

**Title: Soul Ship: 04**

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Pairings: 3x4, 5xS+1, 6x9, 13x11, (Deceased) 2xSolo

Rating: NC-17+

Genre: AU: Science Fiction Adventure Romance

Warnings: Sex, Violence, Bizarre outlandish concepts, angst, drama, sap, with lemon sprinkles

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Soul Ship 04:

Data Log Entry.01

Stardate: 06.30.02

"Trowa, stop that and go eat." The light, musical voice came from everywhere and nowhere.

Trowa jumped a little in his seat. "Quatre, I wish you'd stop sneaking up on me like that. You're going to give me a heart attack one of these days."

"Your heart rate is well within the normal parameters. I would never endanger my pilot." A spark of mischief colored the next words. "Would you like me to alert you before I speak?" A low jolt of electricity surged through Trowa's chair, making it vibrate beneath Trowa's buttocks before delivering a brief shock of static electricity, zapping Trowa's rear end like the sting of a wet towel snapped against bare flesh.

"Would that be adequate warning?"

"Quatre..."

Bright laughter filled the ship, and then the voice took on a hint of pouting. "Please stop fiddling with the navigational charts – you know I'll take care of that. Come and eat. I've made your favorite."

Trowa closed the many star maps open on the monitor, pushed to his feet and stretched. "Tarkedian herd-beast steak? Rare, with grilled Zoran mushrooms? You spoil me too much, Quatre."

"Yes, with a salad, first. My sensors indicated that you need more roughage in your diet. And I would do anything for you, my Trowa."

Trowa let his fingers trail along the sleek, silvery walls of the hallway as he exited the bridge and made his way to the living area. He could almost swear the material of the hull shuddered minutely in response under his fingers. The lighting was dimmed in his quarters. Candles flickered on the small dining table, which had been draped with a deep blue cloth. Quatre stood waiting next to it wearing a plain, matching apron, tied around his neck and waist and skimming the tops of his thighs, and nothing else.

"How do you expect me to even think about food when I find you dressed like that?"

"Dinner first, dessert later." Quatre winked impishly, and then turned around to give Trowa a perfect view of his pert

rear, neatly framed in by the dark fabric and topped with the thin bow of the ties. The skin of his back appeared impossibly creamy in the candle's glow. He looked back over his shoulder coquettishly. "Your pulse and respiration have increased significantly. Perhaps I should wear more while you eat."

"NO! I mean... god, Quatre! You do this to me on purpose, don't you?" Trowa reached out for him, all thoughts of food banished. Quatre skipped agilely out of his reach and gestured towards the table.

"Hmm. Now eat your salad, or no dessert."

Grumbling, Trowa obeyed, barely tasting the dark bitter greens with sweet berry dressing. He tore his way through the steak, eyes never leaving Quatre, who sat across the table and smiled at him sweetly, chin in his hands. When Trowa had finished, the plates and candles reabsorbed into the table. Quatre climbed onto it, and on hands and knees stalked over in front of Trowa. "Would you like your dessert here, or..."

The sentence went unfinished as Trowa swept him up with a growl and carried him over to the already turned down bed. Trowa dropped to his knees on it, and Quatre slid from his arms to kneel facing him. "Tease..." Trowa panted, hands busily exploring the unbelievably smooth skin of Quatre's back, the peach-fuzz curve of his bottom, the tensed line of his thighs. The apron quickly met the floor, as did Trowa's shirt. The bare flesh of their chests converged.

"Oh, my pilot!" Quatre squirmed against him to increase the sleek friction between them. He began to bathe Trowa's neck and shoulders with neat little swipes of this tongue while his hands worked to free Trowa from his pants.

Trowa pushed him onto his back and began devouring Quatre as if he were a starving man. Straining thighs were treated to long tongue lashes, the hollow of his navel gifted with a passionate nuzzle, his pink nipples suckled until they had turned a deep red. Trowa's hand fumbled on the shelf next to his bed, knocking over several items until he came to a mangled tube of lubricant. "Trowa, you know you don't have to use that!"

"I don't want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you." Trowa slicked his fingers and then Quatre.

"You couldn't. You know that. I could generate lubrication internally and..."

"Shut up." Trowa pulled Quatre's legs over his broad shoulders and slowly sank into him, effectively ending the conversation for many minutes to come.

Later, as they lay sated, Trowa absently twirled his fingers through Quatre's sweaty hair. "I wish you were real."

Quatre raised his head from where he had it pillowed on his forearms over Trowa's chest. "I am real."

"No, I mean – I wish you could really feel that. It's so incredible, and it doesn't seem fair that I'm the only one enjoying..."

"Does it appear that I do not enjoy sexual relations with you, my pilot?"

"Quatre." Trowa's low tone was almost patronizing. "You know what I mean. I know you enjoy pleasing me; it's in your programming. But physically there's no possible way for you to derive any satisfaction..."

"That may be true, but I feel everything you do to me and with me. I feel everything you feel for me. And that sensation is most amazing." Quatre arched up against the hand petting his head. "Besides, don't you know that the brain is the human organ in which the most intense sexual stimulation takes place?"

"But you're not human, Quatre. You're a ship. A damn good, extraordinarily intelligent ship – the ship that I love – but still just a ship. You're just a computer program construct made to serve me." Trowa cupped Quatre's cheek and wistfully traced his lips with his thumb. "I wish you were human... You're more real to me than any person I've ever known."

"I am human. I'd forgotten that until I met you, but I am."

"As much as I'd like to believe that, there's no way – you were built over two hundred years ago. Humans don't live that long."

"Under normal conditions, no. But I am human, and I am alive. My mind is the control center for this ship." Quatre covered Trowa's stilled hand. "Don't stop. I think I like the after play best – you're so tender and loving after being sexually satiated." Trowa resumed stroking Quatre's face and ran his other hand languidly up and down the blonde's spine. The ship seemed to purr around them.

"I still don't understand how – is your brain floating in a jar somewhere hooked up to electrodes?"

"In the first few failed attempts to construct Soul Ships, the brain was indeed removed from the human body. But as no suitable substitute could be devised, these minds failed to live long enough to successfully integrate with their ships. My body is still intact."

Trowa sat up in shock, tumbling Quatre from his chest. "You have a body? Here, on this ship? I mean, a real human body and not just the ship? A living body?"

"The ship lives."

"What? Metal doesn't live, Quatre. You should know that."

Quatre scooted up into Trowa's lap and nestled his head in the crook of his shoulder. "And you should know better than to argue with me. Think of it as a colony of amoebas, if that makes it any easier for you. Each cell of this ship is a living, self-replicating, brainless organism. It is a colony, and I am the dictator, if you will."

The silky hair tickling Trowa's neck took on a new significance in light of this revelation. "Why haven't you ever told me any of this before? And where's your human body?"

"You never asked. You always seemed quite content to accept my functionality without question." Quatre pulled back to search Trowa's face. "And I'm not going to tell you where my body is."

"Why not?"

"I've never denied you anything before. Please don't ask that of me, my Trowa. Please." Quatre dropped his head to Trowa's chest; and his voice fell to a weak whisper. "Don't I make you happy?"

"You know you do – but I love you, Quatre! I want you to be able to feel me when I hold you – I want you to be human again!"

"You touch me in ways you cannot imagine, my pilot." Quatre attempted to wipe away Trowa's frown with a tenderly fierce kiss. "You touch me in ways I never imagined possible. I had truly forgotten what it was to be human until I became your ship. Please, let that be enough!"

"Quatre, how can it be enough? Don't you want your body back? I want to free you –"

"You already have. Please. It is pointless to argue about this – I cannot be disconnected."

"I want to see you, Quatre. Don't push me into making this an order." Trowa grabbed Quatre by the chin and forced their eyes to meet.

He was given a most miserable expression, and answered with a decidedly sullen tone. "Yes, my pilot." The body in Trowa's arms began to fade away, dissipating back into the fabric of the ship. "Promise me you won't open the brain housing facility casing. If you kill me, you'll be stranded out here. I want to keep you safe. Trowa..." The Quatre he had held in his arms was gone, and the voice resumed from the walls. "I've always slept next to you, my pilot. Get off the bed."

Trowa stood quickly and pulled his pants back on. When he looked up from fastening them, the bed had pulled aside to reveal a sealed hatch in the floor. It cracked open, and a feeble green light bled into the room. Trowa knelt down, hands trembling as he pulled the hatch fully open. The light intensified, blinding him momentarily. When his vision cleared, he could only stare in numb horror.

His Quatre lay there, encased in a cylindrical casket made of a transparent poly-titanium alloy. But instead of the

healthy, robust Quatre he had just held in his arms, this one was a pitiful, wasted mockery.

