

## WarCraft

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# WarCraft

by [LittleMouse](#)

## Summary

Alternate Fantasy World - A world where people have 'Talents' that allow them to control certain elements. Different Talents can 'Join' to become a specific entity - some can heal, some can repair damage to land and buildings, some are weapons. The Talents you 'Join' with are called your Others. The perfect Joining is of five separate Talents. One lonely Fire Talent far to the North has given up waiting for his Others - good thing they haven't stopped looking for him.

I would like to state that this is an old fic and named before I knew anything of a game called Warcraft.

## Notes

This is the first unfinished fic I will be posting to this Archive. There are a LOT of finished chapters but no end in sight. Fair warning.

## Comes a Four

Hopeless.

Wufei leaned against the far side of the Arena and watched as other Talents, some he'd known half his life, were met by their Others and left the Arena. No one even looked his way, let alone approached him, and they hadn't all day. He didn't know why it was bothering him, it was like this at every gathering he'd ever been to.

Ah, well. Perhaps it just wasn't meant to be.

He pulled his cloak firmly around him, drawing the hood over his face against the bitter wind. It was time to leave, there would be no more Matches made today and he had a job to get back to. He was in for a jolly round of teasing, too, from Alvis and his friends - though he'd noticed that none of them had been Matched, either. It wouldn't matter. They were 'waiting for their perfect Others', while he was just pathetic.

Life wasn't fair.

He stepped out of the Gathering Arena and into the street. Instantly the wind was trying to steal his cloak and his breath - he was certain it was after his very soul. It was so strong it seemed to be pushing him towards the inn, like his feet were taking steps twice as long as usual. He slid inside the door with an unusual feeling of relief - he hated coming back here, but escaping from the wind dulled the usual sullen throb of anger.

"About time!" Harris, the innkeeper, bellowed at him. "I been waiting all the evening for you! Alvis done told us you weren't chosen. Again." He snickered, and half the crowded room echoed him. "Don't see why you bother going. No self-respecting Talents are going to choose *you*! Might as well choose a donkey out of the stable!" Now the whole room howled with laughter.

Wufei just hung up his cloak, doing his best to ignore the jibes thrown his way, and moved around the room, lighting the fires in the huge fireplaces with his Fire Talent. Alvis and his friends were sitting around the main table, candles set up around them as they practiced their own Talents. Alvis was a Fire like Wufei, and delighted in showing off by lighting the candles and snuffing them out in elegant patterns. His friend Gordon was a Water Talent, who was teasing his friend by soaking the candles, making it harder for Alvis to light them. Alvis just sneered and stepped up his Talent, drying the wicks before they flowered into flame.

Wufei ignored them, taking trays of pewter mugs around to the tables, trading the beers for coopers that he tucked into a pocket on his apron.

'Another month.' he thought despairingly, 'Another month until the next Gathering and my next chance to get out of here.' If some poor fool of a Talent would just Choose Alvis - he didn't have to be Chosen, himself - without Alvis to carry the news that he *\*hadn't\** been Chosen, he could escape, leaving Harris to think that he

was. The thought of never having to come back to this hot, foul-smelling place put the trace of a smile on his usually tightly-clamped lips.

Bad move.

One of the strangers from Outside, here for the Gathering, noticed, and when he came to his table with the beer tray, he felt a hand slip up his thigh toward his rump. With the ease of old practice he managed to twist away and make it seem like he was just moving on. The man scowled after him, then signaled for the innkeeper.

*Well, shit.*

This was a bad thing - it was illegal for Harris to sell him like that, but he knew the man had been tempted before - it was only a matter of time before someone made him an offer he couldn't refuse, and this man looked well-off. He'd just have to hope that the rest of his unattractive person would cancel out the effect of that smile. Harris wouldn't risk a fine and a public out-calling for a handful of coppers.

He just had to hope the man wouldn't think he was worth more than that.

He saw Harris shaking his head - must have been a low offer - and the man's eyes turned to appraise him again. He tightened his lips firmly and twisted his features into a scowl. It worked, thankfully - the man shook his head and turned back to his beer and dinner. Harris snorted and went back to the bar.

A little of the starch went out of Wufei's shoulders, but he was careful to keep the scowl on his face the rest of the night.

\*

"This is hopeless."

Heero turned to gaze at his Second, his Water Talent. "Duo - it can't be."

"I don't mean completely hopeless, Hee-chan. I mean hopeless *here*. There isn't a decent Talent in the place. I don't feel anything. Do *you* feel anything?"

"No," Heero was forced to agree. "What about you?" He turned to his Third and his Fourth, who both shook their heads mutely. He sighed. This was the thirteenth Gathering they'd journeyed to since the Oracle in Helia had told them their long-awaited Fifth was somewhere to the North. The enthusiasm they'd begun with had rapidly faded. Too many disappointments were wearing them down.

"There's no point in even staying here," Duo grumbled, curling his lip as a plump female Fire Talent tried to catch their attention.

“I agree.” Quatre said softly. “If our Fifth was here, we would have sensed them already.”

Heero sighed again, and looked to his Third. It was just as well to get everyone’s opinion.

Trowa just nodded, agreeing with the others.

“Let’s go then.” Heero said.

“Back to Helia?” Duo asked, sadness in his voice. It had been a long, hard journey, but they’d been so eager to find their Fifth, the missing piece of themselves and the key to finally becoming a WarCraft. Their Commander had given them as long as they needed, knowing that when they finally found their Fire, they’d be a force to be reckoned with. Not that they were easily dismissed now, even as an unfinished Four, but he had high hopes of their powers once they were Complete.

Now it was over - this was the last town they knew of on this road. Any further and they’d be in enemy territory, where no Talents were even permitted to live - they were killed at birth.

“No, not back to Helia.” Heero said, surprising them. “I heard a soldier speak of a small town off to the East of here. It’s still North of Helia - as long as we are here, we may as well visit. Next week is their Gathering.”

“All right. Maybe we’ll get lucky.” Duo tried to get his old cheerfulness back into his voice, but it was a hard fight. They were rapidly running out of hope.

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“Don’t tell me you’re going to try again,” Alvis sneered as he watched Wufei put on his ragged cloak. “No one ever picks you. I would think you’d be tired of the humiliation.”

‘I would think you would, too.’ Wufei thought to himself, keeping his head down so the other boy couldn’t read the thought on his face. It wasn’t a good idea to anger the Mayor’s son, after all. Wufei had carried bruises from his fists before.

‘Please, *please* let him be Chosen this time.’ He begged the gods as he trudged down the cold, muddy road to the Arena again. He’d long ago stopped asking for himself, but he’d never give up hoping that Alvis would be Chosen and taken far, far away from here. If he was just Chosen by a local Talent life wouldn’t change enough. He’d just be strutting around the village prouder than ever.

Wufei slipped into the Arena and let his eyes run over the Joined Talents and the Singles who were waiting inside. Not many different from last time, and no one who Called to him. Ah, well. At least a few of them were looking at Alvis. Perhaps today would be his lucky day,

after all. He tightened his arms around the small bundle of belongings he'd hidden inside his cloak and waited, hoping hard.

He was watching as a prosperous older Water Talent spoke to Alvis when there was a sudden commotion near the entrance. One of the younger Talents, not old enough for Gatherings yet, came rushing inside.

"There's a Four coming!" He gasped, setting up wondering cries among the unChosen inside. "A WarCraft Four, searching for Fire!"

Alvis drew himself up haughtily, as if he were already Chosen by so prestigious a group. The other Fires, except for Wufei, began detaching themselves from friends and Possibles and drifting toward the door. Wufei shrank back into the shadows, clutching his bundle tighter as hope blossomed in his heart. Surely this would be the 'Perfect Match' Alvis was always going on about?!

He could almost taste his freedom.

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Outside, Heero and his Others swung down from their horses, gazing around at the dilapidated little village with obvious distaste.

"Ugh. At least if our Fifth is here, they ought to be glad to leave," Duo snorted, staring at the refuse piled in the streets.

"This place is disgusting." Quatre agreed, wrinkling his nose as the breeze carried the stench to them. He didn't usually use his Air Talent for such frivolous things, but he couldn't resist sending the breeze in the other direction.

"Whew. Thanks, Quat." Duo said as they started for the small Arena. "I was really going to be..." They all stopped short as a dull surge of warmth welled up inside them, burning hotter and hotter as someone inside the building anticipated their coming.

"That's our Fifth." Heero's voice was reverent - as one unit they broke out of their trance and raced for the building.

\*

Inside, Wufei reeled and nearly fell against the wall as several unknown sensations roiled up inside him - he didn't know what was going on, but he was sure he was about to be sick.

\*

The Four shoved the big wooden Arena doors open and stalked inside. The sense of their Fifth grew stronger, although they toned down their own reaction to it. They knew they were probably overwhelming their inexperienced Fire Talent. They expected to see someone prostrate on the floor as they came in, with worried friends and family around them. That was what it had been like when they found Quatre, their Fourth.

They didn't see it, though - there was just a crowd of country yokels, gawping at them. One redheaded boy with a round, cruel face sauntered forward. They could sense that he was a Fire Talent - but he wasn't *their* Fire Talent. They stood regally waiting, their eyes searching the room for someone else to come forward.

Alvis stood in front of them for a long moment, scowling the longer he waited for them to Choose him. He tried to meet their eyes and failed. Finally he stalked up to the one with chocolate brown hair in an artful mess, who had the emblem of a Spirit Talent on his armor, and forced the blue eyes to look at him. He smiled.

No response. The beautiful blue eyes stayed blank, not even a question in them.

"Alvis!" His father called, worriedly. "Come away!" It didn't do to bother a Four - they might not be WarCraft yet, but they were powerful enough to flatten the village as they were. He didn't want them provoked, and even he had to admit that Alvis was provoking.

"Father, I..."

"Come *here!*"

Alvis ignored him, turning back to Heero. "You're my Others!" he said sharply, watching smugly as all four pairs of eyes swung to him. To his surprise, the First didn't speak - but the Second certainly did.

"Man - not even! We can barely tell you're there - and you're hard to miss! You look like a fat weasel!"

Alvis sputtered.

The rest of the village guffawed.

Another Talent moved forward, a slim blond girl with starry eyes fixed on Heero. "I'm Relena," she breathed, gazing at him with a look that screamed, 'I have found my one true love!' "I'm a Fire Talent - you see?" A flame danced in her cupped palm. Again, it was Duo who answered her.

"Sorry, princess. You're not the one we're looking for."

Her lower lip wobbled, but she didn't give up. "You can't be sure of that - it sometimes takes several hours for Talents to recognize one another, you know!"

Duo shook his head. "Like I said, sorry, princess, but our Fire has already Spoken to us." His gorgeous violet eyes searched the room again, and he called out to everyone. "Why are you hiding? We know you felt us... come to us!"

The four boys waited, but no one moved. Heero huffed.

"Where are the other Fire Talents? Bring them forward." He spoke for the first time, ordering the Mayor. The man obeyed him instantly, motioning to the two Fire Talents left, a cowed looking brunette girl and a young Fire who was at his first Gathering and wasn't quite sure of what to do. The Four stared at them for a moment, then their eyes were going back over Relena and Alvis.

"No!" Quatre cried, losing his patience. "No, none of them! Aren't there *any* more Fires here?"

"No... oh, wait, there's the little inn boy. Where is he?" The Mayor replied, ignoring his son's sudden furious scowl. Everyone turned to look, and someone finally pointed to the far wall, where a small figure sat huddled on the floor, with his head on his knees.

\*

Wufei had barely registered that something unusual was happening - the odd feelings in his stomach had toned down, but were still too much for him to handle at once. He was sure he was going to pass out or be violently sick. Hating his weakness, he'd slid down the wall to the floor and huddled in on himself, folding his arms around his stomach and resting his swimming head against his knees. He vaguely realized that there were footsteps coming toward him, but he didn't react until a hand stroked his hair.

He lifted his head, dark eyes black as night in a face drained of color, and stared at the four pairs of eyes that were nearly devouring him.

'I think I'm in trouble...' he thought, then blackness filled his vision and he faded away.





# Waking to Us

## Chapter Notes

I'm editing out my old formatting and errors as I go - do feel free to point out typos if you see them!

Heero caught the boy before he hit the floor and sat down abruptly, pulling the limp figure into his lap. His Others sat down around him, gazing with worship at the Fifth they'd nearly thought they were never to find. They all ignored the astonished crowd milling around them - they might as well have been alone in the room. Even Alvis, shouting in disbelief, didn't register any more.

Duo reached out a reverent hand and let it follow Heero's path, stroking the sleek black hair.

"Damn, he's pretty." He whispered, making Quatre giggle and the other two grin. It was true enough - their Fifth was an Exotic, a rare type almost unknown even in Helia, astonishing to find out here in the middle of nowhere. His skin, rapidly regaining its normal color while in contact with his First, was a golden bronze, like honey, his eyes slanted like a cat's and with thick, curling black lashes. He had soft, full lips and he was *clean*, a lovely contrast to most of the people in this room.

"He's *not* pretty!" A petulant female voice finally broke in on their little circle. "He's a freak! He doesn't look like anyone else in the village!"

They stared up at Relena, not bothering to deny her words. Why should they? The girl didn't matter, and neither did her opinion. They had their Fifth! Nothing else in the *world* mattered right now!

"We should take him somewhere warm." Quatre said softly, reaching out to take the boy's only visible hand. "And somewhere we can feed him, he's far too thin."

Heero nodded, and Trowa got to his feet and lifted their Fire into his arms. Heero stood and turned to the Mayor again. "Where is the inn?"

"O-other side of t-town." The man stuttered, not knowing that the cold look in Heero's eyes was his normal look for anyone who wasn't one of his Others. He thought he was in trouble because the boy *was* so thin. Fortunately for him, that thought hadn't occurred to the Four yet.

"What's his name?" Quatre and Duo lingered to find out the answer even as Heero and Trowa stalked towards the door, the villagers parting like waves around them.

"I - I don't know." The Mayor was still frightened. "He's just the inn boy."

Duo snorted and turned away.

Quatre gave the man a scathing look and hurried after him, muttering under his breath. “Inn boy! *Inn* boy!” He was certain the man could have named any other member of his village. He was also becoming certain that their Fifth had a less than happy existence here. Well, it would make it that much easier for them to leave, wouldn’t it? And hopefully it would be that much faster that they would Join, and become a WarCraft.

Heero led the way to the inn - the ‘other side of town’ was only a few hundred yards away - and shoved the doors open. Harris jumped up, staring at them and then at the bundle in Trowa’s arms.

“M-my Lords, has he caused you trouble? I’ll certainly punish him for it!” He moved forward, certain that would be the only reason his little slave laborer would be in the company of these men. “If you’ll just let me have him...” he stopped abruptly as Heero moved to block him from their Fifth.

“Keep away,” was all he said, but the man instantly started backing up.

“Sir... I don’t understand?!” Perhaps the boy had collapsed, and these men were moved to help him? It was unlike Lords to worry about a common peasant, but stranger things had happened. “Is he ill? I - I can put him to bed...”

“Keep *away*.” Heero repeated, pushing past him and waiting until Trowa and his precious burden were safely out of the man’s reach.

“You serve food in this place?” Duo demanded, pulling the man’s attention away from his Others. Heero and Trowa moved to the best table, close to the large fireplace, which wasn’t lit at the moment but would make the room very warm when it was.

“Yes, sir, certainly. What would you like?” Harris was delighted at the distraction.

“Whatever’s decent.” Duo shrugged, unable to keep his eyes from going back to the table where Quatre was helping Heero ease off their Fire’s cloak. Quatre had been right about him being too thin. But he was muscular - and oh, so pretty.

Harris had finally thought of another reason why his charge might be with these men, helped along by Duo’s hungry eyes. He smirked - maybe these four would pay a decent enough price for the boy, instead of the paltry offers he’d gotten over the last year.

“Good sir,” he lowered his voice, glancing around to make sure no one could overhear them. “Good sir, ye know it’s not lawful for me to sell him to ye, but if ye were...” he paused, leering into Duo’s wide eyes, thinking he was seeing acceptance, “...if ye were, er... desiring a warm fire in yer room tonight, I’ll arrange it. For a fair price, sir.”

Duo’s Others looked up at a loud thump and were just in time to see the landlord hit the floor, blood streaming down his face from a broken nose.

They blinked, then turned their attention back to their new Talent. Duo would have had his reasons. They trusted him.

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Wufei wasn't sure what was different at first - he swam back to consciousness with the knowledge that *something* had changed, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Just something there... something that had never been there before... something he... liked? Yes, he liked it very much - whatever it was. He sighed and snuggled closer to the warmth that was - holding him?! His eyes flew open sharply, staring up into the warm blue eyes of the blond whose arms he was wrapped in. The other smiled gently at him, but he was already jerking away, throwing himself backwards out of the encircling arms.

Unfortunately for his peace of mind, he just slammed into another sturdy chest and more strong arms went around him. He yelped and tried to escape sideways. The arms tightened, and he twisted around to stare up at a pair of laughing violet eyes, with something sad and worried lurking under the laughter. That was odd enough to make him pause.

"W-who are you?" He managed, his voice trying to strangle him.

"Duo!" the other boy replied cheerfully, "what's your name?"

"Wufei," he replied, not even considering lying.

"Wufei - nice name. That's Quatre." He pointed to the blond whose arms Wufei had woken up in. Wufei's dark eyes darted to him, then away, not returning the hesitant smile. He stared around him, only now realizing that he was in the best room of Harris' inn, had been sleeping in the huge fine feather bed.

'Gods, I'm dead.' he thought, knowing Harris would beat him for being in here. "I-I'm not allowed in h-here." He said softly, trying to slip out of the violet-eyed boy's arms.

Duo tightened his hold gently, making sure he didn't squeeze the thin boy too hard. "It's alright, Wufei. We're renting the room, and you're staying with us."

Wufei's heart plummeted. "W-why?" he managed, unable to keep a flash of fear out of his eyes.

Duo's grin faltered a little. "Not for that, 'Fei. We wouldn't do that to you." The grin carefully reasserted itself.

Wufei blinked, not sure he was hearing correctly. If that wasn't what they wanted - then he had no idea why he was in here. Quatre crawled closer, seeming to sense his confusion.

“Wufei, do you remember us at all? From the Arena?”

Velvet dark eyes turned back to him, studying his face. His eyebrows drew together, and both boys watching him decided he was cute when he was confused. “I - you...” His eyes abruptly widened. “You’re the Four that came! Part of them...”

“Right,” Duo said softly, squeezing him gently, noticing that Wufei had relaxed without realizing it. “Right, Wufei, but we’re not Four anymore.”

Wufei looked back to him. “You found your Fifth?” he asked, awe in his voice. If that was true, there would be Fours coming to this village for years, hoping to find their own Fifths. “Was it Alvis?”

“Alvis?” Quatre asked, confused.

“The Mayor’s son. He has red hair...”

“Gods, no!” Duo laughed, cutting him off even as he bent and rubbed his cheek against Wufei’s soft black hair. “No, Wufei, *you’re* our Fifth.”

“I’m not.” Wufei said calmly, not even hesitating.

