said, and took them back the way they’d come, but somehow they got turned around again and were stood in a room they’d never seen before.

“She won’t leave the store without us,” Wufei growled, more to reassure himself than anything else. “And the security in here is…”

“Fuckin’ nuts?” Duo muttered back. “Yeah, I’m not worried about anyone getting her in here.”

“If we head to the ground floor we might have better luck finding the escalator.”

“Is that - is that a bank?”

It was a bank, the words printed clearly on the door, along with opening hours for the normal banking services and their gold bullion service.

“What the fuck?” Duo demanded, gawping at the door as Wufei tried to drag him away. “What the fuck? Who actually banks with fuckin’ gold bullion?”

“Quatre, probably,” Wufei said. “Come on, Duo.”

Duo continued to bluster and moan about the bank through the next few rooms, until they came
across another display that upset him even more. After winding through department after department of ridiculous, expensive merchandise, they found themselves in a room full of merchandise that was obviously for people who couldn’t afford to shop at Harrods properly, so instead could buy items with ‘Harrods’ branded onto it in some way.

“Do you want a bedazzled Harrods towel?” Wufei asked, in an attempt to distract him, gesturing at the fluffy white towel with Harrods in cursive font in the bottom corner, made from swarovski crystals. “I think it would really make your bathroom look dignified.”

“No, I don’t want a - what is that?”

The large Christmas display was stood just across from them, filled with Harrods decorations and playing Christmas music, fairy lights twinkling brashly. Santas of various sizes, Christmas teddy bears, Christmas trees all unrepentant in their existence, taking up a full room.

“It’s July, you monsters!”

“Look, there’s an escalator on the other side of it, we’ll get there and then find Relena and go get a drink.”

Wufei kept his voice pitched calm and low as he steered Duo past baubles and tinsel, levelling his glare at everything in his path. A few months ago, Wufei wouldn’t have thought himself capable of remaining the calming influence, but apparently Duo had brought out elements of himself he hadn’t previously been aware of. He’d always been able to handle a crisis, but now he was compelled to handle someone else, and someone whose opinion and feelings he cared about.

Duo spent most of the time managing Wufei’s anxieties and coaxing him through social situations, it was only fair he return the favour now.

Once they were on the escalator, Wufei gently cupped Duo’s face and tipped their foreheads together.

“I’m sorry we came here,” he said. “If I’d known, I’d have refused.”

“Sorry, it’s just...” Duo’s eyes looked away, not meeting Wufei’s gaze. “It’s so much of all the shit that’s usually tellin’ me I shouldn’t be here, be anywhere. I shoulda stayed in the gutter.”

“You’ve got every right to be here,” Wufei told him heatedly. “More than anyone who would ever judge you for being here.”

“I know, I know.” Duo shrugged a shoulder and his mouth twisted slightly. “It’s just, y’know. Makes me aware of what I’m lacking.”

“You’re not lacking anything!” Wufei’s hands tightened on his face, fingers threading into Duo’s hair and tilting his gaze up. “I was a mess before I came to L2, you changed that. You are so much, you give so much, that’s what I love about you.”

Duo’s eyes met his then, wide and surprised, mouth opened in a little ‘oh’.

“W-what?”

Pausing, replaying what he’d said, Wufei realised what had slipped out without him even considering it, but it appeared that his mouth was merely a few steps ahead of his brain, and well behind the emotional parts of his body. He studied Duo’s stunned expression, feeling warmth curling through him and a small smile broke his face.
“I love you,” he said again.

“I love you too,” Duo told him, a little breathlessly. “Although I gotta admit I wasn't expecting you to get here that fast.”

“You bought me a tortoise, how could I resist?”

“Yeah and you named it after the god of dudes boning. Pervert. And yes, I can use Google.”

“Did Google also tell you that’s a gross oversimplification?”

“It told me you’re a gross oversimplification.”

They stepped off the bottom of the escalator and Duo grabbed Wufei’s wrist, tugging him towards him and kissing him gently, almost disbelievingly. Right then Wufei wanted nothing more than to blow Relena off and take Duo out of here, wrapping him up safe and keeping him away from anything that made him feel less than he was.

But he pulled away and looked around and frowned, confused.

“Wait, this doesn’t seem right…”

“There’s a fucking *basement*? How stupidly huge is the place?”