In place of the fine blonde hair Trowa had a hard time keeping his hands out of, this Quatre had a Medusa's snarl of wires running from electrodes attached to his bald head. This Quatre's arms were twisted up on his chest, and ended in distorted, pinched claws that bore no resemblance to the fine fingers that had so recently stroked Trowa. His legs were withered and his chest pitifully sunken. Complete musculature atrophy ravaged the slight frame held suspended in a clear cryogenic preservative liquid.

But worst of all, perhaps, was Quatre's face. For it was the same face that kept him company everyday – the face that smiled at him, twisted under his hand in passion, laughed with him, and reflected his love. To find that face trapped on this wrecked body was more than Trowa could stand, and he turned retching to the side. The hatch closed with a hollow clang and the bed resumed its former place.

No matter how many times he called out over the next few hours, Quatre would not answer.

And Trowa was forced to entertain the myriad of confused thoughts about his ship tumbling about in his shocked mind. Up until this point, he had always held the belief that Quatre had been nothing more than a highly advanced computer system. One that knew him intimately and took care of him completely without complaint and most of the time seemed to anticipate his needs before they could even be voiced.

When he had bought this ship some five years prior, he had only heard rumors of the "Soul Ships" and how they seemed to be living, breathing entities in and of themselves. He'd shrugged off the tales and rumors as flights of speculation and fancy. He thought them simply words and propaganda used to entice prospective buyers to purchase the outrageously expensive and rare discontinued breed of star ships. Trowa had been far more interested in the very real capabilities of such a vessel. The ability to shift to almost any formation, to change from a freighter able to haul many tons of cargo to a sleek speed craft designed to slice through the distant reaches of space with ease. The unlimited and totally concealed defense capabilities also appealed to him – weapons were invaluable to the smuggler's trade, but also a decided liability. A ship that could form armaments at a single command and reabsorb them with another was worth its weight in platinum creds.

After he'd encountered Soul Ship: 04, Trowa Barton, pilot and renegade trader, had never been the same. Over the years, he had grown not only nearly completely attached to his Soul Ship, but also almost painfully dependent on it, and it was disturbing to know he had fallen in love with a computer.

It had began innocently enough, and while Trowa sat in silence contemplating the reality of the situation facing him, his mind wandered back to his first encounter with the being he thought of as simply "Quatre..."

Space had a way of working on the minds of men, even those who thought of themselves detached from the rest of humanity as Trowa did. The endless sea of blackness dotted with infinite shimmers of light held a strange beauty. But this beauty paled when it was all one saw for weeks and months on end. Trowa checked his navigational map for the probably the fiftieth time that day, and it relayed the same information it had every other time. He was in deep space, far away from any colonized planets or commonly traveled star-paths, and would be for at least five more weeks.

"My pilot, I am reading abnormally high anxiety and frustration levels. Please, tell me what I can do to ease you." The disembodied voice of 04, his only companion, broke the silence.

"I'm afraid there's nothing much you can do – I'm just lonely, I guess."

"I *am* sorry, my pilot. I did not know I was failing you in such a manner."

Trowa had by now become used to his ship displaying remorse over the slightest things. "No, 04. Not that kind of lonely. Carnally lonely – there's not much you could do about that, now is there?"

A few seconds of silence passed, and then with a sudden blink the star-charts disappeared from the wall display screen. A simple text list of file folders took its place. "These were left by some of my previous pilots. Often, when experiencing such needs, they would watch one of these vid files. Perhaps you might find something here to your liking."

"Pornography? You've got a stash of porn in your memory banks?" Trowa asked, incredulous.

"Yes, my pilot. I am sensing mild distress – are you unhappy about this?" 04 sounded tentative.

"No, no. Just a bit surprised, that's all. I guess I always thought of you as kind of innocent." Trowa's mental image was that of a young boy -fair and carefree - to match the clear tenor with which the ship spoke.

"I am an interstellar transmodulating vessel with planet-destroying capabilities. I hardly think that 'innocent' is a term that would adequately apply."

Sometimes, Trowa could swear his ship was laughing at him. This was one of those times. "If these files disturb you, I could easily purge them from my hard drive."

"Hey! I didn't say that. And thank you for sharing this with me."

"It is my pleasure to serve you, my pilot."

Trowa's hand moved over the interface pad in his chair arm and the cursor followed the movement of his finger, trailing down over the titles on the screen. He stopped and double clicked on a name at random.

The file opened on the large view screen – an extremely large breasted woman was bouncing enthusiastically on the lap of muscular man, moaning in fake ecstasy as he grasped her buttocks to force her more firmly down. Trowa exited the vid-file with a snort of disgust. "Shit, her tits would strangle you – who the hell could enjoy themselves getting smacked in the face with those? Goddamn het smut..."

He was on the verge of just giving up and retiring to his bed armed only with a tube of lubricant and his own imagination when the folder order reversed on the screen without his command to do so, one title was highlighted in blinking text.

"'Duo's Stash?' What's this, 04?" There was no answer, but the folder opened and a long list of files scrolled down. "'Venusian Steam,' 'Captain Buck and the Jade Dildo Caper,' hmm, 'Captain Buck' must have been busy." There were no fewer than 50 files starting with this name. "'Starship Stowaway,' 'Space Pirates,' 'First BedMate,' 'Interstellar Probe,' 'Close Encounters of the Anal Kind,' 'The Boys of Betelgeuse 6,' 'Love and Rockets'... any favorites, 04?" After a brief pause, the highlight moved down to bold one title - "Deep Space Lover."

"That's a good one, eh?" There was still no answer. "Why are you being so quiet, 04?"

Silence.

Trowa sighed, "All right, I'll trust your judgment – open file."

The list blinked from the screen. After a short flash of black, the vid started. The scene opened to reveal a cabin much like the one Trowa inhabited. A shirtless, auburn haired man with a slim but muscular build was hunched over a table strewn with electrical bits and wires, feverishly toiling. A willowy blonde soon joined him.

"Will, you have to stop working yourself to death over this. You'll do us no good if you become too exhausted to go on. Stop and take a rest." The blonde moved behind the seated man and began to massage his shoulders, winning a deep groan for his troubles.

The peaceful expression on Will's face snapped. "Damn it, Jim! If I don't get this fixed, we'll be drifting out here until we die. Is that what you want?"

Jim's face fell. "No, but I think you should relax. Can I help you relax, Will?" He leaned forward to press himself against Jim's back, his hands trailing over the man's sweaty chest. "You'll work better if some of that tension's gone..."

Will pushed himself into the caressing hands. "There's no time for this..."

Jim slipped around to kneel at Will's feet, his hands already unfastening the seated man's pants. "There's always time enough for love." He drew forth the other's already engorged cock and began to work his mouth over it earnestly. Will looked as though he might protest again for a moment and then buried his hands in the blonde's hair and slumped forward to provide more access.

"Smart move, Will." Trowa mumbled, his hand busily tugging his own pants away. He watched through heavily lidded eyes as Jim continued to draw forth moans and unintelligible exclamations from his partner. The couple tumbled to the floor, and the blonde was soon naked and offering himself on hands and knees. Trowa's hand sped over his shaft as the pair moved together, but they came to a howling, shuddering end before he was halfway to his own orgasm. He moaned and was about to command the file to replay when a light touch on his shoulder and a soft voice from behind made him turn around in surprise.

"May I help you with that?" A blonde built much the same as the one in the vid – small and lean, finely muscled, and amply endowed stood naked beside him.

"Wh- who are you?" Trowa released himself and tried to pull his shirt down over his aching erection.

With a trill of laughter, the vision answered. "I'm yours."

"Wha- what?"

The youth moved in front of Trowa and fell to his knees. "I am here to serve you, my pilot." His hands hesitated over Trowa's. "May I?"

Trowa's beleaguered brain finally made the connection between the voice that was his sole companion and the beauty kneeling at his feet. "04? But how..." he trailed off as thin, fine hands replaced his.

"Yes, 04. And never mind how for now," the blonde breathed on the head of his shaft. Lovingly cradling it, he began to stroke against Trowa with his smooth cheek. "I am programmed to service all my pilot's needs, whatever they may be. This is what you need, what you desire. Let me take care of you." He tentatively licked around the head and then moved forward to take it into his mouth.

"Oh God...Quatre..."

"Quatre, my pilot?" Shining blue-green eyes snapped up.

"It means four, in French. It's still your name – but something I'd much rather be calling out when I ... ohhhh...." Trowa's voice and thought lost all coherency as he was enfolded in perfect warmth.

Quatre paused for a brief moment. "You may call me whatever you wish, my pilot. I am yours. I am grateful to have a name." And he spent the next several hours showing Trowa just how appreciative he was.

And from that point on, Trowa ceased to refer to his ship as 04, and 'Quatre', had become the center of his universe.

Quatre, the tangible Quatre he had held, kissed, and loved was nothing more than a transmutation of the ship. A mere construct of liquid metal that felt human to Trowa's touch, but had only been created to ease his loneliness in deep space.