“Yes, you are.” said a voice from the doorway. Wufei jerked around to stare at a Spirit Talent, a tall boy with icy blue eyes. Intimidating.

Wufei felt like cowering, but he still had some pride, and it kept his chin up. There was another boy behind him, but Wufei didn’t have any attention to spare him, yet - the Spirit sat on the bed and was reaching for him, and Duo was letting him go - Wufei’s heart leapt into his throat and he took advantage of the instant that no one was holding him to escape, throwing himself off the bed and across the room away from these unnerving boys.

“Leave me alone!” He said sharply, automatically falling into a defensive pose. If they thought he was helpless, they would find out differently! To his surprise, they beamed at him.

“Good,” the Spirit Talent said, “You know how to take care of yourself. Very good.”

Wufei wondered why his heart swelled with happiness at those words - he’d never before cared what anyone thought about him, why did he care what they thought? The blue-eyed boy was getting off the bed and coming toward him again. Wufei forced himself not to back away and the boy stopped just out of arms reach.

“I’m Heero. You’re Wufei?”

Wufei nodded.

“Trowa.” Heero said, pointing toward the fourth boy. Wufei’s eyes flicked to him for a moment - taller than Heero, with thick auburn hair hanging in his face and a single visible eye that was a beautiful shade of emerald green. He gave Wufei a nod and a smile, but didn’t speak. Wufei turned his eyes back to Heero.

“He’s our Third. Our Earth Talent. Can you feel him?”

Wufei was confused again, not sure what he meant -

- until he felt something well up inside of him, a warm, safe feeling that somehow made him think of dark soil and trees, of flowers and falling leaves.

He dropped out of his defensive stance and just stared at Trowa.

Trowa smiled again.

Heero took advantage of Wufei’s distraction to move closer and wrap his arms around the smaller boy. “You’re our Fifth. Duo’s our Second. Can you feel him?”

This time it was like a cool welling of liquid flowing over his tired, rumpled soul.

“Water Talent,” he said, not hesitating.

“Perfect.” Duo said cheerfully. “Way to go, ‘Fei.’”

Heero tightened his arms - they were being gentle, but Wufei was starting to tremble anyway. “And Quatre’s our Fourth.”

Gentle spring breeze.

“Air.” Wufei whispered, trying to keep from putting his arms around Heero. He desperately wanted to hang on, but he wasn’t weak. He *wasn’t*! And he didn’t want them to think so.

Quatre was nodding, smiling at him in gentle delight. He tried to smile back, but it felt odd on his face.

“Easy,” Heero murmured, “just one more.”

Wufei couldn’t describe the feeling that welled up inside him then - an awareness, a heightening of senses, a realization of exactly what his soul was, like he’d never realized before...

“You.” He barely got the word out, wrapping his arms tight around himself since he didn’t want to wrap them around Heero.

“Now let us feel your Fire.” Heero whispered, his breath warm against Wufei’s ear.

“How? I don’t know...”

Heero gently pressed his palm against Wufei’s chest, even as Wufei gave in enough to hide his face against Heero’s own chest. “Here,” he said softly, all his attention centered on the slim figure in his arms, just like the other three were. “Feel your Talent here - think about it here.”

“How will that...?”

“We are your Others, Wufei. We will feel you, when you do this.”

Wufei felt like rolling his eyes - no matter what he was feeling right now, he was certain that these boys were wrong - he'd been told for so long that he was worthless, that he had no Others, that he'd finally come to believe it. He'd do as they asked, anyway - maybe that would prove it to them.

The other boys felt nothing for a long moment - long enough to make them nervous, wondering if Wufei was going to refuse them. He had that option.

They never once considered that he wasn't their Fifth - they *knew*.

Finally, they saw him take a deep breath, and felt that gentle warmth from before welling up in their hearts again, warmer and warmer until it was the delicious fire of their Fifth.

They all sighed in unison, close to ecstasy - they'd waited so long to feel this. Waited so long to find the slender boy their First was holding close. They couldn't resist the urge to answer him - even knowing that it would make him collapse again. It would be all right - Heero was holding him, and he looked as if he could use the rest, anyway.

Wufei felt a gentle swell of emotion in his chest again. This time he recognized it as the presence of all the boys in this room, and he knew enough of Talents to realize that this meant... that this meant they *were* his Others...

...that he was their Fifth...

...and they were WarCraft...

...which meant...

...that this was all too much, and he felt blessed darkness swallow him again.

# Trial by Fire

## Chapter Notes

Reformatting these is taking longer than I thought. Also, I left out a warning for non-con touching. So, warning. Non-con touching ahead. There.

Alvis watched, sullen, as one of the Four he wanted to Join with came down the stairs, his movements so graceful he nearly floated. It was the talker, the one who called him a 'fat weasel', the one with the amazing big violet eyes and the braid that shone like burnished copper in the firelight. He was quite beautiful, and Alvis, who was openly lustful for anything beautiful and off-limits, let his eyes follow as the lovely boy approached an oddly subdued Harris and asked for food, his voice obnoxiously cheerful.

What did he have to be cheerful over? You would think that finding out that skinny little brat Wufei was his Fifth would have depressed him. Alvis' eyes narrowed as he thought of the other boy. Ugly little thing, with his face always twisted in a scowl, his eyes squinting and his lips pressed into a thin white line, his hair scraped back into a little rat's tail...

The only attractive thing about him was that warm golden skin...

Alvis scowled. He'd tried to touch that skin, often, and although Wufei would ignore his taunts he wouldn't do the same with his touches. He'd gotten a lot of bruises for his trouble, and no way to get Wufei back openly - he wouldn't admit to anyone that the little bastard had been able to mark him - or that he'd found the ugly thing attractive enough to try to fondle in the first place.

It was just... that soft, honey-toned skin...

There was a sudden stillness in the room as the other customers, assembled for the usual evening of drink and food after a Gathering, stopped what they were doing and looked toward the staircase. There was a bigger crowd here than usual, as people were curious to see more of that Four. Now there were two of them coming down the staircase, the blond and the Spirit with the cold blue eyes. Alvis watched them walk to the best table, the one Harris had refused to let anyone else sit at, and settle down to the food the man was placing in front of them. Seeing them made him just a little angrier.

They were pretty, too - and he couldn't have them, either.

All his life, when something went wrong or he wanted something and was denied it, Alvis found a target on whom to vent his spite. This time his thoughts naturally went straight to the boy who *had* been chosen by these wonderful Others, who had taken *his* place in a WarCraft. Too bad that the other Lord was still with him. Otherwise he could...



Hmm. His angry eyes watched as the last Lord came down the stairs and went to the table his Others were sitting at, eyes moving over the food. Alvis accepted the chance fate had given him and slid away, up the stairs towards the inn's Best Room. He knew Harris had put these men there - nothing less would do for a WarCraft Four.

"A WarCraft *Five*," Alvis muttered darkly, slipping down the hall toward the big carved door. "A *Five* and *I* should be the Fifth."

*And someone's going to pay, since I'm not!*

He eased open the door and slipped inside. It was late evening, and the room was muffled in twilight darkness. The only light came from the fire in the fireplace, a warm red glow that made the room seem soft and dreamlike. Alvis wasn't one to spend time gazing at the beauty of his surroundings, and was even less inclined to do so when he was so near the object of his frustrated rage. He approached the bed on silent feet, eyes glued to the slender form he saw, laying under a single thin blanket. He snickered silently at the sight of vulnerable prey and raised a fist -

- and stopped, staring.

After Wufei had collapsed the second time, Duo had taken his hair out of the tight ponytail, worried that the boy would wake with a nasty headache. Quatre had eased him out of his outer clothes and they had put only the thin blanket over him, since the room was warm from the fire.

He lay on his back, one arm folded over his waist, the other hand on his pillow, palm up with his fingers curled like a small child's. His blue-black hair was spread over the pillow like a spill of midnight, feathering delicately around his relaxed face. His ever-present scowl was gone, showing Alvis, for the first time, the ethereal beauty of an Exotic's face, the exquisite bone structure under the honey-toned skin. His lips rested in their soft natural curve, no longer pressed hard against the angry words Wufei longed to spill when he was awake. The light blanket was scrunched up around his waist, showing off his slim, strong torso. More of the bronze colored skin, silky smooth over spreading muscles; delicate dove-wing collarbones; temptingly exposed little caramel-colored nipples...

Alvis dropped his fist and stepped closer, his eyes gone from angry to greedy in a split second. He put out a hand and touched Wufei's leg carefully, skimming his fingers up his thigh to his hip. They twitched against the bunched blanket for a moment, hesitating, then Alvis threw caution to the wind and dragged them up the taut, flat stomach towards one of those pretty little nipples.

Wufei stirred at the touch, his head moving on the pillow, big dark eyes opening to gaze up at Alvis in soft, sleepy confusion. Alvis licked his lips at the sight of them, so different from the narrowed angry eyes he was familiar with - these eyes were large and luminous, with thick curly lashes drifting across them as Wufei blinked sleep-heavy eyelids -

- and then exploded in panic, jerking away from Alvis' exploring fingers and diving for the far side of the bed. Alvis scrambled after him, suddenly determined not to lose this prize. He

grabbed one of Wufei's small wrists, hanging on with a crushingly tight grip while he fought to catch the other arm.

Wufei, caught off guard and still befuddled with sleep, swung at him wildly, frightened beyond anything he could ever remember by the look of hunger on the bigger boy's face. Alvis - Alvis! - looking at him like those patrons in the dining room sometimes did sent nausea curling through his stomach, and if he had eaten lunch, he would have lost it. Terror started clawing its way up the back of his throat, and instinct took over. He turned into a biting, scratching, clawing little wildcat, using every dirty trick ever invented to try to get away from the other boy. Alvis used his weight to press close, avoiding most of the wild blows, catching hold of Wufei's free forearm and twisting it high behind his back.

Wufei let out a faint cry and felt something well up in his chest, a warmth that was not *quite* his Fire, but he somehow knew it had something to do with his Others - then Alvis had him off the bed and on the floor, one leg pinning down both of his, one knee grinding his wrist into the wooden floorboards while his free hand went back to scrabbling at Wufei's chest, searching for the little nubs he'd wanted earlier. He began to shower hot, wet kisses on Wufei's face, trying to catch his lips while the smaller boy flung his head back and forth, avoiding him, trying to struggle out of the death grip he had on his limbs.

Neither of them heard footsteps racing down the hall or the door crashing open, neither of them heard more footsteps thundering up the distant stairs. All Wufei knew was that one second Alvis was on top of him, hurting him, touching him in ways he *never* wanted Alvis to touch him - and the next he was gone. Blasted completely off him by a newly-familiar tall boy with auburn hair, the calm face he remembered twisted into a vicious snarl as he pummeled the Mayor's son.

Wufei crab-walked backwards until his back hit the wall, curling in on himself and cradling his aching wrist close to his chest. He stared at Trowa, who was slamming his fists into Alvis' cringing form even as Wufei felt the oddly calm sense of his Earth Talent swelling in his chest again - Trowa was trying to comfort him even as he fought.

Wufei appreciated it, but it didn't really work - he didn't know this boy, how could he trust any comfort he might offer? He crept along the wall until he was half-hidden by the big wardrobe, still feeling fuzzy from two collapses in one day, trying to shake the cobwebs out of his head. He wondered if he should help Trowa?

Apparently there would be no need - there were suddenly a lot more people in the room - Heero and Duo were pulling Trowa away from Alvis, while the Mayor was exclaiming over his bruised and bloody son. Harris was standing in the doorway staring, while Quatre tried and failed to shove his way past the man's bulk. There were more men lurking behind them in the hall. Wufei didn't know who they were and didn't care to try and find out.

Trowa was struggling against his Others' restraining arms, and they were trying to calm him.

"Tro - hey, Trowa, I think he's had enough! What *happened*, man? Trowa?!" Duo's voice was an odd mix of soothing and worry.

Trowa ignored him, still trying to get at Alvis.

“Trowa.” Heero’s voice was flat, calm. “Trowa, show me what happened.”

‘Show?!’ Wufei thought, near panic, suddenly wondering if they were going to make him reenact that ugly scene with Alvis. But Trowa just jerked his head around, his green eyes still wild and angry, and stared into Heero’s calm blue orbs. A second later and Heero’s head swung around, glaring the promise of death at the cowering redhead cradled in his father’s arms.

“Hey, Heero, man, share! C’mon, what happened?” Duo demanded, reaching out a cautious hand in case he needed to hold Heero back, too. Instead of speaking, Heero’s eyes swung to glare at his Second, then around to his Fourth.

Quatre gasped; Duo growled.

“Okay, Tro, I was wrong. He *hasn’t* had enough!” Duo let go of his Third and started to dive for Alvis himself. Luckily, Quatre had finally managed to get past Harris and he caught hold of their Second. Heero was still hanging onto Trowa, although he looked as though he was considering letting go - and joining in the beating.

“Let go of me, Quat.” Duo’s voice was cold, his gaze vicious as he looked at Alvis.

“No, Duo. Let Heero and Trowa deal with him.” Quatre was calm, soothing. “Duo, *let* them. Wufei needs you and me. Help me with Wufei, Duo.”

At the sound of his name, Wufei tore his wide eyes away from staring at Alvis and stared at the two boys coming toward him instead. He fought down the urge to scramble away from them - if they were his Others, they wouldn’t hurt him, it didn’t work that way - did it?

*Please don’t let it work that way!*

Quatre knelt next to him and put gentle arms around his shoulders. “Are you all right, Wufei?” He stroked back the strands of black hair that were hanging in Wufei’s face.

Wufei shuddered and tensed at his touch, still wanting to push them away, wanting to scream at them not to touch him - but he controlled it, fought it down.

Quatre sensed his panic, sat down firmly on the floor and hugged Wufei tight against him. He wasn’t too much bigger than their Fifth, or he would have tried to pull him into his lap.

Duo knelt on the other side and reached for Wufei’s wrist. “Hey, Wu-man, let me see, okay? I won’t hurt you.”

Wufei surrendered his wrist with ill grace. He would have preferred to just keep the slight injury to himself - he had been beaten often enough to know that he was just bruised, nothing was broken. He couldn’t seem to make his voice work to tell Duo that - he just let the other boy go through a gentle check, pressing careful fingers against his skin while he asked him to bend his fingers and did that hurt?

Wufei just shook his head - it didn’t, not really. Just ached. He wished he hadn’t been such a baby and held it to him in a way that obviously screamed ‘wounded.’ They would think he

was weak - these boys who claimed to be his Others weren't going to want him anymore. Heero had seemed pleased that he could protect himself, and look how splendidly he had proved him wrong! No, they would be getting rid of him as soon as they calmed down enough to think about it.

Too bad. He had rather liked them.

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If Wufei didn't start talking to them soon, Duo was going to scream.

Or his head was going to explode.

It had been three hours since the Mayor had dragged his son out of the room, looking like he had been run over by a wagon - who knew quiet Trowa could get so violent? - and Wufei hadn't stirred from the chair they'd put him in. He wouldn't even talk to Heero, and their First had told them, mentally, that the boy was deliberately blocking him from reading anything from his mind.

That last was rather surprising - how did Wufei learn to do that? Duo knew seventh-year Sorcerers who couldn't keep Heero out of their heads! Their little Fire was a lot stronger than he looked, wrapped up in that blanket with his injured wrist held carefully on his lap.

Duo frowned, gazing at the small wrist. The slightest bit more pressure and it would have been broken - as it was Wufei's fingers were swollen and his hand was black and blue from his knuckles to halfway up his forearm. Badly, badly bruised - but it *could* have been worse.

Hell, the whole thing could have been worse - at least their tough little Fifth had managed to fight the bigger boy off until Trowa got there. His Others were proud of him, but Duo had a feeling he didn't realize that. He looked rather lost and lonely, though he was trying hard to hide it.

The Second was just opening his mouth to inform him of *how* proud they were when someone knocked on the door. Heero spun away from where he'd been standing, gazing into the fire, and strode to answer it. Trowa had been sitting on the floor next to Wufei's chair - he shifted until he was in *front* of the chair, though he didn't get up. Duo and Quatre were curled up together in the other chair. They didn't move, just glared at the door.

Heero jerked it open to find the blond Fire from the Arena standing there. What was her name... Renee? It didn't matter. "What do you want?" his voice was its usual monotone.

"I'm here to offer myself as your Fire, of course," she said sweetly, "am I the first?"

"What?" Heero asked, voice flat but his eyes were confused.

“I said, I’m here to offer myself as your Fire! We’re all waiting in the Hall, downstairs, but I just thought I would slip up and...”

“What do you *mean*?!” Duo interrupted, earning himself a glare before the girl’s eyes swung back to Heero, worship clearly visible in their depths.

“We have our Fire,” he said calmly.

“But - but - no, I heard you caught him with Alvis. The whole village knows. Of course, it’s only what you could expect from him. But no one blames *you*, you couldn’t know what he was...”

“What?” Heero just stared at her. Behind him, Wufei sank down into the chair, pulling the blanket up higher and wishing he could pull it over his head. Too bad that was the coward’s way out - he *wasn’t* a coward.

Trowa stood and gently eased the blanket back down, running a gentle hand over Wufei’s tousled hair. His Fifth blinked up at him in obvious surprise.

Duo and Quatre frowned at each other, then untangled themselves and hurried over to stand with Heero.

“Don’t talk about our Fire that way!” Duo said hotly, watching the girl’s blue eyes widen in surprise. “I don’t know what your damn Mayor told you, but Wufei didn’t do anything wrong! And besides, *he’s* our Fifth - our *Other*! What the hell do you mean, you’re offering yourself? Who is waiting in the Hall, *why* are they waiting?!”

The girl waited until he took a breath. “Everyone knows you won’t want him now - he’s - he’s *defiled*! You have to find another Fire, and we’re all waiting for the Competition. Even Alvis.”

Heero growled at that name, ignoring her other words.

Quatre quickly stepped in. “Competition? Gods, how do you people think this works?! Wufei is our Fire. He *Spoke* to us. Nothing can change that.”

“Yes, we can! We have the Old Law here, if your Chosen is proven unworthy, you must take the winner of a Competition! I suppose we *could* let him participate, since you think he’s so blameless, but it would be pretty silly. I mean, have you *seen* him use his Fire?” She snickered, her amused eyes gazing at Wufei, who tried to sink down in his blanket again.

Trowa stopped him with gentle arms around his shoulders.

“Easy,” he whispered, and Wufei felt the gentle calming presence of his Earth Talent again, a comforting reassurance in his heart.

“The Old Law is obsolete. The Emperor himself commanded *that*.” Duo sneered. “And anyway, we’re WarCraft. The only laws that apply to us are the Military Laws.”

The girl opened her mouth to argue, but was cut off by a voice from behind her.

“Now, Relena! You know you shouldn’t be up here, trying to tip the scores in your favor. Get back downstairs and wait with the others, there’s a good girl.” A tall old man loomed behind her, his hair and beard a beautiful shade of russet streaked with gray. He wore the clothes of a Trainer, and he beamed over Heero’s shoulder at Wufei.

Who, his Others were astonished to see, was beaming right back.

