



Quatre already knew what to expect when Trowa stepped up to the counter but asked anyway just to hear him speak. "Same today?" Quatre quipped, smiling brightly despite the ungodly hour of day.

"Yes please." The soft baritone intoned in that patent purr that sent shivers down Quatre's spine.

"One hot café mocha with peppermint, coming up." Quatre beamed as Trowa moved into the waiting line after paying for his drink.

Today however was not going to be Quatre's day it seemed. He'd just handed Trowa his drink, when the new employee Mueller, half asleep, set a stainless steel pitcher of milk to steam and forgot about it, and it boiled over in an explosion like Mount St. Helens, hitting Quatre on his bare forearm.

Nothing is as painful as getting hit with scalding hot milk on bare skin. It's instant and intense pain. Everything began to move in a blur in a pain haze. Quatre could hear the morning manager Hilde reading Mueller the riot act, while someone had dragged him over to the sink and had his arm under the running cold water and Baritone barking for ice at the same time.

Wait a minute -- he and Mueller were the only male employees on shift, which meant that... Quatre looked at the hands holding his arm under the tap. Large, scarred from scratches, clean, strong, long fingered hands. He looked up into concern filled green eyes.

"I said he needs Ice now!" Trowa growled and from Hilde a Ziploc bag filled with ice appeared and Trowa gently laid it on Quatre's reddened forearm.

"Keep ice on this for at least the next half-hour if not longer if you can, I mean it. That sort of scald will keep burning if you don't neutralize the heat." Quatre nodded numbly as Trowa administered the first-aid treatment.

"Oh my God Quatre? You look out of it hon." Hilde said brushing Quatre's bangs out of his face. He was in a lot of pain the entire scenario seemed detached. He couldn't focus on anything except the pain.

"Shock. It'll pass. Give him a few minutes. I'll sit with him a minute he'll be alright." Trowa spoke to Hilde who nodded and went to fix the chaos behind the counter. Relena was cleaning up the mess, Mueller apologetic hurried to stay out of the way and get the customer's orders out fast and clear the line.

Quatre sat off in the corner with Trowa, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his right arm. "Damn, and I have conducting class today. Not gonna happen now."

"Huh? Conducting? As in?" Trowa asked looking confused.

"A lost art and a required course for music teachers. Me waving a stick around in the air." Quatre said mincing as Trowa shifted the ice pack gingerly.

"Ah, I see. I think this qualifies as a reason to play hooky from that class today." Trowa looked up smiling softly in partial sympathy and humor.

"All my classes today, I need my arms for all of them. Composition, Piano, Orchestra, 'm screwed today."

"You're a music education major? Somehow I thought you were the art type."

Trowa had been thinking about what he did when not making coffee, suddenly the pain became secondary and the conversation became the focal point of Quatre's attention.

"Um-hum. I'm a senior over at the University, One more semester and I have my Bachelor's. But I plan on doing some graduate work for my Masters before I start anything really. And I minor in Education, my back-up plan. I'm a composition major, I'm a dork, and I think I can make a living writing music. I'll probably be working here for a while to come. At least according to my father who thinks I'm wasting his money by not going to be a doctor like my sister." Quatre grinned and Trowa chuckled.

"Makes me glad my older sister became a circus performer, makes my job seem glamorous."

Here was Quatre's golden opportunity to find out more about Trowa. "What do you do?"

"I'm a trainer over at the Zoo."

"I guess that much from the uniform. Any particular species or do you draw lots at the time clock in the morning?"

Trowa raised an eyebrow and laughed. "No. No lots. I work with the big cats, I have the battle scars to prove it."

He really was Steve Irwin, Quatre's jaw dropped. "Are you insane? You're telling me these old scratch marks are like from LIONS?"

"Lions, Tigers, this nasty one here was from a leopard with toothache. She didn't want her medicine."

"I hope your medical insurance is current."

"It's not that bad. Really, most of these are just accidents with claws. I've not been attacked if that's what you're thinking."

"Well you could be!"

"True, if I do something really stupid like that Crocodile Hunter Guy on TV yes. Please don't compare me with that idiot. He's his own Las Vegas Strip Show, he's got a Death Wish."

Quatre laughed. "Okay, I deserved that, I was making that mental comparison."

"I thought as much. Most people do. How's the arm?"

"Throbbing like hell, but I think I'll live."

"Good, if you're feeling better later and want to see what I do you're more than welcome to come by the Zoo. Just ask the information desk when you get there and they can page me from there. I've got to get to work, I'll be late."

"Go! Go! I'll be fine. I might just take you up on that offer sometime."

"Take care Quatre, keep ice on that." Trowa ordered with a smile and grabbing his cold mocha, headed to work.

"HILDE!" Quatre almost squealed and Hilde who had been hovering within earshot the entire time grinned like the Cheshire cat.

"I heard everything. Oh God Quatre, HEAL QUICK, so you can jump his bones then tell me all about it after."

"I plan on it. Can I go home though? This really hurts bad."