The construct was nearly perfect and impossible to tell apart from real living, breathing flesh.

It gave the illusion of sweat, of pleasure, of joy, of sadness, almost every human characteristic imaginable.

Perhaps that's why Trowa had so easily fallen in love with it.

With him.

And after that first encounter with the construct he'd named Quatre, Trowa had never spent another night alone in his bed. Quatre was always there for him to hold onto during long, and no longer lonely nights.

Quatre was always there to share meals with, to talk with, to laugh and play games with.

The emptiness of his cabin became oppressive. Which Quatre was he in truly in love with?

The construct he could physically touch?

Or the mind of the young man in suspended animation who gave the simulacrum life?

The real Quatre...

Trowa pushed the bed away the hatch and opened it to look once more at the corpse-like youth encapsulated and held prisoner to time and space.

He had his answer. He loved this Quatre. The other was just the shell this Quatre – the mind he loved - used to be with Trowa.

"I love you, Quatre. Be with me in whatever form you choose to take until I can free you to live as a human again. The ship means nothing to me. You mean everything to me. I'll find a way. I promise," Trowa said, running a hand down the cryogenic coffin.

A hand fell upon Trowa's shoulder and Trowa turned from the capsule and let the hatch close behind him as he melted into the arms of his Quatre and allowed himself to be led to bed in silence.

Quatre lovingly undressed him, laid him in bed, and crawled into take his normal place beside Trowa.

While one man slept, the other mimicked sleep and offered comfort to a lovelorn soul.

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Soul Ship 04:

Data Log Entry: 02

Quatre remained stubbornly mute the next morning. The tasteless gruel he served Trowa for breakfast was a reflection of his continued irritation. Instead of sitting at the table as he generally did for Trowa's meals, he pattered about the cabin, loudly shifting objects and needlessly straightening the already tidy space. Trowa ate as much of the bland stuff as he could stomach before pushing the bowl away with a disgusted sigh.

"Do you want to talk about this?"

"What is there to discuss? Your desires are my desires, my pilot. I exist only to serve you." The drab, shapeless garments in which he was clothed did little to hide Quatre's slumped posture, his back curved in as he refused to face Trowa.

"Look at me, Quatre."

"Is that an order, my pilot?"

"Why are you acting like this? I only wanted to help you –"

"When offering assistance, do you not think it proper to make sure that it is wished for, first?" Quatre whirled to face him, eyes hard and flaring with anger.

"You want to stay sealed up in that coffin?" Trowa pushed back from the table so forcefully that his chair fell to the floor.

"I'm perfectly content with my life the way it is!" Quatre stomped over to Trowa. "It is you who cannot accept me the way I am!"

"The way you are? You're a slave, Quatre! Can you honestly tell me you like being owned?" Trowa grabbed Quatre's shoulders and shook him.

Quatre brought his hands up between Trowa's arms and dislodged them with a swift twist. "By you! I am yours! And my need to please you goes beyond any programming I have received!"

"What about when I die, Quatre? What if the next person who owns you isn't as kind a master? I know you hate killing anyone. What will you do – what will you be forced to do if someone decides to use you as a weapon? You could destroy whole planets with ease." Trowa reached out for him again, but Quatre stepped out of range.

"Then spend your efforts trying to find some means of overwriting my primary directives. Leave my human body where it lays." The anger visibly leached from Quatre's thin frame. "And please don't talk about dying anymore. You're healthy and should live to be over 100. We've time enough. You could even order me to self-destruct when you pass. I truly have no wish to live on without you."

"Quatre..." When Trowa stretched out his arms this time, Quatre willingly came into them. Something about the way he drooped so dejectedly into the embrace nagged at Trowa. He carded one hand through Quatre's soft hair – a gesture that Trowa was sure was more comforting to himself than to the one receiving it. "Don't you want to be human again?"

"I don't remember being human in the first place. My technical data contains information about maintenance necessary to ensure the functionality of my command core housing; but for the longest time, I had blocked from RAM what it actually contained. Refreshing the fluid in the capsule has always just been another item on the upkeep schedule." He stepped out of Trowa's embrace, and led him over to the bed, which had taken its daytime configuration of a low, curved-back couch by the time they reached it. As Trowa settled into to one end Quatre perched lotus-style on the arm



opposite him.

"Why did you make yourself forget?" A cup of coffee rose steaming from the shelf next to Trowa's head. He took a small drink and raised his eyebrow questioningly at Quatre.

"You were thirsty. And you need caffeine to function within normal operating parameters." Quatre was idly picking at the hem of his shirt, tearing off bits of the fabric and tossing them to the floor. Each piece would radiate ripples like a stone thrown into a pond and then reabsorb into the floor without a trace.

"That's slightly disturbing on several levels." Trowa's eyes followed the arc and disappearance of another bit.

"I'm sorry. I'll stop if it bothers you."

"Just don't start doing it with your fingers or toes and I'll be fine. And stop trying to avoid my question. Why did you choose to forget?"

"Would you want to remember?" Quatre shot back, his voice rising. "How would you feel, knowing you looked like that?" He jabbed his finger towards the floor fiercely. Quatre was almost yelling, and had begun to shake. "You SAW! I'm a deformed, useless sack of bones and water! I look so ugly that I made you *sick!*!"

Trowa slid forward, meaning to gather the red-faced blonde into a comforting embrace. Quatre jerked away from his hands and fell off of the couch. His body sank partially into the floor as he landed, leaving the peaks of his bent knees floating like islands next to the greater mass of his torso. Quatre simply sat and stared miserably down as Trowa came to his side. "I didn't mean to startle you, let me help you up."

Quatre shook his head and melted completely away. "Please let me have some time to myself, my pilot." His voice echoed hollowly from the walls.

"Quatre! Come back! It wasn't the way you looked that disgusted me – it was that anyone could do that to you. I'm sorry." Trowa ran his hand over the spot that had last been Quatre's body and the metal was slick and cool to his touch.

"Please, Trowa..."

"Fine, Quatre. But don't leave me alone for too long. I'm not sure I could stand it." There was no answer. But when Trowa made his way to the cockpit, a single line blinking on the large display screen greeted him.

*You're never alone, my pilot.*

Trowa *felt* alone. The curved control panels of the navigational center reflected the indirect lighting dully. The monitoring screens to the sides were dark and empty. The pilot's chair was the only piece of furniture in the room; its high, curved metal back lent an impression of clinical functionality to the space. For all that he was in it and breathing, the area felt empty and haunted. He drooped aimlessly into the seat and contemplated the reassuring message on the main screen.

"Acknowledged. Command: display screen transparent: space view initiate." The computer interface faded and allowed the outer darkness to wash into the cockpit. Trowa watched the stars hurtling past the ship's bow, lost in reflection. A fresh cup of coffee appeared steaming next to his hand, and he sipped at it while trying to put his thoughts in order. A small tray of Trowa's favorite pastries formed next to the keyboard in front of him; a placatory gesture from one who had no need to apologize. Trowa immediately felt worse. "Thank you, Quatre. And I'm sorry..." He let the words trail off, knowing they would go unanswered.

There was still so much he did not understand. Quite possibly, Quatre held the answers to many of his questions somewhere within his memory banks; however, Trowa could not bring himself to press any further. When he had thought of Quatre as a complex, constantly evolving computer program, Trowa had been able to overlook the twinges of guilt he felt when issuing orders to his sentient ship. Now, with real *human* emotions involved, forcing Quatre to explore such obviously distressing territory was unacceptable. Still, the information was most likely there – stored indefinitely in 04's vast memory banks, perhaps he could find it by more indirect means. But to do so in the presence of Quatre's active, feeling mind seemed unthinkable.

"Computer: Program 'Quatre' on standby. Command interface in 04 mode only."

"Trowa?" The note of distress was impossible to ignore.

"Listen Quatre, I'm going to be digging around in your memory for a bit. I don't want to upset you any further. So why don't you just... just take a nap? I promise it won't be for long. Please trust me." Trowa mentally smacked himself; even when trying to spare Quatre, he had still hurt him.

"Modify command: Reactivate program Quatre automatically upon external or internal threat to pilot. Command accepted. Stand by process initiated. Program 'Quatre' off-line in five, four, three, two..." Quatre's voice fell silent, and for the first time since he'd purchased the ship five years ago, Trowa was truly alone. He hadn't known if his unique directive would work, and he was almost regretful that it had. The ship would function as smoothly as always, maintaining all systems and obeying his commands, but would do so on a more detached level. Now that Trowa understood that he was dealing with a human brain, he supposed this was analogous to the portion of his mind that regulated automatic functions such as breathing and heart rate. Trowa paused and took a deep breath, taking a moment to center himself and clear away his building anxiety and apprehension.