“Well, now, Wufei, didn’t I tell you not to give up waiting for your Others? I always knew someone special would be coming for you. Come on downstairs, now.”

“We’re not participating in any Competition!” Duo spat at him.

“Now, now, lad, mind your temper!” The man was still amused. “No need to get so hot under the collar. You don’t want complaints following you to the Capital, do you? Having Alvis and Relena following you around Helia, trying to say your Fire isn’t properly Chosen? I’m sure your Commander won’t enjoy the trouble they’d cause.” He grinned at their horrified expressions. “I didn’t think so. You have nothing to worry about. They think a Competition is an easy thing, just lighting a few candles - I saw that wince, Wufei - they don’t know there are several other Trials. It’s nothing to worry about. You can bow out of one Trial, and that’s the one you should choose. You’ll have no other problems - didn’t I train you as much as Harris would let me? I know what you can do. Now come, all of you. Best to just get it over.”

“Who *are* you?” Quatre asked even as Heero made his decision, motioning them to obey.

“I’m Torlin, the Trainer here. I’m quite sure you boys don’t know yet what you’ve got in Wufei. I think you’re going to be surprised.” This last was said low, and Wufei, who was nervously scrambling into his clothes, didn’t hear.

The other boys just gazed at each other for a moment, then shrugged and followed Torlin down the stairs. Heero went first, followed by Duo and Quatre, while Trowa waited to walk down at Wufei’s side.

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The Great Hall in the inn was indeed set up for a Fire Competition - there was an elaborate candelabra set up in the middle of the room, all five fireplaces were laid with tinder, kindling and wood, and there were three items laid out in ceremonial style on a small table. A twisted metal rod, a length of black silk, and a covered platter.

Torlin moved to stand beside the Mayor and another man, obviously a town Elder. He lifted a dusty book and slammed it down on a table, making most of the people in the room jump. Quite a feat, since most of the village seemed to be present.

“Wufei, join the other Fires.” Torlin said softly, and Wufei reluctantly moved to where Alvis, Relena, Garret and Mya stood. He made sure he was as far away from Alvis as possible - though he nearly snickered at the raccoon look the boy had, with two black eyes and a swollen, pink nose. Alvis glared at him, then his eyes drifted over the still-loose hair and flushed face - the bedroom upstairs had been quite warm - and he licked his lips.

Wufei shuddered and curled his own lip, looking away.

Trowa growled, a low rumbling sound that only the people standing close heard.

Heero echoed him.

Duo and Quatre practiced their death glares.

Alvis wilted.

“I declare a Competition!” Torlin said loudly, pulling their attention back to him. “A Fire Competition, to prove who is worthy to be considered as the Fifth of this WarCraft!”

“Considered?!” Relena shrieked, “No, that’s not right! If we win, we *are* the Fifth!”

“Mind yourself, youngling.” Torlin glared at her. “Know that it is not your place to speak. You do not know the Laws. So it is written in the book of Old Law and so it shall be!”

“So it shall be.” The two other men with him echoed, the Elder looking rather interested while the Mayor just looked worried, darting glances at his son.

“Such are the Rules,” Torlin continued his formal intoning, using the severe Old way of speaking. “Each Potential shall face Trials, the Trial of Heating, the Trial of Lighting, of Feeling, of Hunger, and of Burning.” The four ‘Potentials’ besides Wufei exchanged surprised looks - they *had* assumed the only competition would be with the candles. The idea of other Trials worried them.

“Each Potential may choose one Trial, if they so desire, and be allowed a Pass. The Potential who performs best of all the Trials shall be considered by the Challenged Others as to whether or not they will Accept him or her. Let the Competition begin! The Trial of Heating is first!”

A man dressed in blacksmith’s clothes strode forward and picked up the twisted metal rod off the table, holding it in his protective gloves.

“First Potential, Alvis Hayweather! Step forward!”

Alvis smirked, as much as his painful face would allow, and stepped out, confident.

“Heat the rod, Alvis Hayweather, to the best of your ability, without burning its holder.”

Alvis frowned a little, his eyebrows drawing together, then concentrated. This shouldn’t be that hard... He glared at the end of the metal rod, willing it to warm. It slowly, very slowly

over about five minutes, began to turn a lighter gray and a faint wisp of moisture or smoke - something - curled from the tip. Alvis gasped from the strain and backed away.

Torlin came forward and passed his hand through the air over the end of the rod. “Not bad. Not too bad. Hey, Blacksmith?”

“Huh,” the man grunted, eyeing the end, “not a bad bit of heat. Not enough to work it, but not bad.”

“Mmm. Second Potential, Relena Peacecraft! Step forward!” She received the same formal command as Alvis, and was able to heat the rod slightly higher than he had - it had the faintest bit of glow to it when she was done. Garret, the young Fire Talent, managed to heat it more but nearly fried the blacksmith’s hands - luckily, the big man realized what was happening and tossed the rod to the stone floor before he could be injured. Garret looked like he was going to cry.

“All right, Garret, all right.” Torlin soothed. “You’ve never yet practiced your Heating, you did very well for a first time.”

Mollified, Garret stepped back and let Mya, the timid-looking brunette, have her turn. Her efforts matched Alvis’ and that seemed to please her enough. So did the praise Torlin gave.

“Good girl, very good! I see you’ve been practicing! Ahem! Fifth Potential, Wufei! Step forward.” Wufei obeyed, his face calm. His Others exchanged glances, wondering at the omission of a surname, but they didn’t have time to dwell on it for long. Within seconds the end of the rod was heated white-hot, while the blacksmith, staring in amazement, eased off his glove and laid a bare finger carefully on the other end.

“I’ll be gibbered.” he whispered, making Duo snicker out loud.

“The Trial of Heating is over. The scores are marked.” Torlin said before people could exclaim much about Wufei’s success. “The Second Trial is upon you, Potentials! Now comes the Trial of Lighting!”

All four of the other Fire Talents looked eager, their faces turning toward the big candelabra.

Wufei winced again and wished he could hide. It was a huge piece of ironwork, twisted to look like a small tree, its branches bearing over four dozen tall white candles.

“First Potential, Alvis Hayweather! Step forward!” Alvis immediately moved into place, his whole face eager. “Light the candles, Potential, in any order you wish, and put them out as well.”

Alvis was an old hand at this game - it was his favorite way to show off his skill with his Talent. He immediately had the candles lighting themselves in intricate patterns as they went up the tree, till the tiny flames seemed almost to chase themselves around and around. He kept it going for a good three minutes, even when people stopped murmuring at how pretty it was and started fidgeting. Then suddenly all the candles were lit, and as suddenly put out. There was scattered applause, and Alvis bowed.



“Second Potential...” Torlin went through the line again. Relena copied Alvis’ theatrics, though her patterns were more delicate and seemed inspired by music. Garret just lit the candles, one by one, and put them out as he went. His family wasn’t able to afford expensive candles for him to practice with. Mya was nervous - she lit the candles in a simple every-other-one up, then back down pattern, and put them all out at once. She still got some applause, and flushed prettily before moving back to her place.

“Fifth Potential?” Torlin asked instead of ordering, looking at Wufei, who quickly shook his dark head. “You wish to exercise your Pass, then?” A nod. “Very well. We move on to the next Trial. Let the Trial of Feeling begin!”

Men came forward to move the candelabra out of the way. The sounds they were making didn’t cover up Alvis’ mocking laughter.

“We’re all very glad, Wufei, that you Passed. I *still* find bits of candle in my hair from last time you tried!” There were snorts of laughter around the room, and Duo frowned.

“Last time?” he asked, and Relena answered, her own eyes derisive as she looked at the Exotic.

“Yes - when he tries, the candles *explode*. Have you ever heard of something so silly? He can’t even light *candles*!”

“E-explode?!” Duo stared at Wufei, who flushed red and looked away. He didn’t realize that the stares he was getting from his Others weren’t incredulous - well, they were, but not because he ‘couldn’t light candles.’ “Explode!” Duo whispered, looking sharply at Heero, “do you know how powerful he would have to be to make...”

Torlin’s voice cut him off. “The Trial of Feeling! It shall be revealed, who can sense these who come seeking Fire. First Potential, step forward!”

Alvis didn’t look so confident this time - because he had no idea what was about to happen. He moved to the middle of the room as Torlin indicated, and the Trainer came forward and wrapped the black silk around his eyes, effectively blindfolding him.

“Now! If one of you will step forward?” He asked the Four who were gazing at him, puzzled. “Any of you, but do not say aloud who it is. Please, try to Speak your Talent to him, and see if he can say who you are. He must try to guess all four of you properly.”

Alvis took a deep breath and waited. And waited. Nothing, although he could hear the rustle of clothing that told him someone was standing right behind him. Finally he just guessed wildly. “Uh, Water!” He heard the someone move away, and then Torlin spoke again.

“And who is behind you now? You may no longer guess Water.”

“Earth...” He guessed Spirit next, then Air.

“You may remove the blindfold. You were correct once of four. Second Potential?”

Relena guessed Spirit correctly, much to Heero's Others' amusement, but she couldn't get any of the rest. Garret surprised them by getting two, Air and Water, and Mya guessed Water correctly, possibly because Duo nearly tripped walking over and snickered at himself.

Wufei, of course, got them all correct.

"The Trial of Hunger is upon you now, Potentials!" Torlin was getting bored with the pompous way of speaking, but he had to follow the Rules. He lifted the cover off the large dish to reveal five smaller dishes, each with a raw game hen sitting in it. He quickly set them on different tables.

"Potentials! Step to a table and cook this offering, to appease the hunger of your Others. You who finish first without ruining this food will find yourself victor!"

Relena and Wufei tied. Mya came in next, with Garret and Alvis turning their hens to charcoal. Garret thought this was most amusing, and Alvis glared at him.

Torlin had to hold back a snicker of his own, but moved on.

"The final Trial is now arrived, Potentials!" *'Gods, who wrote this crap?!'* "The Trial of Burning is come! Step each Potential to a fireplace!" They obeyed, although Alvis and Relena exchanged sudden desperate looks. "You must light your fires, Potentials! Light them with all possible haste, to show how you can provide your Others with warmth when it is speedily required! First Potential, begin!"

"Wait! This isn't fair!" Alvis whined. "He" - he pointed a finger at Wufei - "He has an unfair advantage!"

"You can Pass, Alvis." Torlin said coolly. "I didn't hear him crying 'foul' over the Trial of Lighting. Do you wish to Pass?"

"No..." Alvis grumbled, turning back to the fireplace. He concentrated, scowling, and a flame appeared on a bit of tinder, running rapidly along it. He bit his lip, scowling harder, and the flame spread out quickly, lighting the kindling and flickering hungrily at the wood. When the fire was nicely burning he stood back, slightly smug as usual, and Torlin nodded.

"Very well. Two minutes. Second Potential."

Relena bit her own lip, but not to scowl. She looked worried. Her tinder burned easily enough, and set the kindling afire, but it took her longer to get the wood to light. Finally she stood back.

"Good, Relena." Torlin knew she had trouble with lighting fires, and he gave praise where praise was due. "Two minutes, eleven seconds. The best you've ever done. Good job."

She tried to smile at him, but it was wobbly and tears were gathering in her eyes. She knew she had lost, and she turned those big, teary eyes on Heero.

Who was ignoring her.

Garret surprised even himself by beating Alvis by ten seconds. His fire was slower to start with the kindling, but the wood caught in record time, blazing cheerfully. He was pleased enough - he like the Four, but he never thought he'd win. He didn't really want to - he wanted to stay with his family longer and the idea of being WarCraft frightened him.

Mya's fire was a warm success in a minute and a half - she always lit the fires at home, and knew some good tricks to get them going fast. Not that it mattered - she knew as well as anybody what was coming next, but it pleased her that she could beat the others in this when she felt she'd failed miserably in the other Trials.

Heero, Duo, Trowa and Quatre were surprised when the room went silent. They turned puzzled looks on Wufei, who everyone else was staring at. Their Fifth looked at Torlin for a moment, who gave him an encouraging nod. He darted a swift glance at them, then turned his dark eyes on the last, unlit fireplace. They exchanged nervous glances. Wasn't he good at this? He'd done so well in the other trials that they had been sure he -

*FOOM!*

The neatly laid wood went from unlit to an inferno in a bare second, heat rolling out of the fireplace in waves even as Wufei stepped back.

His Others just stared.

And stared.

Then -

"Holy SHIT!" Duo yelled, and Torlin laughed.

"I told you so."

# Water Fight

The battle had been raging for days. The soldiers on both sides were tired, worried, and rapidly losing hope. They were too evenly matched - neither was going to win. Unless one side got reinforcements or had a sudden plague, this battle was going to rage on forever.

Colonel Gorton stood in the high command tower, watching the half-hearted fights below with a sour look. A young Commander stood at his side, his own eyes perfectly blank as he waited for the lecture he knew was coming.

He'd gotten the same one every day for the past two weeks.

"I can't believe you gave them permission to go."

Zechs sighed. He knew it. Stupid old man, he couldn't get it through his thick head that having Heero's Four become a WarCraft Five was worth losing a battle or two. Good thing the higher-ups were on his side.

"I had permission from General Athar himself." He replied calmly, cool blue eyes watching as a wave of enemy soldiers tried to attack a battalion and were slowly driven back. This battle didn't matter - the soldiers mattered, of course, but their lives were being wasted. This was an unimportant little holding, it was doing them no good and wouldn't do the enemy any good if they had it, either.

He was tempted to suggest that they just let the damn opposing army *have* this outpost and go fight somewhere important, but he had a feeling Colonel Gorton wouldn't see the brilliance in that idea.

Stupid old man.

Stupid old man, who was still lecturing him for letting Heero and his Others go. Commander Zechs squirmed a little and wished he could sit down. This lecture could go on for a good hour - it got longer every time he heard it.

Which was almost daily, ever since this battle had started.

Zechs sighed. It wasn't like he *wanted* Heero to go - he knew the boy was important. Hell, he was *very* important to Zechs, personally! But Heero and his Others were so desperate to find their Fifth. They'd found their Fourth, little Quatre, over a year ago. Usually there was no longer than three months between finding each talent of a Five. A year was almost unheard of.

Heero had been gone for two months now. Two months, after that night Duo had talked them into going to visit the Oracle in Helia, and Heero had come rushing into Zech's tent, begging for permission to go on a quest. Well, as close to begging as Heero got. His Commander had been reluctant, not wanting to risk the Four to the perils of traveling the North, not sure if the

General would give permission, uncertain if he could deal with a long length of time away from the other Spirit Talent.

He wondered if Heero knew just how much he meant to Zechs? Gods knew he'd never told the boy. Proud to the point of arrogance, brave to the point he was called foolhardy, he melted into a nervous puddle at the thought of telling Heero how he felt, at the thought of seeing rejection on that beloved face. There was no way he had wanted to let him... uh, *them*... go, but he couldn't say no to the hope shining in those glorious eyes. He'd sent a request to the General, who had enough foresight to know what a powerful weapon this particular Four would be if they found their Fire. Permission had come very speedily. And he'd watched Heero and his Others leave.

And this *stupid old man!* reminded him of that every single day!

Zechs either wanted to punch him, or cry.

He couldn't decide which.

\*

Wufei still wasn't talking to them. He didn't say anything that wasn't necessary, sitting in front of the small fire in their room while the others packed the few belongings they'd brought to the inn. When they'd asked if he had anything to pack, he'd only shaken his head, gesturing towards the tiny bundle they'd found inside his cloak when they'd brought him here from the Arena.

That worried them. If Wufei had all his belongings already packed, did that mean he was thinking of leaving before they had shown up? It made things easier now - not that they thought Wufei wanted to stay here - but it frightened them, too. It meant they had very come close to missing him. If they had only come to the second day of the Gathering... would their Fire have still been there?

It was an unspoken group agreement not to let him out of their sight. They'd all slept in the same room last night, although Heero and Trowa hadn't actually *slept*. They'd sat up discussing the journey back to Helia to find where their Commander was, while Duo and Quatre shared the big bed, with Wufei choosing to sleep across the foot, near them but not too close. They'd rather expected nightmares, but Wufei dropped to sleep like he'd been knocked unconscious, and slept without stirring until dawn.

When the first bit of daylight struggled through the windows, he'd come wide awake, sitting up sharply and startling Heero and Trowa. The two oldest boys gazed at him without a word, and he sat gazing just as silently back.

They didn't know what to say to him. After that Competition last night, Duo and Quatre had praised Wufei until the boy had been tomato red and looked like he'd wanted to hide under the table. Trowa and Heero, less comfortable with words, had settled for beaming at him, pride obvious in their eyes. And the villagers had certainly acted differently, looking at him with awe instead of their former sneers.

It hadn't seemed to comfort Wufei - he'd gone from quiet and mildly uncomfortable to silent and still, not even responding to them with his eyes, ignoring the gentle touches of their Talents that they sent him.

They didn't understand, and didn't know what to do.

Now Trowa and Heero sat watching him, both of them feeling uncertain but keeping it out of their eyes. Wufei blinked solemnly at them for a moment, then looked to where Quatre and Duo lay curled together like two kittens in the big bed. He blinked again, and for the first time they thought they saw a bit of amusement in his eyes.

Surely this was a good thing?

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Wufei could have watched the two other Talents sleep all day - he'd never seen anyone so obviously in touch with each other as these boys. Every time Duo shifted, Quatre followed him. When Quatre stirred, Duo murmured to him in his sleep. Wufei found it entertaining, waiting to see who would follow the other next. After five minutes of watching them - and feeling the other two boys watching *him* - he scraped up enough nerve to ask them a question.

"Why are they... so close?" The words were spoken so softly they barely heard them.

Heero answered. "They're Linked."

Wufei frowned, looking away from the two boys to his First. "You mean Joined?"

"No, I mean Linked. It's like Joining - except it can happen outside of your Five. It means they share a connection, beyond us and beyond the Joining we will have."

Wufei didn't understand, and it showed. "What sort of connection?"

"They can sense each other without Calling. They can read each other's thoughts without my help. One always knows where the other is."

"How? How did they get ...Linked?"

Trowa chose to answer him, his green eyes soft on the smaller boy. "They fell in love."

Wufei turned pink, his eyes darting back to the other boys. "They're... oh." He scrambled off the bed and sat on the hearth, no longer gazing directly at the boys but watching them from the corners of his pretty slanted eyes.

"Does this bother you?" Heero asked quietly, worried about the answer. If Wufei had been treated like Duo suspected, he would probably not be open to the idea of two males being in love, especially since they were his Others. And neither Duo or Quatre was quiet when they made love - they'd practiced abstinence the last two nights solely for the sake of their Fifth, but he knew it wouldn't last much longer. He nearly groaned aloud at the thought of *another* rift between them and their Fire, beyond the ones already there - not that they understood why he was keeping his distance, and not that they would tolerate it much longer. They *would* find out what was bothering him, and they *would* take care of it. If this joined the ranks of his problems, however, it would take a very long time to fix.

"No." Wufei's one-word reply settled his doubts instantly. He relaxed, and wasn't surprised when he saw Trowa relax, as well. He knew his Third was having similar thoughts - perhaps even a bit deeper. He'd seen how he watched Wufei... who was still talking.