*

One million square feet, it turned out, was how stupidly huge Harrods was, according to the information leaflet Duo had managed to find, next to the creepy not-quite-lifesize statue of some pre-colony Princess and her boyfriend, frolicking in the surf with what looked like a seagull. The leaflet said it was a dove. The leaflet had clearly never seen a dove.

Wufei was thankful they didn’t have to trek across all of them to find their way back to the Egyptian escalator.

Relena was waiting at the bottom the escalator, small bag in her hands, and a relaxed expression on her face. She perked up when she saw them and waved.

“I’m all done!” she told them happily. “Did you guys want to get anything?”

“Yes,” Wufei said emphatically. “I want to get out of here.”

“What did you get in the end?” Duo asked, peering at Relena’s bag as she lead the way to the exits, navigating effortlessly through the store.

“A Mont Blanc pen,” she told them.

“A pen,” Duo repeated.

“We went through all this for a pen?” Wufei demanded.

“It’s a Mont Blanc pen,” Relena said defensively, slipping the item into her handbag. “A limited edition.”
“Jesus…” Duo muttered, pressing the heels of hands against his eyes and tilting his head back.

“How’s the research into Socialism coming on?” Wufei asked pointedly, his tone acid.

Relena sniffed haughtily at him.

“Just fine, thank you,” she said snippily. “But I’m allowed to buy a friend a nice present for a special occasion.”

“Yes. Yes you are,” Wufei said. “But next time, you can buy it online.”

She grumbled at them as they burst out of the doors, dazzled in the bright afternoon light. Duo unhooked his ridiculous aviator sunglasses from his collar and stuck them on whilst Wufei’s frown deepened and he squinted against the sunshine, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

As Relena called Heero to find out where they were meeting, Duo’s hand hooked into Wufei’s, their fingers lacing together. Wufei squeezed his hand and Duo gave him a warm, pleased smile. The warm feeling he’d experienced earlier suffused through his body again, and he smiled back.

Well, perhaps the experience hadn’t been entirely awful. But he wasn’t going to queue up to go back.

There were better things to do.

*

FIN

Chapter End Notes

We made it! The final chapter. I can't tell you guys enough how much I've appreciated your support, encouragement and feedback. I was so nervous when I started posting this, the first fic I'd written in years, but you were all so welcoming, so thank you!

Mega bonus props go to Maevemauvaise for her patience in beta reading this and being and excellent cheerleader, she is the best. <3

- the tube is awful at the best of times. The tube in Summer is like taking a jolly train ride through Satan's bowel. Also, yes the Circle line does go in a circle but it stops at the end and goes back the way it came. It also shares a lot of stops with the Hammersmith and City line, so you have to be really awake to make sure you get on the right train BECAUSE THEY ALL LOOK THE SAME.

- always go for the Jaffa Cakes, Duo. Rookie error.

- Harrods is a really fascinating and hilarious experience. It's so disorientating and weirdly lit, you easily lose track of where in the building you are. Everything mentioned here is actually something I have seen in there. The Egyptian Escalator is famous, and the shrine to Doddi and Diana is super creepy - the statue used to be at the top of an
escalator. Mohammad Ali Fayed, former owner of Harrods and father of Dodi, was very outspoken in his belief that the Royal family had arranged the car accident as an assassination against Diana and his son. He stuck that statue up and, weirdly, the Royal family stopped shopping there.

Eventually, Harrods was bought by another company, who thought maybe it would be lucrative to have Royal custom again. But they couldn't just get rid of the statue, because tourists came from all over the world to see it. So they moved it to the basement with this while shrine.

Harrods does have a gold bullion banking service, and they do have Christmas decorations with 'Harrods' on in the height of summer. The crystal jaguars were very real. Also the Aston Martin dinner service I saw, and a gold-plated cutlery set. It is a ridiculous place. It is also full of a weird mix of people who obviously can just shop there casually, and tourists come to gawk.


Relena wouldn't have had to go to Harrods for one - Selfridge's on Oxford Street also sell them, and is a much more traditional department store, with open spaces and an easier navigation system. I also think there's a Mont Blanc shop somewhere in London - if not several. But it wouldn't surprise me if they did a Harrods-exclusive one either, so that's probably what she was after.

This is it for Salvage, but not for the Salvage Universe. I'm about halfway through the prequel, and have a one shot set about four months after this chapter in the works.

I do have some shorter, Non-Salvage stuff up too if you are interested. Thanks again for sticking with me through this! It's been a wonderful ride. I treasure every comment I get and read through them regularly because I'm amazed and humbled that you all like my work so much. <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!