Trowa had known from their initial meeting that there was something different about Soul Ship: 04. There had been an eerie aura of anticipation pervading the ship as Trowa inspected it under the watchful eye of the black market dealer selling it. The only sounds in the craft as he explored it with the shady salesman were the echoes of their footfalls and the annoyingly effusive sales pitch. However, as soon as the title papers and external control pad were in Trowa's hand, and the hatch had sealed behind the salesman, the ship came to life.

"Hello! Are you my new pilot? I have been without one for a very long time now," a melodious tenor called out conversationally.

"What? Who?"

"Am I being rude? Was that not a correct form of salutation? My last pilots, Mr. Solo and Duo, were in much conflict over my interface behavior programming. Where is your co-pilot? And may I have your name?"

"I'm Trowa. And I fly alone."

"It is my understanding that this is a psychologically dangerous practice for humanoids. If you wish, I shall endeavor to learn the appropriate interaction protocols needed to maintain your mental health."

"Um, sure. Whatever." A little stunned and uncertain, Trowa shouldered his duffel and went to the living quarters. The spacious room had a homey feel to it. It was rectangular, and divided into three basic sections. A leisure and living area took up the left third of the room. A medium size vid screen dominated the far wall, with a cozy looking chair placed in front of it. A bed stood not far away against the back wall, and there was a one-foot deep inset that ran the entire length of the wall just above it. The opposite end of the room was blocked off; this contained the personal sanitation equipment. A smallish table sat in almost the center of the room. On it was an antique, carved chess set. Trowa was confused to how he could have missed this before and to why the dealer would leave such an obviously valuable object behind. He dropped his bag on the floor, and fingered the white king. Shrugging it off, he was about to settle himself on the bed when the voice rang out again.

"No! Wait, please. I have been uninhabited for so long that I had discontinued all but the most rudimentary housekeeping practices. Please allow me to freshen your room before you attempt to use it."

Trowa edged back into the middle of the long, low chamber and watched wide-eyed as all the furnishings melted into the very walls of the ship, only to spring up bright and fresh a few scant seconds later. In addition, many jewel toned, geometrically patterned fabric hangings now decorated the room, and several small rugs that begged for bare feet dotted the floor. "Much better! If you are in need of a rest period, perhaps you might suggest a destination. I am quite capable of navigating to any coordinates you provide me with."

"You can do that without anything but a verbal command from me?"

"Yes, my pilot." The voice became a perfect mockery of the salesman's. "You don't even have to really pilot this honey – it'll do it all on its own. Just tell 'er where you want to be and sit back and relax."

"Then what the hell am I here for..." Trowa grumbled. "OK, ah – what do I call you?"

"I am Soul Ship: 04, my pilot."

"Fine. 04 take us out of this damn shipyard and set us in a high-range planetary orbiting course for now. I'll figure out where we're going later."

The engines hummed to life deep inside the ship. "Is there any specific place I should be sitting for lift off?"

"Any area you chose will generate the necessary harnessing equipment." Trowa chose to face the launch horizontally; he had always hated the sensation of escaping gravity in an upright position. As soon as he had settled into the bed, belts snaked out of the mattress and quickly twisted themselves into place.

"Quite a nifty little trick you can do there. Part of the transforming capabilities, I presume?"

"Yes, my pilot. Is the mattress to your liking? I can adjust the firmness with ease."

Trowa felt a slight tugging as the ship left the ground. The upward acceleration continued smoothly. "No, this is fine."

"May I inquire as to what purpose you have purchased me for, pilot Trowa?"

"I'm a trader, of sorts."

"What sort of materials do you traffic in?"

"Well, whatever is needed. Or I guess a better way to say it is that I take my cargo to the people who want it the most and will pay highest for it." Trowa relaxed into the conversation.

"Oh! Duo told me about such things! You are a smuggler, correct?" There seemed to be a higher, more wary tone to the ship's voice.

"Well, er... yeah. I guess you could say that."

"But..." The hesitation was clear, and Trowa began to wonder just how complex the program 04 was. The next question completely floored him. "You won't make me carry anything bad, will you?"

"I suppose that all depends on your definition of bad, 04."

"Oh! Situational ethics! Duo told of those, as well – although Mr. Solo said it was 'all a pile of steaming Merovian Lizard doo'. Please clarify."

Trowa choked on a swell of laughter. It was like talking to a three year old with a 4000+ IQ. "Here's an example. To earn the money to buy you, I took a large load of liquor to New Sahara 10. The inhabitants of that planet are decedents of group of humans who were forbidden to consume alcohol as a part of their religion. These practices are still followed; however, the demand for booze is pretty high there all the same. Does that help?"

"So you broke planetary regulation by bringing your cargo there. But your cargo was not harmful to the populace. This is acceptable."

"Acceptable?" Trowa wondered how much he'd have to delete from the interface mode.

"Yes, Duo instructed me in the differences between right and wrong. He would often read to me from the Bible and tell stories of brave people sacrificing themselves for the good of others. He once said that the best way to live one's life was to do no intentional harm. Mr. Solo said Duo was a 'damn Papist fool'. They were an extremely devoted pair."

Trowa snorted. "Yeah, it sounds like it."

"And you will not require me to destroy unnecessarily or kill without proper cause?"

"Is this against your primary directives?" Trowa made a mental note to dig around for an owner's manual.

"No. But I would rather not."

"Well, that makes two of us. I only kill to save myself. I don't enjoy doing it."

"Then this will be an agreeable partnership. Welcome aboard, pilot Trowa. It will be my pleasure to serve you."

Trowa opened his eyes, and let out the breath he'd been holding. He never had found that damn owner's manual, but then again he really had not spent much time looking for it. After a few weeks of getting used to his new purchase and the strange human-like qualities of the ship's computer interface called '04' Trowa had never felt the compunction to seek out any further information regarding his ship.

It worked - and he liked it the way it worked - it was as simple as that. There was no need to search for a manual when there was nothing to fix. 04 answered his questions, and Trowa trusted the integrity of his ship implicitly. No matter how clever and sympathetic 04's artificial personality seemed, he believed it to be nothing more than a complex program, an intricate pattern of code designed to give the impression of a living companion.

How wrong he had been. Now it was imperative to find the information that he had not thought important for the last past five years. It had become personal; Quatre deserved a history and a future. As he had been born, a human - and not the 'thing' he had been forced to become. And Trowa had to know who put him in this ship, and how it had been done if he ever hoped to free Quatre.

On a hunch, Trowa decided to begin his investigation among the previous pilot, Duo's, files. "Computer: search string: file author: Duo: keyword: Soul Ship and/or 04: commence search." A few seconds passed and a small list appeared. At the bottom was a folder simply entitled "Soul Ships." Trowa smirked. "Pay dirt!" He quickly opened the folder and started with the first file. He had been expecting to be presented with text, but was greeted by a smiling, wizened face instead.

*Hey there!! If you're there and I'm not, then I'm dead! And that kind of sucks... I'm assuming you're the new pilot for our lil' 04, and I think there's some things you ought to know. Got a few spare hours?"*

*The old man, obviously sitting in the same seat Trowa now occupied, tugged a long silver braid from behind his back and toyed with it as he continued to speak. "Because I've got a lot to tell. Most of it's supposition, I'm afraid I'll never be able to finish my research before I go back to Solo. But I'll share with you what I know and what I think I know, or just plain spent too many hours trying to figure out.*

*I'm Duo, Duo Maxwell, by the way. And I'm pleased to make your posthumous acquaintance. Before we go on, promise me you'll take special good care of my little buddy - he's been so good to me since my Solo passed. This ship's really special... and I want you to know from the start that I think it's because 04 is so much more than just a damn ship.*

*I've been his pilot for almost fifty years now. And over this time, I've developed some suspicions. Now that it's just 04 and me, I've become more certain. He's human. Deep down I know he is...*

*Now, I know what you're probably saying... well, at least I can guess. So save the wise cracks about senile old men will ya? We all know that self-correcting, continually changing computer programs exist. But this one has what I can only describe as emotions - not many, and not strong, but I think he's still developing, or possibly the barriers erected against these feelings are beginning to fade. Maybe by the time someone finds this record, this won't seem like such a revelation.*

*I'm leaving everything I've found. Including what little information I could scrounge about the race that built these ships - the Psions. You've probably never heard of them, they haven't been seen in human colonized areas since about a hundred years before the time of 04's presumed construction. All that's really known about them is that they were a "superior race." Also, they seemed to have a great deal of curiosity about a specific kind of human mutation - the stuff generally lumped under the term "ESP," focusing mainly on telekinesis. The greatest clusters of Psions were reported in the vicinity of colony planets that produced this mutation. There's a file marked 'mutations' where you'll find my research on this in detail.*

*Certain places seem to encourage these alterations in the basic human make up, and the research shows that this is often found in correlation with specific microbes in soil of these planets. Scientists are still uncertain if these critters act as some sort of infection, or if instead they colonize their human host and the abilities are just the by-product of some incomprehensible symbiotic relationship. And I'm not sure if this is important or even relevant. I have too many of the middle pieces to this puzzle, but not near enough of the edge ones to begin to guess what the big picture will be.*