"I - it doesn't. Bother me, I mean - but ...why did they let me sleep there? Wouldn't they want to... to be alone?"

"Don't worry," Heero said rather sourly, "they'll be making up for it. And they wanted you with them, or they would have said so. We - all of us want you close. We've looked so long for you."

Wufei flushed again, ducking his head. Sleep-mussed dark hair swung down to hide his face. He really wished they wouldn't say such things - he'd never had many compliments in his life, and he didn't know how to react to them. Last night he'd been so confused, between his delighted Others and the awed villagers, that he'd just retreated. Better to do nothing, than to do the wrong thing. He hadn't been trained in courtly manners like Alvis and Relena. No one expected him to make any sort of match, forget being Chosen by high-ranking warriors. He could tell by the insignia on these boys' clothes that they were no mere soldiers. He wasn't stupid. The whole village was fawning over them like they were princes, and they'd chosen a dusty little inn boy for their Fifth!

He still felt like the bottom of his stomach was going to drop out when he thought of it.

His heart was already starting to knit with theirs - he could sense it, no matter how silent and withdrawn he tried to be. He didn't *want* to care about them - even after he won that Competition, he was sure they were going to realize what he was, no name and no family and no manners and no *anything* - and they were going to want a Fifth who could match them. They carried themselves like proud Lords, he would never be good enough to Join with them.

"Are you hungry?" Heero's question startled him out of those depressing thoughts. He shook his head mutely.

"Well, *I* am!" came a cheerful voice from the bed, and Duo was sitting up, tossing a rumpled braid over his shoulder and grinning broadly at them.

“You’re always hungry.” Heero said mildly, a trace of affection in his blue eyes as he looked at his Second.

“True. Now where’s the food?”

“I’ll get it.” Trowa smiled, and left the room.

“Good man, he really is.” Duo said happily, stretching before pouncing on the still-sleeping blond. “Quatre! Wakey-wakey! Breakfast is on its way! Wake up, or I’ll eat it all!”

“You would, too.” The blond mumbled, rolling away from the braided boy and pulling a fat pillow over his head. “Leave me alone, Duo, it’s too early to be awake.”

“It’s morning, and everyone else is up, and since when do you sleep later than me?!” Duo laughed, snatching the pillow and smacking the smaller boy with it. He was out of the bed and on the other side of the room before Quatre could retaliate.

“You are evil.” The Air Talent said, sitting up and glaring at his Second. “You are evil *incarnate*, you know that?”

“Of course. That’s why you love me.” Duo replied blithely, hurrying to open the door at a muffled thump. Trowa had been amazingly quick, or Harris was trying to get on their good side - the tall boy stood there with a steaming tray, while a small boy stood behind him with a jug of water and a basket of bread. Duo gave a hoot of delight and snatched the tray, thumping it down on the table before investigating its contents. His Others, knowing from long experience that they had to move fast if they wanted anything to eat, joined him.

Wufei stayed staring at the boy, who eyed the four around the table before sidling toward him. “Hi.”

“Bannen? What are you doing here?”

“Harris hired me. Are you okay, Wufei?”

“Yes, why?”

“I heard Alvis hurt you.”

“Not really. Just some bruises. Does your mother know you’re going to work for Harris?”

“Yes, she said if you asked to tell you she’d be keeping a ‘sharp eye out’. What did she mean?”

Wufei shook his head, his eyes going shuttered and dark. “Nothing, nothing. If she’s watching out for you, it’ll be all right. He’s giving you a good wage?”

“Good enough. Are you...” The younger boy lowered his voice, glancing at the seemingly-oblivious boys devouring the food, “are you really going to leave with them? Won’t Harris be mad? What about the debt?”



“Being Chosen cancels things like that out.” Wufei’s voice lowered to match Bannen’s.  
“There’s nothing he can do to stop me.”

“Good! So you’re really going to get away?”

“I guess so.” Wufei permitted himself a small smile. They had Chosen him, and even if they cast him aside later, these Others would at least take him out of Haven. He’d be far away if Harris ever found out. The man would never be able to afford to search him out.

Maybe he really *was* going to be free.

That thought cheered him no end, and he readily accepted the biscuit Trowa reached to him a moment later.

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After the informal breakfast - that left Wufei wondering slightly over the manners of these ‘Lords’ - he found himself alone with Duo, while the others scattered to do self-assigned errands before their journey.

“Don’t we need to do anything?” Wufei asked quietly, not wanting to let the others do all the work.

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, we have something *very* important to do.” He smiled an absolutely wicked smile. “And I think you’ll enjoy helping me.” He laughed at Wufei’s puzzled look. “You’ll see. C’mon, we’ve got to get some things.” He grasped Wufei’s uninjured wrist and pulled him out of the room.

Wufei allowed himself to be pulled, staring at the braid waving along in front of him. What on earth was the Water Talent up to? He followed obediently after him, quickly discovering that Duo had learned the hidden, back way out of the inn - and indeed, all the little back ways through the village. Wufei had them memorized, since out of sight was out of mind with these people, but he was astonished that this boy had found them so soon after arriving.

“Where are we going?” he whispered, after making sure no one was around.

“To the village well. No one should be there this early, huh?”

“No - and most people here get their morning water from rain barrels.”

“Figures.” Duo’s wrinkled nose told him that the other boy considered the habit of washing up in stagnant, larvae infested water as nasty as Wufei did.

“Why are we going to the well?”

“To get water, of course. I’d just bring it to us, but someone would be sure to notice a puddle of water floating through the streets.”

“You could be right.” Wufei said calmly.

Duo did a double-take, then laughed. “Oh, so you *do* have a sense of humor! Good! That’ll make all this easier.”

“All *what* easier?”

“What we’re going to do next. Can you get me... lemme see... a clay jar big enough to hold two bucketfuls of water, a length of rope, a burlap sack and some sawdust?”

“...yes.” Wufei said slowly, and turned toward a small storage hut. “Right now?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna hide over here, and bring the water to me. Just across the square - no one should see it.”

“Why do you need...”

“You’ll see. Don’t worry, you’ll love this.”

Wufei wasn’t too sure - the manic gleam in Duo’s eyes was beginning to worry him. But he went to the hut anyway, retrieved everything but the sawdust, and brought it to the alley Duo was in.

“I have to go by the woodshop for the sawdust.” He whispered, watching in amazement as Duo held a ball of water suspended above his hands, then shot it into the jar.

“All right,” the other boy nodded absently, taking the burlap and the rope and fastening the material around the lid of the jar, pulled tight like a drum. Wufei watched him for a second, then shook his head and left. He still had to get sawdust for his poor insane Second.

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“What exactly is this?” Wufei whispered again, half an hour later. The two boys were crouched on a low rooftop, clay jar held tightly between them.

“A bit of a spell, to teach you how to have fun.” Duo whispered back, his wide violet eyes constantly searching the village below. The place was just beginning to stir, villagers coming out into the brightening day to go about their work.

“A Water spell?” Wufei asked, his voice incredulous, curious, and eager all at once.

“Yes,” Duo was pleased, “have you never seen anyone do Water magic?”

“Once. Half an hour ago, I saw this boy balancing a big ball of water on his fingertips.”

Duo snickered, trying to muffle the sound as a few villagers looked around curiously. “Oh, man, Wufei, you really, really *do* have a sense of humor! This is going to make life fun - the rest of our boys are just three stick-in-the-muds when it comes to practical jokes.”

“Just don’t play them on me.” Wufei said softly, eyeing the jar. Duo had rubbed the sawdust through the burlap while muttering under his breath, and he didn’t trust the odd object anymore. He could have sworn the clay had trembled.

“I promise.” Duo said solemnly. “As long as you help me, I’ll leave you free of my delightful little jokes.” He laughed at the look on Wufei’s face. “Trust me, any of the others would *\*ove* for me to say that to them.”

“Even Quatre?” The words slipped out before Wufei could stop them. He turned slightly pale, wondering if Duo would be mad, but the other boy was barely paying attention. His eyes were fixed on someone coming down the street.

“Quatre’s my favorite target, besides Heero. Spirit boy needs to lighten up, and so does my pretty blond. Ah, here he comes!”

Wufei peered over the edge of the roof, half expecting to see Quatre, from the way Duo was talking. Instead he saw Alvis strolling down the street, several of his friends in his wake. Duo caught up the jar and crouched tensely, waiting, his whole body thrumming with anticipation.

Alvis stopped and went inside the bakery.

“Aw...” Duo set the jar down and slumped a little.

“He’ll be out soon. He likes the sticky buns for breakfast. You... you don’t act much like a Lord, you know?” Wufei risked the observation, suddenly sure the other boy wouldn’t be angry.

“M *not* a Lord. Whatever gave you that idea?!” Duo turned astonished eyes on the smaller boy.

“Well... you and the others... you all *act* like...”

“No, Fire. Yeah, I’ll call you that, get used to it. I’m not a Lord. Quatre’s from a fine, noble family, and Heero... well, he might be. Trowa’s - I’ll let Trowa tell you. But *I’m* a street rat!” He said the last proudly, chin in the air.

“A... a street...”

“A bum, an orphan, the best pickpocket Helia has ever had the honor of harboring! And I’d still be one, too, if Hee-chan wasn’t such a fast runner.”

“Huh?” Wufei stared at him blankly.

“How long will Alvis be in there?”

“At least a half-hour.”

“Good.” Duo settled down, laying back on the roof tiles. The sun was beginning to warm them nicely. “That’s long enough to tell you. Sit back and listen.”

*\*Helia, Five Years Ago\**

Festival days, Duo thought happily, had to be his favorite days. Lots of food to snatch, lots of sights to see, lots of fat purses on the belts of naive country folk. He’d already lifted enough to feed his little group of children for the next week. His goal was enough coin for a month, and he would need at least three more purses for it.

He crouched in the shadow of a fruit-vendors stall, watching for a likely target. He let two well-guarded nobles go by before his gaze settled on another man. Tall, well-dressed, with a plump purse, and the only person with him was a boy no older than him, with messy chocolate-brown hair.

Easy pickings.

“Yeah, you’ll never know what hit you.” Duo smirked to himself, letting them move closer. Just as he was about to spring, he felt something well up inside his chest, a sudden intense feeling of warmth and companionship that nearly threw him back against the wall. He huddled down, breathing hard, never noticing that the brown-haired boy had stopped and was leaning against the vendor’s stall looking as shocked as he felt. The tall man bent over him solicitously, his purse a mere three feet from Duo’s eyes.

The young boy shoved the weird feeling away as hard as he could, beating it down with thoughts of his hungry younger followers, and dove forward. He snatched the purse, ignoring the shouts, and ran like a startled deer. He hadn’t gone three yards before he heard footsteps pounding after him. He turned up the speed, ignoring the fact that his legs were oddly shaky.

‘Didn’t eat enough this morning... thought that loaf of bread would be enough... *should* have been enough...’ thoughts ran desperately through his mind as his feet ran desperately through the crowd. A loaf of bread would normally keep him going strong all day, though he never missed an opportunity for more. He reached a corner and spared a quick glance back.

To his vast surprise, he didn’t see the group of pursuers he’d expected. He’d thought a guardsman had seen him, and was rushing after him with his companions - yet the only person he saw was that same boy, coming on quickly, bright blue eyes fixed firmly on him.

Well - he'd never been outrun by another kid yet!

He took to his heels again, and was a little disconcerted when the boy kept up easily. "Damn!" he muttered, "what did *he* have for breakfast?!" He put on yet another burst of speed, though he felt his ankles wobble dangerously. He had to keep going...

Had to keep going...

Long enough to reach the fountain. Duo dove into the water, splashing through the knee-deep cistern. 'Safe, I'm safe! He can't reach me now!' He heard the other boy splash into the fountain behind him, and laughed out loud.

Stopped.

And turned.

"Bad move!" He said cheerfully, sending his hand in a scooping motion through the air. A chunk of water the size of a wagon wheel lifted from the fountain and hurtled toward the other boy, who was barely able to dodge it.

"Not bad!" Duo was willing to give credit where credit was due. "Try for two!" He waved both hands, and two water-wheels shot toward the boy. He ducked them, getting one arm wet, and Duo went all out, flinging bolt after bolt of water at him. The other boy leapt, ducked, dove and dodged, and never got more than his sleeves wet.

Finally, Duo had to stop for a breath, panting hard. "What... the *hell*... are you?" He gasped, staring at the boy. He was shocked to see that the blue eyes looking at him were pleased, happy... proud?"

"I'm your First. You're mine."

"Am not!" Duo shouted, staring. "I'm *nobody's*! Who the hell do you think you are?!"

"I'm Heero. I'm your First. Your Spirit Talent. You felt me earlier - we Spoke to each other. Remember?"

Duo swallowed, backed away. "But you're... you're a noble."

"Not really." Heero took a step forward, and had to dodge a half-hearted toss of water. "Come on, my Second. You know, inside, that I'm speaking the truth." He heard a strangled sound from behind him, knew Ellegran had caught up. His keeper wouldn't be pleased about this - he knew his so-called father had plans on binding him to a certain noble's son, whether they felt a Call to each other or not.

*'Too bad. This is my Second. The first of my Others... I want the rest of them!'* He felt the sudden ache in his chest for the rest of his five, for his Earth, Air and Fire. He heard his Water gasp, saw him clutch at his chest and knew he was sharing the feeling. He couldn't help it - he'd been content without any of his Others, but finding this one had woken the desire for the rest.

“You’re nuts!” The other was still trying to deny him, backing away. A street child - ragged clothes, long tangled hair - probably no training at all as far as the way of Others. Probably had very little idea what was happening, what was going to happen.

Didn’t need much training, though. He knew Water Talents who had been Trained for years, who couldn’t do what he’d just seen this boy do. He felt that well of pride again, and shared it with the boy even as he gently probed the other’s mind for... for...

“...Duo. My Second. You have to come with me.”

“Like hell! How do you know my name?! Is this some kinda joke? I don’t have to take this!” he turned and tried to run again. Heero put every muscle in his legs into a giant leap, and managed to grab two handfuls of long, tangled hair, yanking the other boy to a sudden, yelling stop.

“Ow! Ow! Ow! Hands off the hair, Heero! That *hurts*! ...how in any given hell do I know your name?”

“I told you.” Heero followed his instincts, completely unlike his usual behavior, and pulled the ragged boy into a hug. As soon as his arms went around the shorter, slighter figure, Duo sagged.

“Oh, man. Don’t do that.” Heero had sent his Talent to him again, Spoken more gently than their mutual recognition earlier.

“Speak back.” he pleaded softly, ignoring the sound of Ellegran’s squawking protests behind them.

Duo had no idea what he was talking about, but something deep inside him apparently did. He felt the coolness of Water well up in his soul, and felt the other boy shudder and sigh.

“Beautiful.”

“Heero! You can’t... this boy is a thief! You can’t Choose him! This is wrong!”

Heero might have been ignoring the man, but Duo’s head jerked up as he finally registered the words. He’d gone from fear and suspicion to anger in a split second. He didn’t understand what was happening, but in Heero’s embrace he knew they belonged together. Like he was friends with the others kids... only deeper. Special.

The man was still saying nasty things. “He’s beneath you! You can’t seriously consider him! A dirty little beggar! You must comeaway at once! This - EEEYOW!”

Heero jerked around just in time to see one of those wagon wheels dissolve over Ellegran’s head, soaking the man from head to foot in the dirty water of the fountain.

He snickered.

*\*Haven Village\**

“I think that was the first time poor Hee-chan ever laughed. He’s still not good at it.” Duo shook his head, grinning a little.

Wufei sat with his chin in his hands, gazing at him. “Is that true? You’re not really a Lord?”

Duo sat up sharply, giving him a reproachful look. “I’ll let that slide, ‘Fei, since you don’t know me. I may do a lot of things, but lying isn’t one of them.”

“Sorry...” Wufei would have cringed if he didn’t have a little pride left. “What happened to the kids?”

“Huh?”

“The kids you were stealing for?”

“Oh!” Duo went from scowling a little to beaming. “You’re a good guy, too. Nice.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Just that most people don’t ask that. They’re all fine - I know where each one of them is. Heero’s - family - helped find them all homes or jobs. They’re doing great.”

“That’s... there’s Alvis!”

Duo shot upright again, once more catching up the jar.

“Are you going to soak him?”

Duo was pleased to hear some eagerness in Wufei’s voice. “Naw, that’s mild. Kid’s stuff. This is a Spell - more than just Calling. Shh.”

Wufei obediently went silent, wide dark eyes watching the other boy’s every move. Duo waited until Alvis was almost directly beneath them, then flung the jar at the redhead, shouting out a word no one there understood. Wufei winced, expecting to see the clay shatter on his head, but instead it upended like a huge salt-cellar, water pouring through the burlap to form a cloud above the boy’s startled head.

Alvis shrieked like a girl as rain began to fall on him.

The clay pot fell to shatter on the ground behind him, Wufei put up a hand to smother a laugh, and Duo grabbed his Fifth’s arm and dragged him away over the rooftops. Wufei went willingly, still trying not to laugh, calling out to the Water Talent in strangled gasps of his own.

“What... that was rain... how long...?”

“Let’s just say - ol’ Alvis won’t have a lot of friends for a good week. No one likes soggy playmates, ya know!”

They headed for the inn, wearing matching grins.



# Leaving Haven

“Do we have everything?” Heero asked, running his eyes over their horses. Five saddled - they’d bought the best one they could find for Wufei, though it was still far below their standards and would have to be replaced - and two pack horses. Everything seemed to be in order.

“We’re missing two *little* items.” Quatre said, the blond’s voice slightly testy as he gazed around at the assembled villagers. Why did these people think they needed to see them off? He had a feeling it wasn’t going to go well - these people all looked either vastly amused or angry. Something was going to happen - or had already happened.

If it had already happened, he just knew Duo was involved.

“What are the items?” Heero’s voice was curious, and Quatre realized he’d fazed out a bit. “How important are they?”

“A bit... I meant Duo and Wufei. Where are they?”

“You can’t tell?”

“I know Duo’s in the village. That’s about it. He’s not answering me.”

“Is something wrong?” Trowa was immediately alert, while Heero’s eyes closed, reaching out with his Spirit to try and find his Others.

“No... he’s just ignoring me. He’s not hurt; Wufei isn’t, either.”

Quatre saw Trowa’s shoulders relax slightly and a golden eyebrow arched. Oh, so Trowa was worried about their little Fire Talent? Hmm... interesting. About time their Third took an interest in someone. Quatre hoped, for Trowa’s sake, that Duo didn’t figure this out. He’d never be able to resist teasing the other boy.

“Sirs, will you please tell me the meaning of this?!” A half-fearful, half-angry voice sounded behind them. All three turned to see the mayor, keeping a careful distance from his son. Alvis was blubbering, soaking wet, while a very small raincloud hovered two feet above his head and drizzled water down on him.

The three WarCraft Talents broke into peals of laughter.

Duo and Wufei snuck in an open window on the second story of the inn and strolled casually down the stairs. After checking the Great Hall and finding it empty, they headed out the front door.

Duo stopped short, causing Wufei to slam into his back.