"Go hon. Promise when you go to tell me later tonight."

"I promise to call the minute I get home if I go."

"IF you go? IF? Right."

"Okay, I'll call you tonight."

"Good luck." Hilde waved as Quatre stumbled out of the coffee house, balancing a half ice and half water filled Ziploc bag on his arm with his overstuffed backpack dangling from the other as he tried catching a bus home to his apartment complex.

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"Good morning Dr. Barton." Dorothy at the information booth greeted as Trowa headed over behind the counter to the office space in general.

"Mornin' Dorothy. Listen, I might have a guest today so if a guy by the name of Quatre asks for me, it's alright to page me, I'll come up here and get him."

"Oh, really? Is he cute?" Dorothy asked smiling with pure evil intent. Trowa had to laugh.

"Very, and hands off you viper. It took me weeks to get up the nerve to even extend the offer. And had opportunity in the form of a scalding not happened, I'd have not said anything today to him either."

"What!? What happened?" Dorothy asked as Trowa logged in on his time sheet. He related the incident of the morning and Dorothy had to roll her eyes.

"God you're pathetic. If you like the guy just ask him out for goodness sakes. They way you handled this he's no more in the clear you like him at all! Don't be disappointed if he doesn't show up." Dorothy admonished as Trowa grabbed his keys and headed to the cat complex offices.

"Just page me if he shows up. Please."

"Alright, alright." Dorothy grumbled shooing Trowa off bored with his slow moving ways. Had it been up to her, she'd have hog-tied then together by now.

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Quatre, being as fair of skin as he was and susceptible to sunburn, had several remedies leftover from summer collecting dust in his medicine cabinet, and he pulled out his favorite aloe vera blue gel with vitamin E skin conditioners and analgesic pain relievers and slathered great heaping globs of it on his burn. He let out an audible sigh as the cold gel went to work almost immediately, sucking out the heat in almost audible sizzling sounds, while the room smelled lightly of aloe and menthol, and the cool blue ooze numbed the pain while Quatre wrapped a light layer of gaze over the burn.

"Thank you Johnson & Johnson!" Quatre patted the bottle as he replaced it in medicine cabinet and went to change out of his uniform shirt into a nice loose UCLA sweatshirt and jeans. Southern California or not, it was still February and he was going to be prancing around a zoo.

Quatre paused in front of the mirror and ran a comb through his hair. "God I look like a frumpy frat geek. The shirt I gotta keep for practical purposes, damn arm. But I do have an ass, where are my...?" Quatre shed his relaxed fit 501's and headed for the pair he had to lay down on the bed to zip up.

"So I hold my breath a lot." Quatre grinned as he wiggled his now amply denim shrink-wrapped posterior in the mirror. "Okay lady luck, I'm begging here for a little help from you today." Quatre added grabbing his wallet and keys and heading to catch the next bus to the Zoo.

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Dorothy grinned as she watched the few patrons milling around her booth, trying to spot the mystery man. Winter tourism was abysmal, ticket sales showed a mere twenty paying customers, so it was fairly easy to spot the young blond as he walked past the ticket counter to the information counter.

"Can I help you?" Dorothy asked as he stepped up.

"Um, yes. I don't know if I should buy a ticket or not, I was sort of invited to see someone here. His name is Trowa."

"Ah, Dr. Barton said you might come. Let me page him for you come inside to wait if you'd like." Dorothy motioned to the side door and pressed a button to allow him access to open the door.

"Dr. Barton? I didn't know he was a doctor!"

"Well, he is and isn't. He's like a specialized Vet of sorts. More school of experience than university trained. But I'll let him tell you I only know a little bit of his story myself. He's the quiet type." Dorothy said as she buzzed Trowa's pager and Quatre sat in a chair to wait.

"So, what's your name so I can log you into the guest list?"

"Quatre, Quatre Winner."

"Winner, as in like Winner Production Enterprises downtown?"

"Yeah, sort of, it's my dad's company. Not really my thing."

"Hollywood production parties and all those superstars not your thing?"

"No, not really. I never wanted fame or fortune, too much stress involved in my opinion. You've never had to live with my dad. I've seen enough stress to last a lifetime."

"You've probably got a point. Ah here he is!"

Trowa stepped inside and smiled. "Glad you could make it."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this, but I feel a bit guilty not paying to get in here. Can I live a donation or something?" Trowa looked ready to faint from the suggestion.

"If you want to, we can always use donations, but I did offer to take you around. And on a coffee salary can you afford it?" Trowa asked and was interrupted but Dorothy laughing.

"You have no idea who you invited here do you Dr. Barton?"

Quatre glared at her. "I can afford it, but I don't live off my Father miss." Quatre said in a foul mood. He hated when people assumed he was rich and dripping with cash because he father was a billionaire. Quatre knew the value of money. Yes, his father paid his rent and bought him groceries and books, but Quatre worked for fun money he earned himself. He refused to be a sponge of humanity. So he stormed over to the ticket booth, made a donation buy buying a ticket.