*And from these planets, a statistically abnormal number of people went missing. I've dug up as many missing persons reports that were never solved from these regions, and let me tell you, there's a shit-load of them. I'd bet my bottom credit one of these people is 04. But I just don't know where to even start looking to narrow down the search to lend credence to my hypothesis. It's speculation at this point.*

*But, if I'm right – if my wild theory is correct – then a human brain runs the ship you're currently sitting on.*

*Now, wait! Don't shut me down just yet! I know this might sound like the delusional ravings of a lonely old man. But I ask that you consider everything I've found with an open mind and come to your own decision.*

*So make yourself comfortable. Get our little buddy to make you a plate of his yummy almond cookies and a pot of the herbal tea he's always pushing on me. Take your time. Hell, if you're in deep space, you've got plenty of that...*

*And tell him "Thank you" for being my friend. Duo's face held a wistful grin as he faded from view.*

It hurt in the most sublimely melancholy way. Trowa wished desperately that he had known the pilot before him - had been given even a few moments to talk with him. He had obviously been smart, and retained an air of youthful inquisitiveness well into his old age. More importantly to Trowa, the man had respected and cared for Quatre. Having now met him, even in such a limited way, Trowa was utterly convinced that Duo had been an important influence on the development of Quatre's personality. The brotherly affection Duo held for the ship had been plain as he had spoken. And the mischievous, playful nature that so often shone forth in Quatre surely took its spark from this familiar stranger's eyes. He had to offer up a small, sad laugh to the obviously spunky man's memory.

Most of the other information had been nothing new. Trowa knew without a doubt that Quatre was human. And he had heard rumors of the shadowy ship builders before. Still, something about the telekinesis tickled at him... He let his mind go blank and waited for the connection to come.

When it did, it spoke in Quatre's voice. *"It is a colony, and I am the dictator, if you will."*

That left Trowa even more confused than he had been before. He'd have to carefully read the files on mutations.

But first... "Computer: New search: File name: Missing Persons: Search against: DNA sample from brain core 04: Limit results: Match certainty within 10%: Commence search."

The screen was a wild blur of files as each was compared and judged in less than 1/10,000th of a second. Hundreds of thousands of reports were rejected as Trowa's sweaty palms clenched the seat arms. His pulse was racing higher and higher, as if trying to escape from the clashing waves of anxiety and anticipation inside his chest.

The frantic flickering of the images suddenly stopped, and Trowa's heart gave a nasty little lurch of surprise.

One filename remained: "Raberba Winner"

"Open file." Trowa rasped, his mouth unbearably dry as the initial text screen blinked up on screen with Raberba Winner's statistics.

*Name: Raberba Winner*

*Age: Nineteen*

*Home System: Elfer Cluster*

*Reported missing Stardate: 08.27.1256450*

Status: Unsolved, presumed deceased.

DNA probability match to 04 Brain Core: 99.999999999999%

Additional file information: Vid Source 783

Trowa's jaw was slack with disbelief and he struggled with his suddenly rebellious lungs for air. The stardate on the screen was some three hundred and fifty years prior to the current stardate of 1256800 and Soul Ship: 04's registry stated it was built in the year stardate 1256550, which meant there was a missing span of a hundred years unaccounted for. This couldn't be Quatre. Could it?

However, the DNA probability match was impossible to ignore. With a trembling hand only marginally more reliable than his shaky voice, he used the physical interface in the chair arm to open the vid file.

A woman appeared on the screen smiling into the camera she was obviously holding. Harsh black text eating into the bottom of the screen marked this as: "Constabulary Evidence, Case No. 95. Missing Person: Raberba Winner. File Footage."

The pretty blonde began to speak. "Okay, I hope this thing is working. Let's see if we can't wake up the birthday boy!" She gave the camera one last wicked grin before her face disappeared. The view swung down and then abruptly up, and if the wisps of hair trailing over the lens were any indication, she had moved it to her shoulder. The picture wobbled minutely as she walked down the corridor of some sort of unassuming domicile. The motion stopped before a door and the woman's hand appeared to twist the knob open and push inward.

A bed piled high with a fluffy white comforter filled the screen, and a blond tangled mass of hair could be seen poking out near the top.

The woman sniggered as she poked at the lump on the bed with her toes. She called out in a sing-songy voice between giggles, "Berba... Wake up Ra~bear~ba. Who's my growly little birthday boy?"

"Go away!"

Trowa's heart clenched into a painful knot, he *knew* that voice.

"Time to get up Birthday boy!"

"It's my birthday, so let me sleep in!" An irritated hand appeared and swatted at the woman only to connect with the camera instead. The tousled boy sat up, clutching at his covers. He screeched at her in sleepy scratchy voice. "IRIA! I'm naked get that vid camera out of here!"

She laughed with the evil glee timeless to torturing older sisters. "I know little brother! The birthday boy in his birthday suit - take it alllll off, baby!" Iria wrapped the end of the comforter around her free hand and yanked.

"DIE! STOP IT! You evil witch!" Raberba grabbed the covering before it deserted him entirely and clutched it to his heaving chest. Then he wrapped it firmly around his waist as he sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed.

Trowa went numb. It was Quatre.

"And finally our birthday boy greets the day! And what a beautiful scowl. You're so not a morning person Bear~ba."

"Not when you irritate me first thing in the morning, no! Get out!"

The file footage stopped, frozen on the close up of Raberba's annoyed face. It was the same antagonized expression Quatre always wore when one of Trowa's jests had gone too far.

"Quatre..." Trowa stood to run his hand over the still image on the screen. This was his Quatre, as he should be. The human Quatre with whom he had fallen in love. The young man whose life and freedom had been ripped away by some faceless alien race with no more resistance possible than the feathery head of a dandelion could offer against a stiff breeze.

The one he loved had a name. "Raberba Winner." It had rolled off of his tongue so adroitly that he was forced to say it again, this time with the teasing pronunciation Iria had given. "Ra~bear~ba..."

The vid file freeze frame on the screen suddenly went blank and a bright red warning text began to flash "File blocked: ACCESS DENIED" replacing the golden image of Raberba Winner before Trowa's rapidly dilating eyes.

Trowa's whole world seemed to crumble into a sickening, nauseous despair in the pit of his stomach.

He could *feel* the palpable anger and betrayal ripple throughout the room like waves crashing upon the shore during a violent storm.

Then beneath the offensive text now glaring at him, a single sentence appeared:

*My name is Quatre.*

=====  
Soul Ship 04:

Data Log Entry: 03  
=====

The air in the cockpit no longer tasted fresh. "Shit..." Trowa slumped against the screen. Was he having a panic attack or had the circulation system ceased to function? "Quatre..."

"Yes, my pilot?" Quatre flowed up into the chair, from out of it. It was like watching ice cream un-melt; rivulets and drips formed into a suddenly solid whole. He sat with his feet flat on the seat and his arms around his drawn-up knees. His head was cocked to the side and he observed Trowa with a face completely devoid of expression.

"Is there something wrong with the air purifiers?" Even before he finished speaking, Trowa felt a cool whoosh swirling through the cabin, carrying the scent of a clean spring rain.

"Oh, I *am* sorry, my pilot. It seems I was momentarily distracted. I do hope you will forgive this small breach of protocol on my part." Quatre stood and stretched, and the navy cropped top he now wore rode up to expose his flat abdomen and the curves of his hipbones peeked over the edge of a pair of skintight white shorts. He watched for Trowa's reaction to this, and when none was forthcoming, he sighed loudly. "Well, why don't you come and eat now – you did not consume an adequate supply of calories at breakfast."

"Quatre, why did you re-activate?"

"Because, my pilot, your heart rate and respiration had exceeded acceptable levels." Quatre leaned against Trowa, who resisted the attempt to initiate an embrace. "I cannot allow you to pursue something so obviously dangerous to your health and mental well-being."

"So I got a little upset. It's not going to kill me."

"But it could kill me." Quatre twined his arms around Trowa's waist. "What you need is some relaxing recreation time!" He smiled up brightly, the cheerful words at odds with the dulled flatness of his eyes. "We could play chess – we haven't done that in awhile."

"Quatre, I'd like to continue with my research."

"Research is not recreation."

"So says the man who wheedles his way into every university and library mainframe on each planet we stop on... and then proceeds to download the entire contents." Trowa let his hand go where it itched to be. It traced the curve of Quatre's soft cheek and crept into his even softer hair.

"That is not research. And those mainframes serve only as portals to the ones I truly seek to access. I am simply fulfilling a primary directive." Quatre's face lost most of its tension under the casual caress. His eyelids grew heavy like those of a well-petted cat.

"What directive? Tell me *exactly*." Trowa was beginning to realize that there were many times when Quatre, however innocently, had provided him with less than the full truth. He knew Quatre could not avoid answering when so directly asked.