“What’s going on?” he asked, trying to peer over the other boy’s shoulder. He saw the villagers gathered around some horses, and three boys convulsed in laughter.

“Man!” Duo said reverently, “Hee-chan and Tro *never* laugh like that! What *is* going on?!” He started to go out and Wufei pulled him back.

“That’s going on.” He whispered, pointing toward a sopping wet mayor’s son.

“Oh.” Duo snickered. “I guess that would make them laugh. C’mon, Fire, let’s go. Looks like they’re all packed up and waiting.”

Wufei hung back. “Um... maybe we should wait. I think - I think the mayor is angry with us.”

“It’s not a problem.” Duo replied calmly, taking the smaller boy’s arm and tugging him towards the door. “A Spell done in retaliation to an insult against one of my Other’s is not under his jurisdiction. Besides, we wouldn’t do anything to hurt the village, but he doesn’t know that, so no way is he gonna mess with WarCraft Talents. Trust me.”

Wufei sighed and allowed himself to be dragged out the door. At the sight of them, Alvis scowled, Mayor Hayweather scowled, and Harris scowled. Wufei didn’t care about the first, trusted Duo on the second, nearly bolted at the third. He couldn’t - couldn’t! - bring up the debt now, and Torlin was there. If he *did* bring it up, the Trainer would step in to remind him of the Law. It would be all right.

He took a deep, settling breath, and followed after Duo.

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Heero noticed everything, so of course he saw those scowls, and his Fifth’s reaction to them. He stopped laughing and started glaring. If that innkeeper thought he was going to do something to *his* little Fire Talent...

Huh. Apparently his glare was working. The man slunk away like he was trying to avoid execution.

Heero dismissed him from his attention, turning his eyes back to his Second and his Fifth. *They* were pointedly ignoring Alvis and the mayor, Wufei apparently having lost his

nervousness once Harris was gone. They were standing next to the horse they'd bought for Wufei, discussing riding abilities and the fact that their Fire barely had any.

"There's never been much need for me to ride a horse. I could walk most of the places I had to go."

"How often have you been on one?"

"Less than a dozen times." Wufei's dark eyes seemed to check Duo's face for ridicule.

"Well, we all gotta learn. Hee-chan had to tie me to a horse, kicking and screaming... just tap with your heels to go, pull the reins to stop. Pull them gently in the direction you wanna go. He'll probably follow our horses once we're outside the village, so you won't have to worry much about that bit for awhile. Long enough to get comfortable with being on him."

Wufei looked a little doubtful, but Duo gestured for him to climb aboard, and he did. His natural grace got him into the saddle without looking like an idiot. He gathered up the reins and held them carefully, wondering if the horse knew he was a novice. He looked at it again and frowned. This was one of Torlin's horses! He never sold them to strangers! He often said he knew they weren't the best of horses, but they were like his children. His eyes went to the man with the grey-streaked beard, asking a question without opening his mouth.

Torlin grinned, nodded, and mouthed the words, 'only for you.'

Wufei gave him a tiny bow of thanks. None of the villagers noticed, but his Others did. They didn't say anything. Wufei had relaxed on the horse's back, and the animal had turned its head to snuffle a bit at his leg. Not the best bred horse they'd ever seen, and they *would* buy Wufei a better riding animal - but Heero still decided that they'd keep this horse. It obviously meant something to their Fire.

The mayor had tried twice to get closer to his sniveling son, but he kept jumping back to avoid getting wet. He apparently reached the end of his patience, and turned on the WarCraft to complain. Heero saw what was coming and swung onto his horse, turning the big animal away before two words were out of the man's mouth. His Others quickly moved to follow him, the three still standing jumping on their horses. Duo made sure Wufei managed to turn his horse before he nudged his own into motion.

As they moved away, they all heard the mayor calling after them. When they ignored him, they heard his voice ordering the villagers to 'bring them back.' Duo snorted. These people weren't *that* stupid, and it wasn't like the man was their ruler.

He was right - they didn't hear the sounds of pursuit. They heard muffled laughter, and people walking away.

Quatre risked a quick glance back and saw even Alvis hurrying for cover, his father chasing after him, the whole square rapidly becoming empty.

As the horses were nearing the edge of the village, Torlin came running down a side street, a bundle under his arm and an grin on his face.

“Wufei! Wait! I have something for you!”

Wufei pulled tentatively at the reins and was pleased when the horse really did stop. Torlin laughed at his expression and handed him the bundle, something long and thin, wrapped heavily in ragged cloth.

Wufei held it for a moment, turning it over carefully in his hands. He started to unwrap it and was stopped short when Torlin gave an inarticulate warning sound. He looked at his Trainer, puzzlement drawing his fine black eyebrows together. Torlin stared hard at him, then turned his eyes back down the village street, where Harris’ bulk was still looming in the inn door.

Wufei blinked, then frowned down at the bundle balanced precariously on his knees. He looked back at Torlin.

Torlin winked at him.

He looked back at the bundle.

A look of disbelief spread across his delicate face, and the hands holding the bundle became suddenly reverent.

“Is it...?”

“Yup! Be sure not to open it for a while!”

“I won’t.” Wufei’s voice was a thready whisper of awe.

“Good lad! Luck with your Others, don’t forget to practice your fine work, and you’d best move along! I think the natives are getting restless!”

Five heads turned to see Harris and the mayor holding a hushed, excited conversation, gesturing toward them.

“Should we...?” Heero started, but Torlin cut him off.

“The best thing to do, Spirit Talent, is to take your Others and get them out of reach. No use starting unnecessary battles, even if you’d easily win. You shouldn’t use your Talents against such a pitiful foe.” He exchanged an amused glance with the dark-haired Fire Talent, and they spoke the next words together.

“It would be dishonorable.”

\*

Wufei tried to keep his horse fairly close to Duo's, without intruding on the space he was sharing with Quatre. The two Linked Talents had their hands clasped loosely together, their horses walking side by side. They were chattering happily with each other, and didn't seem to notice that he was staying so close.

He was sure the Water Talent would help him with the horse if - or when - he needed it... and he just felt more secure with Duo than with the others. He thought he knew Duo better now, after the story on the roof and the trick he'd played on Alvis. It was a vast relief to know that at least one of his Others was as common-born as he was. Until he got to know the other boys better, he was sticking with Duo.

Well - as long as they didn't notice.

\*

"What's up with Tro?" Duo stopped wondering to himself what was in that weird package and asked his koi about the strange looks the Earth Talent was sending his way.

Quatre looked up from fiddling with his reins to study the redhead. Trowa's green eyes were going back and forth between Duo and a point behind him and to his right. His expression was an odd mixture of satisfaction and yearning.

Quatre carefully turned his head, and saw Wufei riding rather close to Duo, though the Exotic was pointedly *not* looking at the braided-haired boy. Quatre glanced back at Trowa and grinned.

'*Quatre? What's going on?*' Duo spoke the words through their link, something they rarely did when it was only their Others around. Heero glanced at them, curiosity in his bright blue eyes. He wouldn't listen in if they didn't want him to, but Quatre saw no reason to ask him to turn away.

He also could think of no reason not to tell Duo what was going on, since Trowa was being so obvious.

The teasing he was about to get would be his own silly fault.

'*I think Trowa would like to have your shadow, Duo.*'

'*My... what?! Quatre, do you have sunstroke?*'

Quatre sighed softly, and made the barest motion of his head toward Wufei. Duo's amethyst eyes followed, puzzled, then he looked back at Trowa. The Earth Talent had realized his slip

and was calmly studying the horizon - but the faintest trace of a blush on his cheeks gave him away.

*‘Oh! Oh, I see! That shadow! Quatre - you’ve been holding out on me!’*

Duo left off admonishing his lover and spoke his next words aloud. “I have a bad feeling, Quatre, that we’re going to be dealing with *two* moping, unhappy boys suffering from unrequited love. I don’t know whether that’s romantic or silly.”

Heero glared at him. “What do you mean, two?”

“Aw, c’mon, Hee-chan! We’ve all seen the way you look at Commander Zechs! Well, ‘Fei hasn’t, but he will! When are ya gonna tell him you like him?”

Heero just gaped at him, stunned out of his usual stoicism.

Quatre giggled, Trowa smirked, and Wufei just blinked.

“What are *you* smirking about, Trowa?” Duo caroled, bright eyes fixed on the boy with the suddenly terrified expression. “I think you need to do some confessing of your own!”

Trowa’s eyes shot to Wufei, who was still blinking in confusion.

Duo, watching every move he made, snickered and took a little pity on him. *Very* little.

“I’ll give you a few days, Trowa. Since you’re my friend, and my Third and all. Let’s say... four days. Then you tell.” He and Quatre exchanged sweet smiles. “Or we will.”

Nothing like a little panic to get a boy to confess his love!

Heero *almost* smiled at the look on Trowa’s face - but he had a feeling Duo wasn’t done with him yet. And he was so right.

“Same goes for you, Spirit boy!” The obnoxiously cheerful voice yodeled. “Four days after we find our sexy Commander! Then it’s confession hour for you, too! You confess, or we do it for you!”

“Quatre...” Heero chose to ignore Duo and frown at the blond. “I can’t believe you’re going along with this.”

Quatre sniffed, smiling smugly. “It’s not as if *I* have a problem telling someone I love them.”

“What?!” Trowa was startled out of his own usual silence. “You didn’t tell Duo for days!”

Quatre blushed very faintly. “I... was still working things out! I told him as soon as I realized what was going on!”

“At a lot of urging from Trowa and I!” Heero shot back, enjoying the look of chagrin on the blond’s face.

Wufei was still blinking.

Duo turned to him, elfin face perfectly serious. “Don’t let my pretty blond fool you into thinking he’s perfect, Fire. When we first met him, he was a spoiled rotten poor little rich boy.”

“Duo!” Quatre protested.

“Aw, c’mon, Q-koi! You know you were!” he turned his laughing eyes back on their befuddled Fifth. “He really was. Loved him as soon as I saw him, but he a mess.”

“Duo!”

“Quiet, pretty blond. ‘Fei... I’ll tell you another story.” And Duo started in on a bombastic tale of nobles, treachery, and rescues.

Quatre let his horse fall back until he was beside Wufei, and occasionally, quietly, whispered to him what had *really* happened.

*\*Fairwater Township, Fourteen Months Earlier \**

“Quatre - you must get up now.” A gentle voice intruded on the sleeping silence of an elegant room. A tousled blond head lifted from a silk-covered pillow, blinking blue eyes at the woman standing just inside the doorway.

“Iria? It’s not morning yet - why must I get up?”

She smiled. “Have you forgotten what day it is, Brother? After looking forward to the Gathering all week? We must leave earlier to be one of the first families inside the Arena.”

Quatre threw off the covers and leapt out of bed, scrambling for his slippers. “I’ll be ready in five minutes! Are we taking the carriage, or horses? Who else is going? Where are my clothes? Do you think I’ll be Chosen?”

“You have plenty of time to get ready; we’ll take the carriage; I’m escorting you, Serena, and Grace; your clothes are in the wardrobe; and I hope so.” Iria’s reply was filled with laughter. She loved it when her brother got so excited. He usually tried to act calm and together - she enjoyed seeing him more like a child. She really did hope he found Others today. He’d been

to four Gatherings so far, more than any of his sisters had gone to, more than all of his friends. People were beginning to whisper about him.

Iria hated that. Her brother was so sensitive. He'd act like he didn't notice, then come home and cry. It didn't help that he was an empath on top of being a Talent. He could hear *and* sense the derision that other noble families were starting to direct towards him.

Iria gave her head an arrogant toss. They were just jealous - her family was better bred than any other in this town, and her brother would find Others who would complement them well. He would be part of a Healing Five, she was sure. He was so gentle and sweet, and his empathy would only help with the healing.

Yes, he would certainly make their family proud.

Quatre glanced at her as she left the room, sensing the pride she was feeling and hoping he wouldn't let her down. He knew she, his father, and the rest of his many sisters were expecting him to make a good Match - but it didn't matter to *him* what his Others were like. He just wanted to have Others. His Others, his special friends who would be even closer than his family. He could feel the longing for them, not very strong since he hadn't met a single one yet, but it was still there. All Talents felt it, of course, but after you found some of your Others, the loneliness of yearning for the rest could drive you insane.

Or so he'd heard.

He really hoped that all Four of his were already together, and he'd find them all at once. He didn't like the muffled ache he felt now, and had no desire for it to get worse.

He finished dressing, and left to hunt for Iria and his other sisters. He could hear them giggling already, and he sighed again. Another good thing about finding his Others was that he would live with his Spirit Talent, or whoever was oldest if their Spirit hadn't found them yet.

So unless *he* was oldest - unlikely - he would get away from the House of Constant Giggling!

Joy!

\*

Quatre shifted his feet, tired already. Mostly because Vera Strummer, the daughter of one of his father's business associates, was yakking away in his ear, her voice literally going a mile a minute. He sighed softly, trying to tune out her chatter. His father had asked him to be polite to her, and he would obey the man for as long as he could stand it.

Then he was sending the pest out of here in a tornado!



Vera was an Water Talent, not a very good one, and she desperately wanted to be the first of Quatre's Others. Not *the* First, of course, his Spirit would be that, but the first of the other three he would Join with. Her family lacked the social status of the Winner family, something she was determined to solve by Joining with the younger blond boy. It would be almost as good as marrying him.

Their status would skyrocket if she could manage *both*!

Quatre shifted again, angsty. He'd met most of the Talents here before, and the new ones hadn't Spoken to him yet. Vera was trying to stick close in hopes that their Talents would Speak soon, but it hadn't happened at the last four Gatherings and he didn't see it happening now. If he had his way, it would never happen. Being Joined to her would be worse than staying with his sisters.

He let his eyes run over the assembled Talents again, and froze.

Oh...

Gods...

Where had *he* come from?

He stared at the boy, taking in the neat military-style clothes with the WarCraft insignia, the Water Talent sign on the front of his armor, the beautiful face, the braid that looked like it was alive, swinging behind him as he swaggered along, the big shining blue-violet eyes that were staring right back at him as the other boy stopped...

Staring back at him?!

Quatre nearly fell over when he realized the beautiful boy's eyes were firmly fastened on him - and then he felt something inside, deep inside -

- like his soul had fallen into cool, clear water... so cool...

And another boy, taller, with thick chocolate hair turned away from studying a Fire Talent who was showing off by lighting small piles of wood, and stared at him, too.

And another boy, taller still, with the greenest eyes he'd ever seen, jerked around and joined in their staring.

Quatre felt the intensity of a Spirit Talent filling his soul, and the calming solidness of an Earth Talent, joining in with that gorgeous coolness that meant a Water Talent and he knew he had found three of his Others.

He had just enough time to register a sharp, aching emptiness where his Fire Talent should be before he fainted.

*\*On Horseback, In the Middle of Nowhere \**

“He fainted, of course, at seeing my stunning beauty for the first time...”

“Duo!”

*\*Fairwater Township's Gathering Arena \**

Vera watched as Quatre collapsed, his sister Iria shoving her aside to kneel next to him, wailing. What on earth was going on? Was the boy so fragile he fainted after standing too long? And who were these rude soldiers pushing past her now?!

Quatre opened his eyes a few minutes later.

To a scene of absolute chaos.

His head was in Iria's lap. His sister was sobbing and calling to him. The lovely boy with the big violet eyes was hanging over him, concern on his face. The Spirit Talent and the Earth Talent were kneeling on his other side, and Vera Strummer was shrieking like the mortally wounded.

“You *can't* be his Water Talent! *I'm* his Water Talent! He's supposed to be in a Healing, not a WarCraft! He's mine! Get away!” She was swatting ineffectually at the lovely boy, who wasn't paying her the least bit of attention.

The rest of the people in the Arena were milling around, talking loudly, discussing this ‘amazing occurrence’ at what seemed like the top of their lungs. Quatre winced, feeling a headache coming on, and saw his Spirit's bright blue eyes narrow.

“Is there somewhere we can take him?” He asked sharply, looking at Iria. She had the sense to shut up, and nodded.

“Y-yes. There are little rooms at the back of the Arena.”

Quatre's First stood and scooped him up easily, striding away through the crowd with the Water and Earth Talents hard on his heels.

And Vera Strummer trying hard to follow.

*\*The Middle of Nowhere \**

“And then we introduced ourselves, Quat and I fell in love, we all went back to our Commander, and started looking for you.”

Wufei blinked.

“But... I thought you said you rescued him... and what happened with the girl?!”

Duo grinned. “So you like a good story, huh? Don’t worry, I’ll tell you the rest. But we need to stop now.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Heero’s voice was closer than Wufei expected and he jumped, “You’re guiding the horse one-handed, nursing your other wrist. If we go much further, you’re going to be too sore to sleep, anyway, since you’re not used to riding. Besides, we’re all a little tired. There’s no real hurry to get back.” He added the last bit when he saw the edge of worry ease back into Wufei’s onyx eyes. He wanted to assure the boy it wasn’t *bad* that they were stopping because of him.

Wufei found out Heero was right when he swung down from the horse. His legs were *very* stiff, his knees barely agreeing to bend. He stomped his feet a little as he tethered the horse, hoping to work some of the stiffness out. By the time he got back to the campsite, everything had already been set up by his efficient Others. Campfire ready to be lit, five neat beds made with wrapped pieces of bread and cheese set on top of them.

“Cold this evening. Would you?” Duo gestured toward the stacked wood.

Wufei eyed it, then him. “Step back a little.”

Duo obeyed.

FOOM! Again.

Duo laughed. “Man, I’ll never get used to seeing that! Totally awesome, Fei-chan!”

Wufei blinked again, a small voice in the back of his head pointing out that he’d been doing that a lot today. Duo thought his nearly-out-of-control Talent was awesome?!

That boy was very strange.

“Which bed is mine?” He asked softly, looking at the warm blankets. Better than what he’d slept on at the inn, and camping was supposed to be ‘rough’. Life was certainly going to be

different with these boys.

Duo answered his question by plopping down on one bed and tugging Quatre down to the one beside him. Heero was already sprawled on his, and Trowa had taken off his armor and shoes and stacked them beside another.

That left the empty blankets beside of the auburn haired boy.

For some reason, Wufei blushed.

## Resting by a Warm Fire

Five boys sat around a blazing campfire, munching on bread and cheese.

Two of the boys sat close together, talking and laughing quietly, stealing the occasional quick caress.

Three boys sat gazing into the flames, their eyes sleepy and unfocused.

“Um...” Duo cleared his throat, making three faces turn to him. “I think we should all get some rest now, huh, Hee-chan? You guys look like you’re going to fall into the fire. Quatre and I will take first watch.”

Heero glared at him, amusement and irritation battling for control of his eyes. “And you expect us to get any rest while you’re... ‘watching’?”

Duo had the grace to blush. A little.

“We’ll watch quietly.” Quatre said, amusement definitely reigning supreme in his baby-blue eyes.

Heero snorted, but headed for his blankets, followed by Trowa.

Wufei went to the neatly stacked packs first, and retrieved the bundle Torlin had given him. Only then did he head for his bed, laying down with the package clutched firmly in one hand.