Trowa glared at Dorothy "What just happened here?"

"Sorry Dr. Barton, but I assumed him being Quatre Winner, Edward Winner's son, he'd be loaded."

"Whoa! The billionaire producer Ed Winner?"

"Yes, I hope this doesn't change anything. I mean, I was looking forward to this since you offered this morning." Quatre asked walking up looking slightly upset.

"Changes nothing. You ready Quatre?" Trowa asked and Quatre smiled in relief.

"Ready. And do you mind starting with the Dr. Barton bit of the story? I mean you don't look much older than me, how can you be a doctor already?" Quatre asked as they got into a golf cart nearby painted with tiger stripes with the zoo logo on the hood.

"Easy enough. I'm probably not much older than you. I'm twenty-five. You?" Trowa asked as Quatre sat beside him.

"Twenty-three."

"Well, to make a long story short Quatre." Trowa began as he popped the cart into gear and began driving back to the complex he worked in. "I grew up around big cats. My father was a trained vet and circus lion tamer. He raised all sorts of big cats, at one point in time the circus had 15 all white Bengal tigers, 17 lions, and 2 black panthers. When I was about fifteen the circus closed and dad bought some property out in the hills here and opened a sanctuary for the animals. We got all sorts of animals in the sanctuary and when I wasn't in school, I was working. By the time I reached college, I'd been working hands on for so many years I aced the exams for my veterinary medicine Ph.D. I got my doctorate, and dad got heart disease. We couldn't afford to keep the sanctuary open and pay his medical costs. So when dad died, we moved the cats to other places and I closed the sanctuary and here I am."

"Wow. What a biography and you're only twenty-five, amazing."

"Not really, it's normal for me. Here we are." Trowa said stopping next to a tan colored building next to a cement complex that looked to contain all the cages for the cats that were not in their exhibits or habitats.

Quatre followed Trowa through a "Restricted, Authorized Personnel Only" marked security door and instantly inside the smell of CAT hit you.

Only this wasn't litter box stink, this was kitty poo aroma to the max minus the "fresh Step" odor fighting crystals.

"Don't mind the smell, Keeba is sick with a little stomach woes this morning."

"Little woes? Want I should go get some Pepto? GasX? Maylox? Glade Fresh Scent?"

Trowa chuckled and pointed to a cage where a young golden Bengal tigress was curled up asleep in a cage. She did look a little under the weather. "Gave her the tiger version Pepto already. She'll be fine in a few hours. Now you know why we say 'Don't Feed the Animals'. Popcorn does that to her and she loves it."

"Poor baby." Quatre remarked with pity and he semi-pouted while bending over to look closer into Keeba's cage. Keeba for her part cracked an eye open and shifted to get a better look at Quatre herself in the process.

"I never been this close to a Tiger before. Wow, her eyes are so... so deep." Quatre sighed mesmerized by the large feline less than three feet away.

"If you like this Quatre, you'll love this, come on." Trowa smiled as he led Quatre past Keeba's cage to a row of glass window cages. Trowa motioned for Quatre to wait where he was as he disappeared behind a door. Through the glass Quatre saw Trowa move some straw bedding to reveal a little golden lump that has been camouflaged by the dry grass. It was sleeping until Trowa disturbed it's rest, and then it was all play and pounced his trainers hands.

"Oh my God how CUTE!" Quatre cried, face almost presses against the glass as a little lion cub found Trowa's hand the BEST TOY EVER!

After a good minute of horseplay, Trowa scooped up the cub and came back out through the door. "My feisty little friend here is a lucky little bastard. For some reason mother left him, so I've been hand feeding him since he was born. He's just ten weeks, and he's growing like a weed. Would like to pet him Quatre?"

"Get out! Really?"

"Really, but I won't guarantee he won't bite. He's frisky as hell but I think you'd survive this sort of Lion bite."

"And it's worth it! Hi there fella." Quatre said reaching a finger over to scratch the cub's belly.

It was play-time again, and the cub began batting at Quatre's finger and wriggling in Trowa's arms. "Come on, let's go in here so I can set him down, he needs a good play exercise anyway, you're drafted to help." Trowa grinned as he moved into a large cage full of scattered plush toys, chewed on until they were sad, dirty little remnants of their former selves, a coming apart at the seams softball went skittering across the floor as the cub attacked it the moment Trowa set him free.

Trowa and Quatre settled in on the floor to "play" right along with the youngster.

"What's his name?" Quatre asked as the little monster ran willy-nilly around them in circles.

"It will probably end up being some recycled Rudyard Kipling name, or worse, yet another 'Simba'. I call him Fred. That won't last."

"Fred? Ya know, I like Fred, Fred Lion, sounds like an insurance agent." Quatre laughed as Fred found his shoelaces the BEST TOY EVER! No matter the cat species, kitten or cub, they're all pretty much the same at that age and every thing they can play with is the BEST TOY EVER.