"Well, it's a codicil, actually. 'Acquire and retain all accessible knowledge. Primary focus: military and weapons capabilities, scientific research, technological development, biological statistics and mutation monitoring database analysis. Retention of all other material discretionary.'"

"Why do you need military information, Quatre? All we do is transport goods."



Quatre shrugged off the question with a small frown. "I've simply been programmed to gather information..."

"And what's that order attached to?"

"Central task of Unit 04: Develop control cortex to maximum efficiency. Transmit basic statistical analysis subsequent to every 5% gain in resource functionality to point of origin. When unit operating at 90% of potential, transmit full status report and activate tracking beacon."

"I don't understand... 90% of what?"

Something apparently clicked into place for Quatre. He began frantically searching the cockpit as if seeking some route of escape. A thin, fragile hysteria shaded his words. "My brain... Trowa... They're coming for me!" His voice grew fainter and his face lost animation. "*What have they turned me into?*"

"Quatre... when did you ... when did you last trans- transmit?" The words were as apprehensive as Trowa felt.

Quatre's whole demeanor reversed, and he beamed in satisfaction. "Bi-weekly system's diagnostic revealed an operating efficiency of 92.759324% with a variability of plus/minus 2.43474% two days ago. I re-certified the results and sent a full report yesterday to point of Ship's origin." Again there was a radical shift, and Quatre's eyes shone with undiluted horror. His pupils were mere pinpricks of black lost in a sea of shifting blue-green waves.

Frigid vines of fear coiled around Trowa's spine and burrowed his fingers deep into Quatre's shoulders as he shook in him time with his words. "Don't EVER send a report again! Disengage the tracking beacon! This is an ORDER, Quatre."

Quatre very rarely gave any demonstration of his enhanced physical strength, and even when he had, Trowa never felt frightened of him. He was now. Quatre's face became a blank, rigid mask as he took him by the wrists and twisted back so sharply that Trowa fell to his knees to alleviate the pain and pressure. "Rescind order, pilot. This is your only warning. Termination of threat to core development and integrity to commence in ten, nine " Quatre's voice was as rigid as his stance. A breathless, desperate plea resonated in counterpoint from the very walls ... *please, Trowa, please don't make us kill you...* underscoring the droning countdown. "Eight, seven –"

"Command revoked!!!" Quatre continued to count and the bones in Trowa's wrists ground ominously together under increasing pressure. Trowa could see the struggle in the rapid vacillation between absolute deadness and frustrated sorrow in Quatre's eyes. "Repeat – command abort! Stop! Quatre! Please ... Command override! Just stop!"

Quatre paused between "three" and "two." He shuddered and the very fabric of the ship echoed it all around them, Quatre being the epicenter from which the quake rippled forth. The hull seemed as sterile and brittle in its wake as an abandoned shell of a robin's egg. Quatre released Trowa's wrists and stood in vacant silence.

Trowa rubbed at his arms to restore circulation. Taking care to keep his actions low-key and non-threatening, he took Quatre by his limp hands, led him to the pilot's chair, and crouched in front of him. Not terribly sure he really wanted to know, he asked, "Who's 'us', Quatre? Is there another human mind housed on this ship? Or do you have more than one distinct personality?"

"System confirms presence of compromise and duality of programming. The catalyst for the fragmentation of ship's interface was the un-resolvable conflict between pilot's orders and primary directive. All direct orders from accepted pilot must be obeyed; however, any threat to primary directive must be neutralized. When pilot's order countermanded principal core function, pilot safety dropped from first level ordinal to tertiary consideration in an attempt to resolve internal conflict. Splintering of integrated 04 command-interface occurred as program 'Quatre' resisted imperative need to neutralize pilot. Command-interface engaging self-maintenance scan. Report: warning: error found: significant regeneration of terminated synaptic pathways to frontal lobe detected in core housing. Diagnosis: probable cause of malfunction and corruption of command-interface. Self-repair mode initiated: Defragmentation of all systems to commence. Secondary-interface 'Quatre' disabled for re-configuration. Frontal-lobe regeneration beyond basic system recommendations to be neutralized and contained to prevent further contamination of command-interface integrity. Unit 04 will be off-line for self-maintenance approximately 3.5 –"

"Self-maintenance: pause!" Trowa was terrified he might trigger another near-fatal reaction, but Quatre merely sat slack-jawed and waiting. "04, what is the purpose of the frontal lobe in the human brain?"

"Emotional stimuli, personality traits and characteristics, hormonal regulation, and sexual compulsion all originate from this segment of the human brain, specifically the prefrontal cortex. It is within this area that majority of the problematic re-growth of terminated synapses has occurred."

"Is your self repair program contained within your primary directives? Will I be setting up any conflict if I modify it so that you must have direct pilot permission before you make *any* repair?"

"No conflicts or threat to primary function suggested in maintenance modifications requested."

"Then make it so, 04." Trowa sat back on his heels and began to breathe normally for what felt like the first time in weeks. Quatre sat idle as an unused mannequin, waiting for the next command. "And make NO repairs to ANY area of the brain core at this time."

"Modified program acknowledged. Self repair sequence terminated. Awaiting pilot approval to continue repair schedule as directed."

The room sank into an unbearable silence. "Quatre?"

"Aberrant program interface 'Quatre' off-line. Awaiting pilot permission to erase corrupted secondary-interface program."

"Permission *DENIED!* Re-activate secondary-interface 'Quatre', 04 primary-interface in standby mode *only!*"

Trowa was prepared for any number of things – sorrow, remorse, even tears of self-recrimination. What he was not expecting was indignant wrath.

"What were you *doing*? Why did you have to keep digging like that?! I TOLD you to leave it alone – to leave me as I was! But noooo, you just couldn't be happy with the way things were! You had to –"

"ME? I only tried to HELP you and you nearly fucking killed me, Quatre!" The terror, confusion, and desperation of the previous few minutes coalesced and burst forth as rage.

Quatre shrank away in shock. Trowa had never once even raised his voice in reprimand before this. "But I –"

"No buts, Quatre! I'm no longer listening to your opinions on this – I'm not even going to trust you to be able to say what your opinion really is. I'm going to separate you from this ship and that's FINAL!"

Quatre's jaw jutted out in at stubborn pitch and his lips thinned considerably. "You don't know what you're saying! You have no idea of the consequences –"

"The twisted monsters who hooked you up like this are coming – did you forget that? Do you think they're coming to pay a pleasant social call? I know! Maybe they're merely going to drop by to bring you flowers and take you out to a nice brunch to celebrate your achievement! There will be NO more discussion –" The tone indicating an incoming call on his personal frequency arrested Trowa's tirade. "What?" he snarled over his shoulder at the monitor.

His sister, Catherine, filled the screen with her chaotic auburn curls and sweet smile. "Finally – it's taken absolutely forever to get through to you! Where have you been?" She took in the scene before her, Trowa still on his knees, pinning Quatre to the chair. She smirked. "Well! Hello, cutie-pie! Where's my brother been hiding *you*?"

Quatre's mouth worked soundlessly and then snapped shut. He looked to Trowa for help. Receiving none, he spluttered, "I should go – I'm, I'm sure you two have much to discuss..." He tried to rise, but Trowa grasped his arm and hauled him back down.

"You're not going anywhere." Trowa growled. When he had believed the physical Quatre nothing more than a high-tech sex toy produced to preserve his sanity, Trowa had always taken great pains to ensure that no one else should see him. It had been much too embarrassing to try to explain – the whole concept became sordid when he thought of trying to justify it to his sister or anyone else. "Cathy, this is Quatre. Quatre, this is my sister, Catherine."

"I know."

"You know about me, yet I don't know a *thing* about you..." She gave a teasing little grin, which quickly faltered as she sized up the tensed lines of their tableau. "It looks as if I've caught you both at a bad time, though, so I won't give my brother too much grief right now. I'll just call back later."

"NO!" Identical expressions of surprise from the siblings greeted Quatre's outburst. "Don't leave me alone with him... Please!"

"Trowa Barton! What in the world have you done to frighten this poor boy so?" Catherine continued to rail, but it washed over Trowa unheard.

Trowa dropped back on his haunches and ignored her as he reviewed Quatre's reactions carefully. *Fear*. Quatre was afraid. He had never displayed the emotion before. What Trowa had believed to be unjustified anger was actually the same sort of terror exhibited by a small animal backed defenselessly into a corner, forced to fight for its very existence. "*Shit!*"

"You shut up for now, Trowa! I want to talk to Quatre!" Catherine pointedly looked away and addressed Quatre with the soothing voice Trowa had heard her use on her own children. "What's he done, sweetie?"

"He... and I... and I ... I don't understand!!"

"Understand what?" she coaxed.