“‘M dyin’ to know what that is.” Duo muttered, eyeing the package with bright, curious violet orbs.

“He’ll tell us soon enough. Or we’ll see it when he opens it. Don’t push your luck, Duo. You’re the only one he really trusts so far.”

“I know. Don’t worry, pretty blond. I won’t do anything sneaky and upset him.” The violet eyes turned to roam over his body, making Quatre shiver with desire. “I got a really good distraction right now, anyway.”

They grabbed for each other’s hands, and vanished into the shadows.

\*

A few moments later, and the three nearly-asleep boys were brought back to awareness by barely-suppressed moans.

“I thought they were going to be quiet.” Heero muttered, rolling over and pulling the blanket over his head.

Trowa snickered and looked at Wufei, who looked rather concerned. “It’s nothing to worry about, Wufei. They’re usually much louder.” He was relieved to see some confusion in the Fire Talent’s eyes - if Wufei wasn’t sure what was going on, then perhaps their worries about Harris and his attempt to sell the boy to Duo were unfounded? Perhaps he’d only been trying to take advantage of the yearning Duo would have certainly had in his eyes.

Wufei’s own eyes widened a bit, and he blushed, realizing what was going on. “Oh,” he said softly, settling back down on the blanket, “I - forgot, I guess, what you said about them this morning.”

Trowa sighed, not certain how to feel. So Wufei *did* know what was going on - but he’d had to think about it. Well, he’d have to get used to their very loud Second and Fourth - gods knew he and Heero had to get used to it! And it wasn’t easy - those soft moans were beginning to get to him, make his body want things it wasn’t allowed to have right now.

Heero, too, shifted on his bed and muttered something under his breath.

Wufei alone seemed unaffected, which added to Trowa’s emotional upheaval. Did their Fire even think about other boys that way? Duo’s teasing returned to his mind, and his heart sank a little. He knew his Second well enough to know the threat behind the words was real. One way or another, in four days Wufei was going to know how Trowa felt about him. Was he setting himself up for a crushing rejection?

And how would that affect their WarCraft?

Well, he couldn’t dwell on it, he told himself firmly. He needed to rest - Wufei seemed to have drifted off, probably exhausted after the unaccustomed long horseback ride. Heero’s breath had evened out as well. Apparently, his First had been able to tune out the steadily-growing-louder moans and sighs.

Well, he’d had that talent once, too, hadn’t he? Trowa settled his head more firmly on a folded blanket and closed his eyes.

\*

“Trowa.”

The Earth Talent sighed and grumbled slightly, not waking up.

“Trowa.” There was amusement in the voice.

Trowa gave another grumbling sigh and squeezed his eyes more tightly shut.

“Trowa, man, I know you’re tired, but it’s your watch. Besides - you really need to wake up. You don’t want to sleep through this, do ya?”

‘*What...?!*’

Trowa pried open a weary green eye and saw nothing but black. He blinked, waiting for light from the campfire to tell him what he was seeing.

Nothing.

He raised a hand and found out that he *was* seeing something, after all - hair.

An inky puddle of soft black hair, attached to the head laying almost against his, the face turned in the other direction.

Trowa calmly ignored the sudden thunder of his heart and forced himself not to move, taking stock of his exact position.

Still on the blanket-bed he’d fallen asleep on, the one only inches away from Wufei’s.

Cold, because the fire had died down to embers.

And Wufei had apparently been cold, too, instinct making him move toward the closest source of warmth.

Which was Trowa.

Who was also cold, and instinct made him wrap himself around the warmth that had joined him.

He was *cuddling* Wufei!

Well, sort of. Wufei lay almost next to him, his legs still on his own bed, one hand fisted in the blanket and the other tucked under his chin. Trowa had an arm around him, his face almost buried in that hair. Even as he watched, Wufei shifted a tiny bit closer.

Trowa sighed. Another hour, and he’d really have been cuddling the Fire Talent.

And someone had to wake him up!

At that thought, his head came up sharply, staring at the Talent laughing down at him.

‘*Gods... it had to be Duo...*’

“Am I going to be able to live this down?” He asked softly, trying not to wake the exhausted Talent lying next to him.

“Of course not. C’mon, I hate to make you leave, but it is your turn to watch.”

Trowa got up, still grumbling. Duo watched, amused, as he nearly stomped across the campsite and into the shadows. Very out-of-character for the tall boy, but Duo knew what it felt like to be that close to someone you cared about. Very frustrating to have to move away from them. And since this was the first time in recorded history that Trowa had cared about someone in *that* way, he knew the Earth Talent's frustration level was probably at an all time high.

He snickered. Trowa in love was *fun*.

\*

Wufei woke up at dawn, as always. For a long, worried moment he had no idea where he was - he expected the same grimy walls in the little cubbyhole at the inn that he always saw when he woke up. Instead he saw wide open space, a stretch of cloudless grey sky, and Duo and Quatre once more curled up together.

After the first moment passed and memory returned to him, he smiled.

And then wiped it off his face. He didn't need to scowl anymore, he supposed, but smiles had always been dangerous. He didn't pause to wonder why they would be dangerous now, just went with the habit of a lifetime and kept his face carefully blank.

The fire was nothing but embers, barely glowing, and the morning was chilly. There was firewood piled nearby. Wufei slipped out of his bed, noting that Trowa was asleep and Heero gone, and made his way to the fire. He warmed the logs gently, so that they would catch fire quicker. No need to use his Talent more than that - another loud fire-start would wake up the others. Torlin had been able to teach him enough to keep Warming under his control, even if Wufei'd never been able to sneak away for much training in other areas. He wondered vaguely if there were Trainers wherever they were going, and if his Others would mind if he wanted to learn more control?

"Of course we won't." Said a soft voice behind him.

Wufei jumped, startled, and nearly bolted. A strong hand on his shoulder stopped him in his tracks.

"Sorry," Heero murmured, and moved to sit beside the smaller boy.

"How did you do that?" Wufei hissed back, not sure whether he was offended or not at the blatant eavesdropping on his thoughts.

"It's part of being a Spirit Talent. Do you - don't you know about other Talents?"



Wufei turned slightly pink. "There - there were Fire Talents at Haven, and a few Water. None that ever did things like Duo... there was an Earth Talent when I was younger, but she married one of her Others and moved to a different village. I've only seen Air Talents at Gatherings - and I've never met a Spirit Talent before."

"Didn't your Trainer teach you about other Talents?"

Wufei nearly laughed. "I had enough trouble, finding the time to learn about my *own* Talent. Harris had too much work for me to spend many hours with Torlin."

"It's illegal for Talents to receive only partial Training..."

"Under the New Law. Not under Old Law."

"And Haven clings *that* much to Old Law?"

"It's easier for them. For people like the Mayor and Harris, I mean, and they have the money in Haven. Old Law lets them do more, control people more."

Heero thought that one over for a moment, then nodded. "Why were you with Harris?" He asked, bluntly changing the subject.

"My father - he died in Haven Village, and owed Harris a debt. A monstrous big debt - I have no idea what it was for, but Harris had the script. Signed and dated by my father. So he got all of my father's possessions."

"And you went to work for him, to help pay it off? Your wages went towards the debt?"

Wufei gazed at him, slightly amused. "You don't know much about Old Law, do you?"

Heero shook his head. "New Law has been in place since before I was born - most people believe there *are* no places that still observe Old. Why?"

"Under Old Law, children are possessions, just like a suit of clothes or a horse. When my father's personal possessions did not cover his debt, they put a value on me and applied the amount to the balance. Not that it made much difference. Small children aren't worth much."

The Spirit Talent was silent for a long moment. "You're saying that Harris... owned you?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"But... I do know that slavery is illegal, even under Old Law!"

"Oh, no!" Wufei's voice was even more amused, although he rested his forehead against his knees and allowed his loose hair to hide his face. "No, no, there are no *slaves*. We're just bond-servants, that's all, and if someone is good-hearted enough to pay off the balance of our debts, we are freemen like the rest."

Heero snorted. "So they make it sound pretty? Wait, we didn't pay off any debt! Will Harris try to follow and take you back? Why did he let you go without mentioning it?"

“Ah.” Wufei’s tone went from false amusement to real. “That’s where Old Law bit Harris, I’m afraid - I was Chosen, and if a bond servant is a Talent, and is Chosen, all debts are canceled. There was nothing he could do.”

“Good.” The word ended the conversation for now - Heero didn’t want to push his Fifth into any more confidences. He could tell the boy didn’t fully trust him yet. That was all right - so long as it didn’t stay that way. He turned to look through the packs for breakfast and found Trowa’s green eyes watching them.

*‘Did you hear?’* Heero asked, speaking his thoughts into his Third’s mind.

Trowa nodded. He had woken as soon as Wufei stirred, but kept up the appearance of sleep, wanting to just watch the other boy for a while. He’d heard every word the two boys had shared.

*‘You’ll have to talk to him later.’* Heero’s thoughts were still sounding in his mind. *‘Seems he’ll be able to relate to you even better than to Duo.’*

Trowa flushed, unable to hide the fact that this pleased him. If his own experiences could help Wufei deal with things, it would be the first time his motley past had ever done him any good.

Maybe things were looking up.

\*

“Are you going to tell me more of the story?” Wufei asked Duo quietly, as they were packing up the camp. Heero, Trowa and Quatre were getting the horses ready while the two least-experienced riders had settled for getting the beds and equipment set to go.

Duo beamed at him. “Finally, someone who wants me to talk instead of telling me to shut up! Of course I’ll tell you more!”

“Quatre tells you to shut up?”

“They *all* do, ‘Fei-chan,” Duo said, managing to pull his face into a sad puppy-dog look.

Wufei snickered.

*\*Fairwater Township’s Gathering Arena\**

Heero lay the small blond boy on a couch and stepped back to give him breathing space. The soft blue eyes followed him, flickered to Trowa, to Duo, and back to him again.

“My Others...?” He asked softly, still mildly confused after collapsing.

“Yes.” Heero said softly, not moving closer. Not yet.

The boy put a slim hand on his chest, rubbing like he was trying to chase away pain. “...our Fire?” He asked softly, and the boys around him knew what he meant.

“We haven’t found our Fire yet.” Duo was the one who replied, drawing the eyes to him. The little blond turned pink when their gazes met, and both of them looked away.

Heero and Trowa exchanged amused glances.

Duo might call them ‘emotionally stunted’, but they could tell something was going on between the two.

“What’s your name?” Heero asked, trying to put the small boy at ease. He could have just searched his thoughts for it, like he had Duo that time, but this boy wasn’t resisting like his Second had. He looked pleased. Surprised, but pleased.

“I’m Quatre.” He looked at the boys, trying to memorize them with his eyes, waiting for their replies. One part of his mind noticed that Iria was in the room, wisely standing in a far corner, out of the way. The expression on her face was very odd, but Quatre couldn’t make himself be concerned with her right now.

“I’m Heero.” The Spirit Talent said, finally taking a step closer. Quatre reacted without thinking, putting out his hand in hopes of bringing him even nearer. Heero didn’t need any encouragement to take it. “Ready?” He asked, sure Quatre would know what he was talking about. His Fourth was wearing fine clothes, his hair cut professionally. Probably noble, definitely wealthy, and he would have had the finest Training possible.

“Yes.” Quatre’s face lit up in a brilliant smile, and he waited.

For a very short second.

Then he felt the strong force of a Spirit Talent inside his soul again, felt like his entire history was exposed to the bright-eyed boy gazing at him, felt like he could sense everything about every person in the building. Like he knew past, present, future... it was close to overwhelming, yet he knew the boy was toning it down for him.

Seemed as though his Spirit was remarkably powerful.

The feeling of Heero’s Talent retreated, and the coolness of Water rose up in him again, at the same time the braided boy spoke. “I’m Duo,” was all he said, and all he needed to say for now - Quatre knew he was their Second, since he had Spoken to him right after Heero, knew

he was Water Talent, could tell that he was fun-loving, full of life from the feeling within his heart and the look in the boy's eyes.

And he could tell he was very, very special to him, although he couldn't tell why.

Even more special than one of his Others.

Earth was next, the tallest boy. Auburn hair in impossible bangs, green eyes warm and rich and welcoming. "Trowa," he said softly, and Quatre knew at once he was a man of few words. Well, that was all right. He let himself get lost in the sweet strength of the Earth Talent he felt, a solid foundation he had missed all his life. Earth was the opposite of Air, after all, and that would make the two of them very close. Each needed what the other had, Quatre, Trowa's steadiness, and Trowa, Quatre's buoyant optimism.

Quatre found himself concentrating on Talent Lessons, to keep himself from passing out when all three of his Others spoke to him at once. He let his soul lose itself in the pleasure of meeting theirs, while his brain calculated and sorted the information. Spirit Talent, leader, with Four to take care of, each of the Four relying heavily on their Opposite; Water to Fire, Air to Earth.

Which didn't explain why he felt such a connection to the boy called Duo...

...but he'd sort that out later.

It was time for him to Speak back.

He concentrated briefly on his own Talent, feeling the soft breeze of Air in his center, sharing it with his Others without knowing how he was doing it. He saw all three sets of eyes close in bliss, and he smiled.

He knew how they felt.

And then the moment was ruined as the door crashed open, Vera Strummer's father stomping into the room with his daughter and Quatre's own father hard on his heels.

"What's going on in here?!"

*\*The Middle of Nowhere\**

"What are you two doing?" A puzzled voice asked, making Duo and Wufei look up sharply, the story lost. Quatre was standing with his hands on his hips, managing to glare at his koi while smiling at his Fire.

Not easy.

But Quatre managed it, no problem.

“Nothing, Quat. Just telling Wufei a little more about the story...”

“And filling in with bits about your ‘beauty’?” Quatre asked, amused.

“Not once, honest!” Duo raised one hand, laying the other over his heart.

“Well, I know you don’t lie, so I’ll forgive you. But no more story without me!”

“Oh, all *right*...” Duo whined, winking carefully at Wufei.

Who forcefully fought down another snicker.

“We’re ready to go if you two have finished packing.” Quatre told them, picking up a bag and heading back to the horses. “You can finish the story while we’re riding.”

Duo stood and cast a quick glance around, checking to see if they’d forgotten anything. Apparently, while he’d been wrapped up in his story-telling, Wufei had finished the packing. Not a thing was left to do, except take care of the smouldering campfire.

It wouldn’t do to leave that burning.

Wufei watched, still enthralled by seeing such a powerful Water Talent, as Duo called moisture out of the air until a goodly sphere of water was hovering over the fire. His Second let it go, drenching the embers with a ‘splat’ and a hiss of steam. He grinned at the look on Wufei’s face, then picked up two bags and followed his lover.

Wufei snatched up the bag that was left and his bundle, still carefully wrapped. He had decided not to risk unwrapping that until tomorrow - or at least tonight. One day away from Haven wasn’t enough for his peace of mind. He’d thought this treasure lost to him forever, and had no desire to risk losing it again.

Harris could still follow them, after all. One day wasn’t too far for him to come, but two would be. So until this evening, he could wait.

He wasn’t so sure he could wait until morning. He wanted to see it again, and he could tell his Others were curious.

This was one secret he wouldn’t mind sharing with them.

But not until he felt he was safe.

“C’mon, ‘Fei!” Duo called cheerfully, “your horse is waiting!”

Well, *that* certainly wasn’t something he was looking forward to. His legs still ached slightly from the ride yesterday, and he dreaded how they were going to feel by nightfall. He let Trowa take the bags from him and put them on the packhorse, watching carefully to see how

they were fastened, so he could help him next time. He wasn't used to watching others do work that he could do himself.

If he could make himself useful, perhaps they would be more likely to keep him with them, even if they decided not to leave him as their Fire. He wished, not for the first time, that he'd been able to take lessons from Torlin about his Others, about being Chosen and Joining, instead of having to concentrate all his stolen time on learning to harness his wildly powerful Fire. He wouldn't feel so uncertain if he knew the rules.

Maybe he could ask...?

Maybe.

He swung onto his horse and gathered up the reins, ready to follow wherever his Others led.

## A Rescue and Some Tears

Riding was either going to be something he hated or loved - Wufei didn't see how anyone could be undecided about it. On the one hand, it was certainly enjoyable, to see the scenery go past, to know he was traveling further than he'd ever been and faster than he could ever walk.

On the other hand, his legs and backside were *really* starting to ache.

They had spent the morning riding in near silence - Duo hadn't offered to finish the story yet and Wufei was determined not to annoy him. Heero and Trowa looked tired and Quatre was gazing off into space. Duo seemed caught between tired and hungry, searching through a bag for something worth eating and then pausing to stare blankly ahead like Quatre was.

Wufei was a little confused - but not about to question them.

If they'd taken turns keeping watch last night - beyond what Duo and Quatre had called 'keeping watch', of course - then he supposed they would be tired. They hadn't woken him to take a turn at guarding the camp, and he worried a little about that.

He also decided he was worrying a bit too much - he was going to start pulling his hair out. Perhaps they were just waiting to see what his skills were? How were they to know whether he knew how to guard anything? He'd have to find a way to tell them about the walking trips he'd taken with some of Haven Village's other bond-servants, to gather and carry back the supplies their masters needed. He had plenty of experience guarding campsites from wild animals and possible human predators; he could help them tonight!

It never occurred to him that they'd been trying to let him rest.

They had been riding in silence for over an hour when Heero sighed and shook his head like he was coming out of a dream.

"No use. We're too far away."

Trowa, Quatre and Duo all murmured understanding comments, then seemed to shake off their own lethargy. Trowa urged his horse to catch up with Heero's, and they started a conversation about the distance to the next township compared to the distance to Helia, and how much supplies they were going to need.

Wufei was utterly lost. Too far away from what?

"From our Commander." Duo wasn't a Spirit Talent, but it didn't take mind-reading skills to know what Wufei was thinking just then. "Heero was trying to speak with him - Spirit Talents can do that, if they know each other and if they're close enough. Zechs is out of range, even with Heero borrowing from us."

"...borrowing?"

Duo gave him a funny look. "Heero told us you didn't have much training. That's okay, we understand, and I probably had less than you. But you're going to need to know a lot, fast, since we're WarCraft and the kingdom is at war. So, do you care if Quatre and I teach you some stuff? Hee-chan'll probably get Zechs to start hunting for a Trainer for you as soon as he's close enough to mind-speak with him. So you'll learn even more when we..."

"Take a breath, Duo." Quatre sounded amused, grinning at his koi. "You're just going to confuse him. And you didn't answer his question."

"Oh, yeah!" Duo didn't take the slightest offense at Quatre's correction. "Heero was kinda boosting himself, his power I guess, by borrowing some of our power. He can do that, since he's Joined individually with each of us, even though we couldn't group Join because we weren't a full group yet." He paused to look at Wufei.

He got a blank look in return.

"Spirit Talents can 'draw', or borrow, from the Talents in their care. It's how the Healing, or the Building, or the WarCraft is done. They control our power and direct it where it needs to go. We're really far away from Zechs, even with our boosting him, we knew he probably couldn't reach, and Hee-chan's one of the most powerful Spirits out there."