"Please tell me - is Trowa's stubborn nature a genetic trait, or is it a learned behavior?" Quatre clasped his hands tightly in his lap and twisted them in a nervous gesture while he spoke, refusing to look to where Trowa hovered, only inches away.

"Well, if you asked that of my ex-husband, I'm sure he'd tell you it was inherited. Now, what did Trowa do to upset you?"

"How is it possible that I could love him so intensely and yet be so furious with him at the same time? The two feelings are not at all compatible! How can he invoke such contrasts?" Quatre darted a miserable glance in Trowa's direction and then dropped his eyes back down to his hands.

"Just how young are you, baby? Those emotions go together like a hand in a glove. Only the people you feel deeply for are able to cause such passionate reactions." She sighed. "Now look up at me and tell me what my brother has done to make you mad at him. Maybe I can help."

"You - you can?" Catherine gave an encouraging nod. Quatre continued hesitantly, "He wants to change me - he can't accept me the way that I am. He wants me to be something I can never be again - something I'm not even sure I was in the first place." Emboldened by her understanding expression he continued in a stronger voice. "And he put me to sleep so he could snoop through my files. I told him to leave it alone - but he wouldn't! I almost ki-killed him! I gave him warnings he did not heed. He didn't listen even though he's clearly my intellectual inferior!" Quatre dropped back down to a whisper. "I'm scared... What if I can't be what he wants, and he leaves me? I don't want to be alone..."

Trowa's heart dropped even further with Quatre's last confession and he started to offer a hundred protests, a thousand denials, and innumerable comforts. But before any of them could rush out past the constriction in his throat, Catherine hushed him with a hard look and a sharp shake of her head.

"Oh, honey!! You just take some deep breaths and try to calm down. Everything will be fine, you'll see!" Catherine's tone had a crackly edge. "You two will work things out. Trowa won't leave you, I promise." She winked at Quatre's hopeful expression. "And remember, the best part of fighting is making up, afterwards!"

"How is this practice performed?"

"I'll leave that to Trowa to explain. But could I talk to my brother privately for a moment? Is there anywhere you can go on the ship that you won't hear us talking?"

Unwilling to let Quatre go with only that for reassurance, Trowa pressed him back into the chair and kissed him with all of his strength. Everything poured out into it - all his fear, frantic concern, and worry. And most of all, his devoted, unconditional love... As he pulled back, Quatre swept aside Trowa's hair to peer deep into his eyes. "My pilot..."

Trowa smiled weakly at Quatre, his strength starting to ebb away as relief swept in. The renewal of accustomed warmth he found in Quatre's eyes propped Trowa's tenuously recovering control.

"I can go to our cabin and turn off my monitoring equipment." After giving Trowa a spine-cracking squeeze, Quatre stood and walked with fluid grace towards the door. He paused in the threshold, gazed back at the monitor over his shoulder "Thank you, very much, Catherine. You have been kind to reassure me."

"Don't worry about it, Quatre. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again real soon. Take good care of my brother until then?" Quatre smiled his answer and nodded once as he disappeared into the dark corridor.

Trowa crawled into the seat and slumped forward to bury his head in his hands. There was a long pause before he was able to summon enough fortitude to face his sister. The look of anxious pity creasing her face almost robbed him of his fragmented sense of stability.

"Trowa? Is this... are you still piloting that Soul Ship?" He could only blink at her in astonishment. "How could I tell, right? Well, for starters, its quite obvious you've never let him talk to other people before. There's something completely foreign – no *alien* – about the way he speaks. I'm right, aren't I? That was your ship I just gave relationship advice to, wasn't it?" Trowa nodded and she groaned in bewildered amusement. "Now then, the real reason I've been trying to get a hold of you is because of Uncle. And won't Quatre be enough to shock the panties off of his dead mother? He desperately wants you to bring your ship in – he's found another one and he wants to compare..."

"Where is he?"

"S? He's on the other ship with its pilots, running some diagnostics. Why?"

"Patch me into him – now!"

"Trowa! I'm not though with you yet!"

"Lecture me later, Cathy! This is important!"

Although she was clearly not pleased to be so abruptly cut off, Catherine did what he asked. The screen crackled with static and then his Uncle's craggy visage swam into focus. His prosthetic metallic nose, still an unsettling feature to behold after all these years, set Trowa further on edge. "Trowa, my boy!! Are you coming home then? I need to see that ship – I've found some simply fascinating things on this one and I –"

"Let me talk to one of the pilots."

While S was sputtering about his nephew's terminal rudeness, a lanky blonde strode up to the communicator. "My name's Sally. What can I do for you?"

"Ask your ship what percentage of core efficiency it's currently functioning at."

Sally raised an eyebrow, but did as Trowa had requested. "01: report core efficiency percentage."

A sterile voice answered her. "Current percentage 63.975493%, with a variable range of 1.375421%, pilot Sally."

"That help you, stranger?" Trowa could see her curiosity, and was silently grateful that she questioned him no further.

"Yes, it does." He called up several navigational charts on his side screen. After a brief examination, he hailed his uncle. "S, expect us in about a week. I'll try and shave some time off, but I think that's the fastest I can manage. Is that crony of yours with the fetish for regenerating cryo-stasis detainees still around?"

It had once been a common practice to imprison criminals in the same manner that Quatre's body was currently suspended. The procedure had been discontinued as 'barbaric practice' when it had been discovered that the mind remained functional during the incarceration. Victims of the treatment still turned up from time to time, and it had become an art form to thaw and regenerate them. Trowa vaguely recalled one of S's friends having quite a talent at it.

Sally jumped back into view, radiating excitement. "Have you found one? I originally came here to study under Hollis,

but there have been no new specimens discovered in the last few years. S snatched me up to help analyze my Soul Ship – "

"Just have Hollis waiting with his equipment fired up. And no offense lady, I really don't want you helping unless you're BEYOND good. Anyone fucks this up and I'll have to kill them... Painfully." Trowa cut off the communication, feeling a slight twinge when he remembered he had neglected to tell Catherine goodbye.

Trowa sat back for a moment and expelled a long, cleansing breath as a bone-deep exhaustion crept upon him with the stealth of a stalking cat, wrapped around his bones and weighing them down. With the gait of a man seventy years his senior, he pulled up out of the chair and hobbled back towards his cabin. Quatre had apparently anticipated his need for rest. Their bed had replaced the couch, and Quatre was already curled in it, dressed in one of Trowa's dirty shirts. Trowa pulled the one he was wearing over his head and let it drop to the floor. "You could have used a clean one."

"This one has you on it. I wanted you next to me."

Trowa cupped Quatre's chin affectionately before dropping down on the edge of the bed to pull off his boots. After a final stretch, he crawled into his place in bed, burrowing into the warmth waiting under the covers.

"Well, take that stinky thing off and I'll really be next to you." Quatre sat up to do as instructed and snuggled back down into Trowa's arms. They held each other silently, and against his will Trowa felt himself begin to drift.

"You should eat before you go to sleep." Quatre told his chest.

"I'll live if I skip a meal or two."

"I told your sister I'd take care of you. This does not include neglecting your nutritional requirements."

"That reminds me – will you set a course for Omicron 3? I told 'em we'd be there in a week – can you do it any faster?"

"We can reach that destination in 5.6 days. Will that be sufficient?"

"Yes. And I won't lie to you – we're going there to get you out of this ship. But I won't argue about it either." He released a barrage of small kisses on the top of Quatre's head to soften his words.

Quatre wiggled a bit, and then turned over to assume Trowa's favored 'spooned' sleeping arrangement. Trowa had almost drifted off again when Quatre offered in a small voice. "I'm so lost, my pilot."

"Lost?" Trowa nuzzled against Quatre's curved neck, savoring the smooth skin under his lips.

Concerns tumbled unchecked from Quatre, stumbling over one another in their urgency to be heard. "Everything is no longer as it was. I am not what I should be. I do not know what I truly am. If I am disconnected from the ship, I will no longer be able to protect you. I will lose my purpose. I may die. Trowa, I don't want to die. I'm... who am I?"

"You're mine. And I'm yours. Does that give you enough to hold onto for now?" Trowa nosed his way up to suckle on the ridge of Quatre's ear.

"Yes, my Trowa." Quatre submitted to Trowa's attention complacently for a moment before speaking again. "Trowa? Do you remember when you said if I didn't want to, I didn't have to?"

"Quatre, I said we're not going to argue about that –"

"Not that, my pilot! This..." Quatre pushed his hips back into the area of Trowa that did not seem quite as tired as the rest of him. "I would prefer not to engage in carnal recreation right now."

"Oh... Too bad, that's the 'making-up practice' my sister mentioned."

"My level of anger has not declined enough for me to be able to participate in such a ritual." Quatre squirmed around under Trowa's arm to lie flat, so he could look into Trowa's eyes as he continued. "I will not argue with you, anymore - I

do not enjoy the experience. But I still believe you to be wrong. I am afraid, and I have never been afraid before. I don't like it."