Wufei's dark eyes shot to the leader of their little group, who was still deep in a discussion with Trowa, trying and succeeding in not looking like they were paying the conversation behind them a bit of attention. One of the most powerful Spirit Talents? Then why had he Chosen *Wufei*? Alvis was supposed to be the most powerful Fire Talent in Haven, and he knew that power attracted power.

Duo was definitely a powerful Water Talent, and though he hadn't seen Quatre or Trowa's Talents in action yet, he had a feeling they were no less intense.

Then again, Torlin had always rolled his eyes when Alvis or his father were bragging about Alvis' strength - so maybe the redhead hadn't been as good as he'd thought he was?

Did it matter now? Alvis wasn't here, after all, and Wufei was slowly taking in the fact that he would never see the older boy again.

The thought filled him with a strange, disbelieving joy.

"So anyway, if you want to try it, you and Heero could make your first attempt to Join tonight, when we stop. Or maybe morning would be better, after you've rested. You have to Join with him, before we can all join, anyway. Think it over. Want some more story now?" Duo deliberately changed the subject after mentioning the Joining. It was something they all wanted, desperately, as soon as possible, but he felt it safer to speak to Wufei casually about it, not like it was something important. It was best to be relaxed when one attempted to Join, and Heero had already told them Wufei was worried. He hadn't probed deeply enough to find out what he was worried about, since Wufei would have been able to tell what he was doing and the last thing he wanted was to alienate his Fifth.

So Wufei needed to relax, and his stories seemed to have helped so far.



Anyway, Wufei was nodding, dark eyes lit with curiosity and eagerness.

Duo cleared his throat.

\*Fairwater Township\*

“What’s going on here?!” Hayton Strummer repeated the words again, glaring at the four boys and Iria.

“What does it look like?” Duo asked back, cheeky as always, grinning as the man’s face starting flushing red with anger.

“Father!” Quatre deliberately ignored the fuming man and struggled to sit up. Trowa and Heero both slid arms behind his back and helped him. “Father, I have three of my Others!” He didn’t even try to keep the excitement out of his voice, and his father smiled at him before looking the boys over. His expression faltered at seeing the WarCraft insignia on their clothes.

“Quatre - a WarCraft?” His voice was doubtful. He’d been just as sure as the rest of his family that his son was destined to be in a Healing Five.

“They are my Others.” Quatre replied softly, firmly.

“Vera is supposed to be his Second!” Strummer said sharply, his eyes running over the boys and settling on the Water Talent symbol on Duo’s shirtfront.

“Is she?” Lord Winner asked calmly, “I don’t remember her ever Speaking to Quatre.”

“We agreed...”

“We agreed that if she *was* his Water Talent, then we would merge certain business interests in their names. That is all. You know as well as I that Choosing and Joining cannot be forced. If it happens, it happens, and if it doesn’t, too bad. In this case, it seems to be too bad.” Lord Winner didn’t exactly look heartbroken.

Vera did. She started wailing again.

Iria sighed. That girl was annoying. She wasn't sure she was happy about her delicate little brother being in a WarCraft, but at least she would never have to deal with this whining idiot as an intimate part of her family. She moved to stand beside her father, who put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief hug.

"Iria. Perhaps you'll bring Quatre and his Others to the house, and prepare rooms for the evening? Unless, of course, you already have a place to stay?" The last question was directed toward Heero.

The boy shook his head. "We came direct from Helia for the Gathering. We would have left as soon as it was over."

"I see. Well, feel free to stay with us as long as you like. I hope it can be a good amount of time - you understand we are not eager to lose Quatre?"

"Of course." Heero nodded politely, not really all that concerned. The man had to have known it would happen sooner or later. He should have been prepared for it. Not that Heero was thrilled about taking Quatre away from his family, but he was a WarCraft Spirit, there was nothing that could be done about it. After the war, they would go into the regular Reserve Guards, and be able to spend time with their assorted families - since Quatre was really the only one *with* a family so far, they would probably spend much of their time here.

If Quatre wanted to.

That ought to soothe the man and the girl, when he told them.

Which would be later, because he didn't like this other man and the squalling girl-child with him, and wanted to speak about personal things as little as possible in front of him. He knew he didn't really need to tell his Second and his Third this, but better safe than sorry.

He silently told them anyway, and got brief nods in reply.

They seemed just as wary of the man as he was.

Quatre moved to get off the small couch Heero had laid him on and nearly fell to the floor instead. His First caught him quickly, supporting him as he struggled to his feet. "All right?"

"Yes," Quatre replied, his voice breathless with strain. He'd been taught that meeting your Others the first time was incredibly draining, but he'd never imagined it would be this bad! He felt like someone had pulled a cork, and allowed all his strength to pour out.

"Here, let me help!" Strummer said quickly, and had Quatre scooped up in his arms before even Heero realized what was happening.

"Hey!" Duo's voice was sharp with anger, and both Trowa and Heero reached for their Fourth, their faces dark.

Strummer skipped back a step, ignoring the fact that Lord Winner was also glaring and that Quatre was struggling to get out of his hold. "Now, little ones, it's just that my house is closer, and kept very cool by the breeze from the river. You don't want your little Air Talent

to get heat stroke, do you? That's happened before at Gatherings, when a Talent finds so many of his Others at once. You should know it weakens them! Come, you're more than welcome!"

He ignored the fact that the Spirit and the Earth Talent were trying to pull Quatre away from him - he was much taller and was able to keep the smaller boy *just* out of their reach - and strode out the door, his suddenly silent daughter clutching the edge of his sleeve.

Quatre's father, sister, and Others followed close behind him, back out into the crowded Arena. Within seconds, the crush of people had them separated by several feet, and the distance grew and grew until Strummer was vanishing out the door with them only halfway across the huge room.

"This is ridiculous!" Duo put their feelings into words as he shoved a fat Earth Talent out of his way, causing the woman to squeal and try to smack him with her fan. He dodged it without even glancing at her. He had a very bad feeling about this, and he knew Heero and Trowa did, as well. The matching looks on their faces were not pleasant.

Iria was fuming. How *dare* that man just accost her little brother like that?! He knew he had no right to come between a newly Chosen and his Others! Quatre needed to be in contact with them or he wouldn't be able to recover! He'd stay weak and disoriented and who knew what... oh, gods, of course!

"Father, he's going to try something!" She said softly, and her father nodded without looking at her.

"He's a foolish man. He knows Choosing can't be broken, I don't know what he expects to accomplish. Perhaps he'll try to wed his little harpy to Quatre..."

"Can he do that?"

"If Quatre is confused enough not to realize what's happening - but he knows that any legal decisions made by a newly Chosen aren't binding until three days after the Choosing. New Law is very strict about that."

Under Old Law there had been no such provision, leaving vulnerable New Chosen with less-than-alert Others open to the attacks of certain devious people after their money, possessions, position, or anything they desired from them.

"Then *why* is he bothering to...?"

"I think he plans on waiting those three days," he replied, interrupting her question. "I've had enough business dealings with him to know how his brain works. You know if Quatre isn't in contact with these boys, he's not going to get better. After the three days are up, he'll be just as out of it as ever." Lord Winner didn't bother to keep his voice low like Iria had. These were his son's Others, they needed to know exactly what was going on. Anyway, they were WarCraft - and that would come in very handy if Strummer had done what he thought he -

Ah, yes. They had finally made it outside, and down the street to Hayton Strummer's ostentatious mansion. The big doors were firmly closed, gated, and a double guard was posted.

Heero walked up to them without hesitation.

"Let us in."

The two head Guards exchanged glances. "We've strict orders from our Master, no one comes in."

Heero's blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "Our Fourth is inside. You would do well to reconsider those orders."

The half-dozen Guards shifted nervously. "Sir, we cannot. Our orders are our orders."

Heero gave a low growl and his Others felt his mind touch theirs, asking for their power. Trowa instantly surrendered his, but Duo spoke up, using the silent speak of their Joining.

'Hee-chan, wait. This isn't the best way - we don't want to argue with the Township Council or with Commander Zechs over why we used our WarCraft on citizens. C'mon, I've got a better idea.' He proceeded to share his plan with Heero, Trowa easily able to hear it since Heero was still in touch with him.

In a moment both boys were grinning.

The Guards and the Winners looked no less nervous.

Those grins were not comforting.

\*

Quatre had drifted off to sleep while Strummer was carrying him, even though that was the *last* thing he wanted to do. He'd just been so tired, he couldn't help it.

When he woke he was laying on a soft bed, warm covers tucked up under his chin. The room was shadowed, dim, and for a moment he thought he was in his own room, his own bed. Then he began to take in the details, and realized he'd never seen this room before.

He tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness washed over him and he crumpled back down to the pillow. What was wrong? Where were his Others? They should be with him, keeping him from feeling this way! There were three of them, surely they knew how he would be reacting!

He *wanted* them...

He felt something inside him stir, his Air Talent calling out for the Talents it had touched earlier.

The reply was immediate, and close. He relaxed.

Until the door opened, and Vera Strummer came strolling in, a tray in her hands.

Quatre's stomach roiled and he decided that if it wanted to get rid of his breakfast, he wasn't going to argue. He must be in the Strummer home, if Vera was here, and they *deserved* vomit all over their fine furniture.

Because if this was their home, then they had tricked his family and his Others into bringing him here. It was the only explanation - they would never come here willingly!

At least, his family wouldn't. His Others wouldn't know about the Strummers, they might have been talked into visiting. Although if Iria was around - and he couldn't see her abandoning him while he was unconscious - he didn't understand why she hadn't protested.

Maybe she had.

The thought put him even more on his guard as Vera set the tray on a small table and uncovered it, revealing a pretty little teapot and a plate of dainty sandwiches.

"Welcome back to the world, Quatre!" She tried to make the words sweet, but they came out snobbish instead, like she was sneering at him for sleeping so long. "Here's a nice snack for you. Eat up, then Daddy wishes to speak to you."

"Where... are..."

"Oh, Iria? and your father? I'm sure they'll be by later, they know you need to rest." She started for the door.

"No... where are... my..."

"Rest, Quatre dear! There are busy, busy days ahead of us, you know! Your father has finally agreed to our marriage!" With that she left, shutting the door behind her.

"Like *hell* he did!" Quatre rarely swore, but he felt the situation merited it. He threw back the covers and tried to get out of bed, only to end up in a heap on the floor.

He very nearly swore again.

Three times he tried to get up, before collapsing into a sorry little heap and laying still. He was close to panic, but he tried to control it. He had felt his Others, they were close, they wouldn't leave him alone, they *couldn't*...

"We won't," said a soft voice in his ear, and gentle hands were pulling him up, strong arms wrapping around him. Duo's arms, and Heero standing beside him, blue eyes going back and forth between him and the door, Trowa by the window, smiling softly in his direction.

Quatre went from panicked to utterly relaxed, snuggling into Duo's embrace and feeling strength begin to flow back into his veins.

"Better?" The violet-eyed boy's voice was a soft whisper against his ear.

"Yes," was the only word Quatre could make his throat force out.

"Someone's coming. We need to go." Heero said, appearing beside them and lifting Quatre into his arms. He knew it would take several more hours before the boy could be trusted to walk on his own without falling. He carried him to the window, where sure-footed Trowa took him, ghosting along a ledge and to the corner of the house.

A huge tree was growing in the Strummers' back yard, thick branches twisting and swaying in the windy night air. Trowa started to step off onto the nearest broad limb, but paused. "Are you strong enough to...?"

"Yes." It was still the only word he could say, but Quatre lifted a delicate hand and made a pushing motion. The wind around the tree ceased abruptly, stopping the limb from wavering under Trowa's outstretched foot.

"Thank you," was all his Third said, as he stepped away from the ledge and onto the tree, as nimble and swift as any cat. Quatre watched as he fearlessly leapt from branch to branch, down from the dizzying heights of the Strummers top floor until they were once more on solid ground. Duo and Heero followed more slowly, not as talented in this as their Third was, but certainly, Quatre thought to himself, not the least bit awkward.

He'd have to get them to teach him how to climb like that.

"Come on!" A breathless voice called, and he jerked his head around in amazement. Iria was standing by the open gate of the Strummer family's back yard. Her blue eyes were lit up with a mix of concern and merriment. "Come on, hurry! All the lights are going on!"

The three soldiers turned quickly to see that it was true - the mansion was lighting up like it was a festival night, and cries of outrage and confusion were echoing into the still evening air.

"I think they know you're gone." Duo's voice was amused as he pulled Quatre's arm over his shoulders and hurried him toward Iria and safety. Their Others followed along behind them, ready to block any attack from the rear.

They made it outside the gate, closing the iron grill behind them, before the back door opened, spilling light and guards into the shadowed yard.

They were gone, down the street and away, before a one of them reached the gateway.

\*On Horseback, Getting Closer to Somewhere\*

“We spent about three days at Quatre’s house, until Commander Zechs showed up. We didn’t dare leave before he got there, that Strummer tried to cry foul over our Choosing. He didn’t have a leg to stand on, of course, but we felt it safer to be with our Commander and our Unit. We might have gotten away easily, but we didn’t want to risk *anything* happening to Quatre.”

“How did he know where you were? Did you tell him of the places you were attending Gatherings?” Wufei’s dark sloe eyes were still curious. He knew there was more to the story - and Duo had left out the part about falling in love!

Well, maybe that was private.

He still wanted to hear it.

“Oh, he knew we were going ‘round to Gatherings, Hee-chan just Spoke to him and told him we’d found our Fourth. He came pretty quickly - it’s no small thing for...” Duo seemed to realize he was about to say something he shouldn’t, and cut himself off.

Wufei frowned. No small thing for what? “Duo?”

“I think it’s about time to camp,” was his reply, as his Second turned those violet-blue eyes up at the sky.

Wufei’s frown deepened, but he didn’t ask again.

\*

Camp was made more quickly than usual that night, since Wufei was determined to help. Five beds, five dinners of bread and cheese with a bit of dried meat as a treat, a warm campfire and good company - perfection.

Or as close as they could get for now.

Wufei ate his dinner quickly, leaving the others to wonder if he thought they were going to take it away from him, and sat with his legs folded meditation-style, as close to the fire as he could get. The bundle that was heating Duo’s curiosity to the boiling point was balanced

across his knees, his hands resting lovingly on either end. His Others tried to act like they weren't staring at it, weren't watching him.

They didn't succeed, but Wufei was too distracted to notice.

He tapped a slim finger against his lips, wanting to open this package, dreading it at the same time. Memory always made things more spectacular than they really were. He also had the weird, impossible fear that as soon as he removed the shrouding cloth, Harris was going to swoop down out of nowhere and snatch his treasure away from him.

He was being ridiculous.

He straightened his spine, still oblivious to the fact that his Others were watching him, and started undoing the bindings that held the ragged bits of cloth together.

His Others leaned forward, abandoning their pretense of 'we're not looking.'

Wufei still didn't notice. The cloth fell away to reveal a battered-looking leather scabbard, the trace of a design too worn away to tell what it was supposed to be. It was oddly curved, holding an equally odd-shaped sword, like none they had ever seen before. The hilt was wrapped in leather just as worn as the scabbard, but the metal guard and tip still had a dull gleam.

Wufei slid reverent fingers over the faint design - he obviously knew what it was supposed to be. They waited in silence as he slid the sword from the scabbard, placing the ancient leather carefully to one side.

The sword was very old, and tarnished. It obviously hadn't seen the light of day in years, and its edge was dull and blunted.

It was still beautiful.

Long and slender, narrower at the hilt and curving along its length, flaring out into a wider tip. A delicate design was etched into the metal, a twisting and snarling dragon clinging to the sword's blade, intricately detailed and roaring out in defiance against an unseen enemy.

They had never seen such workmanship - hadn't even known such a thing was possible.

"Wufei?" Duo's voice was quiet, awed. "That's beautiful. Where did..." He trailed off as Wufei lifted his face.

His eyes were full of tears.

"It belonged to my father." He slid it back into the scabbard and unconsciously clutched it tightly against him. "It's all that's left."

"All that's left of what?" Trowa asked this question, moving closer to his Fifth and laying a careful hand on his shoulder. He was too pleased to breathe when Wufei leaned slightly toward him.



“All that’s left of us. All that’s left... of my clan.”

# The Township

“You’re left.”

Wufei looked up at Trowa, bewilderment in tear-filled dark eyes. “What?”

Trowa sat down slowly, trying not to disturb the physical closeness between them. He put out his hand and laid a careful finger on the beautiful sword. “You’re part of your... clan,” he hesitated a bit over the unfamiliar word, all of the Others assuming it meant family, “so the sword isn’t all that’s left. There’s you.”

“Me and a sword.” For a moment they thought Wufei was going to bawl, but then a shaky little smile spread across his lips. “I guess it’s better than being alone.”

Duo and Quatre smiled at him, but not Heero. “You’re not alone, not anymore. Even without the sword. I know we are not your family, but we are your Others. We will never leave you.” The calm, matter-of-fact way he said it did more to melt the frozen block of uncertainty in Wufei’s heart than anything else they’d said to him thus far.

So he took his courage in both hands, and asked the question that was worrying him the most.

“You... you’re not going to ...change your minds?”

Now all of his Others sat down.

Almost like their knees had given way.

“Wufei - exactly how much were you taught about your Others?” Duo asked the question, the other three boys seemed to have been struck dumb.

“Nothing!” Wufei’s emotions were on a wild ride. Right now they switched to anger, though he wasn’t sure why. “I thought you knew that! I... Torlin... I only got an hour a week with him - if I was lucky! That’s why my Talent is so bad! I can barely do anything! And I don’t know why you’re even bothering with me!” He paused, took a very deep breath, and went more calmly back to the question. “All I know about Others is what I’ve seen or overheard.”

“I’m guessing that’s not a lot?” Duo asked softly.

Wufei shook his head. “And half of what I’ve heard contradicts the other half.”

Duo shook his own head ruefully. “I shoulda remembered what it was like, not having a clue about what was going on. I promise, Quatre and me’ll start your Basics tomorrow. New Law fixed most of the problems that you probably saw in that damn village. Right now, this is the

main thing you need to know. Once Chosen, always Chosen. We're together, forever, and only death can split us up."

"And even then, not for long." Quatre added.

"Yeah," Duo agreed, "Joining lasts beyond Death - I've seen Joined Talents with a Specter tagging along behind them, waiting for them to join it before going on to AfterLife."

Wufei's eyes were wide with astonishment. "Really?!"

"Yup! Just wait, you'll see. One of the Generals we fight under - his Water Talent died in battle, but her Specter still stays with him and their Others. They can talk, and he can still draw from her power when he needs to. Pretty amazing... but anyway, 'Fei, believe us. You're stuck with us."

And Wufei's shy, shaky little smile became his very first full-blown, gorgeous grin.

\*

It was warm that night.

They settled into their blankets, Heero taking the first watch. Trowa was next to Wufei again, and lay awake for nearly an hour.

Hoping there would be a repeat of the night before.

But it was warmer tonight, and Wufei stayed where he was until Heero woke him for his own turn at guarding.

Trowa had fallen asleep a while before that happened, but instinct brought him awake when someone moved so close. He wondered why Wufei looked so happy to be told it was his turn to watch - Trowa hated getting out of a warm bed to go stand guard.

When Wufei came back, Trowa woke up again.

And waited rather hopefully, but it was *warm*. Wufei stayed on his own bed.

Trowa really wished it was colder.

\*

“Are we going to try?”

Heero turned sharply at the quiet voice behind him. Wufei was watching him pack his bag, not looking at his face. The others had taken the horses to drink at a nearby stream and were nowhere in sight.

“Are we going to try what?” He asked, keeping his voice just as soft. He was fairly certain of what Wufei meant, and it was making his heart pound, but he wanted his Fire to say it.

“Duo said... that we could try Joining this morning? Only, I don’t really know how.”

Heero dropped his bag and moved closer. “That doesn’t matter. It’s mostly instinct. There’s no ritual to it, and trying to learn about it just makes it harder.”

“But in Haven... they always made such a big deal about it...?”

“It *is* a big deal; it’s special. But it’s not something you learn, and no good Trainer would try to teach it to you.”

“Is it hard?” Wufei let Heero take his hand and pull him down to sit on his blankets.

“Not really. It doesn’t always work the first time you try, so don’t worry if it doesn’t happen. Give me your hands.”

Wufei slowly held out his hands, swallowing with a little bit of trepidation. He would have liked to ask Duo for an explanation of exactly what was going to happen, but Heero was saying he shouldn’t... and he also liked the idea of not having an audience.

In case he failed.

So when he’d realized he and his First were alone, he’d quickly taken his chance.

Heero took his hands gently, then frowned down at the still-vivid bruising on his wrist.

“I’m sorry, Wufei, it’s not going to work.”

“Why?” Wufei tried to stay calm.

Heero’s fingers slid gently over his swollen arm, cradling it in his other hand. “Because of this. We have to clasp our hands together in front of us, with our wrists bent, and that would

hurt like hell.”

“I can handle it.”

“I’m not saying you couldn’t. But there can’t be any distractions when we’re trying to Join, and pain is a distraction no matter who you are. No matter how strong you are. I had some splinters in my leg the first time Trowa and I tried to Join, and they barely hurt at all. But they kept us from completing our Joining. We had to wait a week for the spots to heal completely, because there wasn’t a Healing around to help.”

“Where were you?” Wufei leaned forward, dark eyes growing eager, ignoring that fact that Heero was still stroking his arm carefully, like he wanted to make those bruises disappear.

“We were hiding out.” Heero actually cracked a grin. “Trowa’s story isn’t as funny as Duo’s, or as chaotic as Quatre’s, but it was a lot more exciting.”

“Will you tell me?”

“No. I think Trowa should tell you.”

“That’s what Duo said.” Wufei scowled and sat back.

“And he’s entirely right. We’ll be at a township before noon. There should be a Healing there. We’ll get them to fix your arm, then we can try Joining tomorrow. All right?”

Wufei nodded, and they both went back to packing.

\*

“Wufei.”

“Hmm?” Wufei looked up from contemplating his sword. He was carrying it across his thighs as he rode, not wanting to hide it away in his bag yet. He’d do that just before they got to town. He just wanted to look at it for a while.

Duo’s voice had startled him out of some rather pleasant memories.

“What’s a clan?”

Wufei blinked. “Uh... it’s like a family group.”

“Not just your parents and you?”

“No... it’s grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins...” he trailed off, ebony eyes growing wistful.

Duo let his horse move closer. “So, what happened to them?”

Now Wufei’s eyes shuttered and darted away. “I don’t remember.”

Duo frowned. “Fire...”

“I. Don’t. Remember.” It wasn’t the first time they’d heard a trace of anger in Wufei’s voice, but it was the first time it had been directed towards one of them.

Duo very wisely shut up.

Or at least, he changed the subject, since he wasn’t one to stop talking.

“Hey, we should be about at the township, huh, Hee-chan?! What’s the name of it? Should we put on our cloaks or what?” It wasn’t always wise to enter a township with their WarCraft insignia showing. And Wufei didn’t have his yet, so not everyone would realize he was with his Others. That could be rather dangerous, especially if people thought he was just a servant.

“No cloaks. Take off your outer armor and all your insignia. Better safe than wishing we’d done it.” Heero was already beginning to unclasp his own armor. His Others followed suit, then Quatre frowned at Wufei.

Who was glaring down at his horse’s mane like he was contemplating setting it on fire.

“Wufei.” The dark eyes jerked to his, wary and still closed against any emotion.

Quatre gave him his sweetest smile, and he blinked. “You need to be wearing better clothes.”

“These are my best.” His voice was dull and flat. Quatre saw Duo wince. Not over the idea of those clothes being his best, but over the lifeless tone.

*‘Wish I hadn’t asked that.’* Quatre heard his koi’s voice echo in his head.

*‘We will have to know sooner or later.’* Heero spoke right after him.

Quatre didn’t answer them verbally, just let them sense his agreement. He turned on his horse and plunged an arm into his own pack, coming up with a neat pair of brown pants and a plain-cut white shirt with a tiny bit of gold embroidery on the collar and cuffs, a lovely design Wufei didn’t recognize.

“Here.” Quatre tossed them to his Fifth, who caught them neatly and stared. He’d never seen such fine clothes - they had obviously been worn before but it didn’t matter. The pants were some soft, almost velvety material and the shirt was so silky-smooth he could barely feel it with his work-roughened hands, for all it looked so plain. They had to have cost a fortune.

“I can’t take these.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No... they’re too...”

Quatre cut him off shortly. “Don’t say too good, or too expensive, or anything like that. I’m your Fourth, Wufei, and I’m allowed to share my belongings with you. Nothings too good for any of my Others. You’re my family. Heero, there’s some trees ahead. We should stop, all of us need to change.”

Wufei abandoned his protests for now. If his Fourth wanted him to wear these, he would, but he’d make sure they found their way back into Quatre’s pack later.

They pulled their horses up when they reached the trees, and each of them went off to change. Wufei was even more determined to return the clothes when he discovered that the delicate embroidery, in a pattern of little squares and spirals, was not only done in real gold, but continued down the front panel of the shirt, alongside what looked like real ivory buttons.

He hadn’t realized Quatre was *this* wealthy - in the soldier’s uniforms and armor, his Others all looked the same.

\*

When they all came back to the horses, he had to re-evaluate the rest of his Others. They were dressed in clothes just as nice as these.

He wondered if Quatre had provided them or if they were all rich?

Well, not Duo. He reassured himself with the thought that at least one of them had been as poor as him.

Couldn’t tell it now, though. In his fine clothes, he looked as beautiful as any princeling. So, too, did Quatre, and Heero and Trowa looked like the fine Lords they were.

The other Talents had seen each other in fine apparel often enough to ignore it now. They gazed appreciatively at their little Fifth, instead. In his new clothes, he looked more noble than any of them, making them wonder about his heritage. They would have to do some research into his ‘Clan’, once he opened up to them about it.

Or once he and Heero Joined, and Heero learned his secrets. That was a fact of Joining they hadn't mentioned to Wufei yet, but after the reaction he'd had to Duo's simple question, Heero knew he'd have to tell him. He wouldn't risk making his Fire hate him for tricking him.

"Why did we have to change?" Wufei asked, wondering why their armor had been put away.

"Because WarCraft make people uncomfortable." Quatre said, walking around him and checking to make sure the clothes were hanging correctly. They fit very nicely. Only a tailor or someone with an excellent eye for symmetry would realize the pants were a tiny bit too long, or the shirt was just a bit loose at the waist.

"When we were looking for you, we were on the offensive." Heero's rather nasally voice chimed in. "We wanted people to be a little awed of us, to do as we asked and tell us what we needed to know. Now we're back to defensive, until we reach our Unit."

"Oh." Was Wufei's only reply. He needed to think that over.

There were two things about Wufei that need changing, Quatre decided. The blond frowned at his shoes, well-worn and shabby little brown things, but none of them had feet small enough to lend him a pair.

Duo walked forward, grinned at his Fifth, and stole his hairband, letting the raven locks swing down around the Exotic's startled face.

That took care of the other thing that needed changing.

"Why did you do that?" Wufei demanded, pushing back handfuls of hair.

"Because you look gorgeous like that!" Duo said cheerfully, twirling out of reach when Wufei grabbed for his stolen property.

Wufei blushed and went after him. "Give it back! I can't wear my hair down, it gets in my way!"

Duo continued to run, laughing at him. "No chance, Fire! You need to wear it down!" He put on a burst of speed, racing toward the horses.

Laughing every step of the way.

Wufei continued to run straight after him, half-shouting and half-laughing at the other boy. He wasn't exactly slow, either.

Their Others just stared.

Then they all shook their heads sadly.

Two of them.



\*

The guards at the gate of Cordia Township came to attention when five riders on fine horses came into view, leading two very nice pack animals. Rich travelers were the township's best source of income, and they were under orders to be polite and assist them in every way.

The Head of the Gate Guards hurried forward when they stopped. "Welcome, gentlemen! May I inquire as to your business in our fair Township?"

The boy riding to the front answered, cool blue eyes assessing the guard. "We seek shelter and food for the night."

"Of course, sir, of course! We have several fine inns. I recommend the Dancing Dog, it is truly the best in the township!" It didn't hurt that his brother owned it. "You'll find it on the main street, just a few buildings in."

"Thank you. You have a Healing in this Township?"

"Er... yes, sir." The guard's voice was reluctant and Heero shot him a questioning look. He straightened and wiped the slight discomfort off his face. "Yes, sir, we do. The innkeeper can direct you to them or call them for you. Do you need assistance?"

"No. May we enter?"

"With your word, sir, that you enter in peace."

"You have it." Heero was well-versed in the ritual of entering a Township Gate.

"Then enter in assurance of safety within our walls." The guard replied. Two drudges opened the heavy gate door and the horses walked inside.

\*

Wufei felt like an ant.

He'd never seen so many big buildings, or so many people. Most of the houses had two stories, and the inn had three - the two story inn at Haven had been the biggest building he ever remembered seeing before. And there was a grand total of fifty-seven people in Haven.

He'd seen twice that many here before his horse had traveled a length.

They were hurrying down the street, carrying bundles and bags, or sweeping off doorsteps, or hanging out windows, or calling to them from market booths, holding up their wares so they could see.

His Others were calmly ignoring them, and Wufei did his best to imitate their cool reserve.

It wasn't easy - he had to keep up a constant mental reminder not to let his mouth hang open.

And he really wanted to get off his horse and explore this fascinating place.

Heero seemed to sense his curiosity. Well, he probably *did* sense it, being a Spirit Talent and all...

"There are plenty of hours left. Let's get our rooms for the evening, and seek out the Healing. Then we can see what this place has to offer."

All his Others nodded their agreement.

\*

The innkeeper shuffled his feet nervously, gazing at the fine Lords who had entered his establishment. He'd have to thank his brother, but first he had a problem to deal with.

"A... A Healing. Yes, sir, we have one... but... er..."

Heero quirked an eyebrow at the man but didn't prompt him.

"Well sir, they... they'll be asking you for payment."

Heero blinked. "That is against New Law."

“Yes, sir, I know, but they don’t really call it payment. They - one of them is ill, or says he is, and they ask for help with purchasing his medicine, since it takes from his power to Heal, and... and that’s not illegal at all, and if you can’t help, they say they can’t do it, for it will make his sickness worse.”

“I see.” Heero’s voice was beyond cool. He hated to see people take advantage of others this way. He could feel the mental scowls of his Second and Third, who were standing with him, and knew they agreed with him.

Quatre had dragged their Fire off to find a cobbler and new shoes. The blond didn’t think it would take more than a few minutes, they should be back by the time rooms were secured and the directions they needed acquired.

Heero was glad they were gone. He knew his Fourth was sensitive about things like this, feeling the pain of those taken advantage of, and he didn’t want his Fifth’s first introduction to a township to be something as negative as this.

“I’ll take the directions, even so.” He said calmly, deciding to find out for himself if this were true, though he didn’t sense deceit in this man. He’d be able to tell if the member of the Healing Talents was as ill as they claimed he was. And as a WarCraft, in a country at war, they had the authority to administer punishment if the farce continued.

He easily memorized the directions the man told him, and the three of them turned to go.

Only to have Heero stop short when Quatre’s frantic voice echoed through his mind.

*‘Heero! Wufei’s gone!’*

\*

Gods, there were just so many things to look at.

He’d had to keep stopping when he saw something new, although Quatre had said they needed to hurry back to the Inn and the Others.

He should have listened.

Then he wouldn’t be in this predicament.

Wufei stood in the shadow of a market booth selling bolts of cloth, the towering stacks effectively hiding him from view while he pondered on what to do. He could sense his Others in a vague sort of way, and wondered if Quatre had realized he wasn't behind him anymore, but he'd figured out enough to know that without the Joining, he wasn't going to be able to find them easily.

Not with so many people milling about.

The visit to the cobbler hadn't taken as long as he'd expected. The man had some very nice boots that Quatre had zeroed in on. The cobbler had said they were made for a young lordling, had been just a tiny bit too small by the time they were done. They had fit Wufei perfectly. Made of soft brown deerskin, almost the color of the pants Quatre had given him, they were so light on his feet after his heavy old shoes that he felt practically barefoot.

Now he was standing here, with new boots on his feet and fine clothes on his back and his old shoes dangling from his fingertips, wondering how in any given hell he was going to find his way back to his Others.

He'd asked one man where the 'Dancing Dog' was, and after the idiot had stopped staring at him like he'd never seen another person before, he had pointed off in some vague direction. Wufei had snorted, but followed the wavering finger.

Bad idea, because he ended up more lost than ever.

Well, the main flow of people seemed to be going west. He'd just follow along.

They had to be going somewhere.

\*

"I swear, he was right behind me, then this fat lady almost ran me down and when I looked around for him he wasn't anywhere. I'm so sorry, I should have kept him beside me." Quatre was so worried he was babbling.

"It'll be okay, koi." Duo said softly, sliding an arm around the other boy's shoulders. "We'll find him, this township isn't *that* big."

"Why isn't he Calling to us?" Quatre continued to fret.

“Maybe he doesn’t realize he can. Haven probably made a big deal out of *that*, too. He probably thinks he shouldn’t do it.” Duo’s voice was sour. They *had* to get started with their Fire’s Basics, beyond the few bits they’d already told him.

“Split up.” Heero said calmly. “I can Speak to keep us in contact, we’ll cover more ground that way.”

“Gotcha, Hee-chan. Which way?”

“You take north, Quatre can go west, I’ll take east, and Trowa can take south.”

“Gotcha,” Duo repeated, and they all went in their ordered directions.

Or at least, they started to. They all took a few steps, then stopped.

“Trowa?” As always, Heero could tell which of his Others was having problems.

“I just... I feel like we should go west.” Trowa didn’t look at him when he said it. Heero frowned for a moment, then blinked and stared at the boy.

“All right. West. Let’s go. Take different streets.”

Trowa was gone almost before the words were out of his mouth.

Duo and Quatre lingered. “Hee-chan?”

Heero smirked at them. “Can’t you two tell what’s going on?”

They exchanged puzzled glances.

Then beaming smiles.

“Linked?!” Quatre looked like someone had announced the war had ended.

Heero nodded. “They don’t realize it yet. Especially not Wufei.”

“Whoo hoo!” Duo cheered. “So Tro-chan’s going to get what he wants! And we’ll lay some nice gentle hints on ‘Fei! That just leaves the *other* idiot who doesn’t realize he’s Linked!”

It was Heero’s turned to look puzzled.

Quatre and Duo snickered.

Apparently, you headed west in this place when you had absolutely nowhere to go.

After following five different people, only to have them stop striding purposefully and start wandering off in another direction, Wufei was getting annoyed.

That fact that the sense of his Others was getting fainter wasn't helping. It was beginning to frighten him, actually, although he refused to think about it. Dwelling on fear wasn't the way to rid himself of it.

Wufei looked around for another person to follow, hoping to see someone official, perhaps a Guard who might be heading for the Gates. If he could get back there, he could find the Inn and wait for his Others to show up.

If this didn't work, he'd head for the wall that surrounded Cordia Township, and follow it all the way back to the Gates. It would take hours, but it would be better than wandering in circles all night.

He thought he caught a glimpse of a Guard and stepped out of the shadowy doorway he'd been lurking in, hurrying so he could catch up with the rather distant figure.

He hadn't taken two steps before he was surrounded.

"Hello, pretty." A boy about two years older than him smirked down at him in a way that reminded him of Alvis. "You shouldn't be wandering the streets all by your lonesome. Are you lost?"

"And will your family pay us to bring you back?" Asked another boy who'd moved behind him.

Wufei turned sharply to see him eyeing the expensive new clothes appreciatively.

He lifted an elegant black eyebrow and glared at him. "I don't need your help."

"Now, now." The first boy said, motioning to the other four with him to move in closer.

"There's no need to be that way. Larn just misspoke, that's all. We'll take you back to where you need to be. Where do you want to go?"

Wufei scowled. He wasn't going to tell these boys anything. If he was in trouble, so be it, but he wasn't going to get his Others involved. Even as he thought that, though, that same odd feeling welled up in his chest that he'd felt when Alvis had jumped him, back at Haven's inn. It confused him - it wasn't Calling. He wasn't sure what it was.

Or why it made him think of Trowa.

It didn't matter. They were moving ever closer to him, and he didn't like it.

\*

Trowa felt the same oddly warm feeling, and increased his speed now that he had a direction to follow. The reason behind this was nagging at his subconscious, but he didn't have the time to spare it right now. He'd sort it all out later.

Wufei needed him.

\*

"Leave me alone." He put ever bit of force he could manage into the words.

"No." The tallest boy said, moving until he was almost next to him. "You need our help. You're pretty, you know that? I've never seen an Exotic as pretty as you." He reached out his hand toward Wufei's loose, shining hair and the smaller boy knocked it away.

"Shut up and leave me alone!" Anger was beginning to make his Fire heat up inside him. He wouldn't burn these boys, but he could certainly make the air around them too hot to be clothed. If they kept this up, they *deserved* to be seen running through the streets naked.

A sudden thought of Duo's face if he saw that almost made Wufei laugh.

"We just want to help you, really." The boy said again, but Wufei was ignoring him, now. He felt his Fire settle to its usual warm embers as the feeling of an Earth Talent welled up in his soul.

Trowa was coming.

Trowa was *there*, turning the corner and shoving one boy out of the way to get to Wufei. He lay a firm hand on his shoulder and his eyes raked over him. "Are you okay?"

“Yes.” Wufei nodded, not knowing that his own eyes were shining at the boy. Trowa blinked, and flushed.

Then turned on the boys still surrounding them.

“Go away.” Firm and calm and leaving no room for argument.

The boys didn’t budge, but even thought it was two against five, Wufei felt absolutely safe. He didn’t question why, not right now. Later, maybe. He knew why, just not the reason behind it.

He was safe because Trowa was with him, sliding an arm protectively around his shoulders. He didn’t need protecting - but this was nice.

Without thinking, he put out a hand and wound his fingers into the scarf around Trowa’s waist.

He didn’t notice Trowa’s sudden smile.



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