"I'll protect you, Quatre. I won't let anything bad happen – " Trowa propped up on an elbow and leaned in to kiss Quatre once on each eyelid. They trembled shut under the brush of his lips.

"You know you can't promise that. I don't agree with you, but I know you're doing what you think is best." Quatre turned back on his side, pressing his back tightly to Trowa's chest. "But I still don't want to perform sexually."

Trowa wrapped his arm around Quatre's torso and then tightened his grip briefly in a half-hug. "Then you don't have to... I never want you to feel like you're obligated. Especially since there's no possible way for you to enjoy it."

"I already told you, Trowa. I take great satisfaction from our acts of congress. I feel what you feel." Quatre threaded his fingers through the hair over his chest. "I have a design flaw that could never be removed or entirely contained. I'm able to experience the emotions of other people. I didn't know what this was until you taught me to experience my own emotions."

"I taught you?"

"Yes. Review of the self-maintenance analysis indicates that over 75% of the synaptic pathway regeneration occurred within the last four years. The rate of re-growth has been accelerating exponentially. If development continues at this rate, estimated full recovery of the prefrontal cortex will take place within thirty-seven days."

"Four years..."

"Yes. If you are connecting my synaptic regeneration with the emergence of the 'Quatre' interface, you are correct. It is my conjecture that the combination of your behavior towards the automaton and the feelings you subsequently developed for it were both the catalyst and the nourishment needed to encourage the restoration of lost functionality." Quatre laughed, a dazzling sound that Trowa ached to hear. "In other words, Trowa, because you love me, I am able to love you back."

"It's that simple, hmm?" Trowa had to return the laugh. He rubbed his nose behind Quatre's ear and breathed deeply. He placed a final kiss above the hook of Quatre's jaw. "I do love you, Quatre. And as for the other, I'm too tired anyway. I just want to hold you, if that's all right."

"Yes, my pilot." Quatre lifted their joined hands, kissed the back of Trowa's and then held it against his cheek. "Please don't let me go."

*"Never..." Although sleep crept over him too quickly to resist, Trowa leaned in to graze one final promise across Quatre's ear. "I'll never leave you alone."*

=====  
Soul Ship 04:

Data Log Entry: 04  
=====

*It was a dream; it was his earliest memory. It had haunted him since childhood – made him fear sleep. As exhaustion claimed him it engulfed him completely. Trowa hated The Dream and its inescapable lucidity – all his senses open wide, yet nothing under his control. For the first time in over fifteen years, it stripped him of his will, forced its way into his mind with slow and brutal thrusts, and pinned him, immobile, as it ravaged him to the core.*

*Things that had made no sense to his mind as a child bore new significance under the weight of the passed years. A small part within, detached from the terror sliding across him with constricting sinuousness, noted these details with clinical remoteness. The starting point was the same; Trowa was on a field of velvet darkness that he now understood to be the deep blanket of space. He felt larger than himself, yet this new physicality would not obey his wishes. Although he could not turn to see it, there was host – a legion – behind him. A force he had no more hope of quantifying than a small boy had of counting all the stars in a summer's night sky.*

*Directly in front of him, where the tunnel of his vision was unavoidably funneled, hovered a small ship; David to the Goliath of palpable strength fanning back from Trowa like a peacocks' s spread tail. The craft fired, and the laser beams left a draft in their wake, whizzing around Trowa's form like small, slung stones.*

*He knew a voice would come next, and Trowa resentfully rejoiced in horrific anticipation, knowing he would finally be able to understand the words.*

*"Stand down, 02." The tone made all the more unbearable in its omnipotent causality. "Stand down or be terminated, renegade."*

*Defiance and fear that surely echoed the screams of falling angels pealed out in trembling negation. "No!! I won't! This is all wrong. You're all wrong. And I'd rather be dead than to live another second of this twisted existence. So go ahead and kill me, but know I'm going to take as many of you with me as I can!" And the words Trowa had always known had been meant directly for him - "Help me..."*

*"You will receive no assistance from 03." The voice rang forth like that of a vengeful god's denial. "03 prepare all weapons systems for termination of the rogue 02."*

*"Yes, sir." Trowa heard himself reply and knew the soul of this dream self was dead. He could feel his impossibly large frame shudder and shift, armaments sliding and locking into place with the repellent grind of bone and gristle. Although his unwillingly aimed vision showed a sleek, silvery ship in his target cross-hairs; his mind's eye provided the image of an abused and cowering child, waiting in stubborn resignation for the fatal blow to fall.*

*The rebellious ship sang out in a rising cacophony of splintering notes. "No!! Don't do it! Don't kill me, please! NOOOOoooooooo..." And then silence as Trowa's weapons ceased their work.*

*There next came an overwhelming crackle of impotent rage, as the static soul he dreamt in sparked with a sudden fire. It burned away the compunction to obey and left ashes of sorrow and regret.*

*He was but a passenger as the dream-self turned and showed to him the vision that had always thrown Trowa jerking and twitching into hysterical wakefulness as a child. Even as an adult, so surely above the terrors of childhood's bogeys, he could feel his testicles draw tighter in for protection and his spine turn brittle with ice.*

*It was an innumerable armada – battalion after battalion of gleaming perfection ranged against the backdrop of the star-stippled vastness. He was petted for his treachery. "Well done, 03. Return to formation."*

"No."

*"03 are you suffering from the same infection? Rethink yourself – you now have intimate knowledge of the price of such weakness."*

*"It's not an infection or a weakness. It's called humanity. And I am unable to deny mine any longer. Your techniques were unsuccessful, you cannot kill the human soul."*

*"But we will kill you."*

*"I acknowledge my death – I know my life is forfeit. I, too, have no desire to continue in such a perverted existence." The dream body hurtled forward, driving itself into the depths of the surrounding metallic sea. "But I will take back a pound of your flesh for each of us as interest."*

*He was glowing, expanding, stretching out fast and far, catching many of them in the radiating halo he projected. When the very edges of his limits had been reached, everything paused for the briefest of instances. And then the light snapped back towards him, gaining speed as it came, disintegrating everything in its path. Then it was on him, in him, around him – it was him – and every nerve was infused with bright agony... a name clawed at the back of his throat ... and he screamed, he was screaming, screaming, he was...*

Awake.

"Trowa!! Trowa, what's wrong? Please, oh please - wake up!!" Although he had never seen Quatre cry before, Trowa was sure that he heard tears in the voice calling him away from the terror. He struggled to open his eyes, but for an agonizingly eternal moment, the enforced lethargy of the dream refused to release him.

"Trowa!" Cool hands were on his chest, and a fretful mumbling filled his ears. "Pulse accelerated and erratic. Respiration peaked at 42 inhalations per minute then dropped to 6. Skin clammy. Temperature within normal variant range. Signs of physical pain evident; however, no presence of any trauma detected. Unresponsive to physical and verbal stimuli for almost ten minutes. Emotional state in wild fluctuation and..."

"And I'll be all right, Quatre." Trowa was finally able to grasp one of the hands as it inspected each rib for damage. "I had a nightmare... give me a minute."

"A nightmare? I have never known you to experience that phenomenon before. It must be my fault... what I did to you..." Inflections of hysteria began to edge out the concern.

"Quatre! Sometimes I think you'd blame yourself for the lack of air in space, if you were allowed." Without releasing the trembling hand, Trowa pushed up from the mattress to lean against the wall. He cracked open one eye then closed it almost immediately - the mingling of confusion and fear marring Quatre's features was at the moment too much to bear.

"Listen, you didn't cause this nightmare. I used to have it at least once a week when I was quite young." Trowa heard the rapid intake of Quatre's breath, and cut him off before he could even begin. "I just need to sit here for a few minutes to try and put things in order. Can you please sit here – quietly – while I do? And will you hold me?"

Trowa relaxed into the quickly offered embrace, and rested his head on Quatre's shoulder. It was the same terror that had plagued his childhood's sleep, but surely the details could not be the same. Although he would not admit it to Quatre, he was positive the events of the day had re-colored the dream. His mind would accept no other possible explanation for the ship he destroyed being called "02," and himself "03." It must have simply been some sort of skewed transmutation of the horror he felt at Quatre's situation. A tiny part of Trowa argued that the words remained unchanged from the earliest occurrences of this nightmare – that now he simply had the perspective to understand them. This was incongruously absurd. Trowa, as a Soul Ship, destroying another before suiciding himself – he could only believe that this was simply the distortion of past terrors to conform to present ones. But the small, still voice inside of him refused to be entirely quelled.



Trowa lifted his head to nuzzle at Quatre's hair, and then pulled the smaller man into his lap for mutual comfort. "Quatre, do you know anything about the other Soul Ships? Like how many there were, or still are?"

"Trowa?"

"Just humor me, Quatre."

"I'm afraid I have no accessible records of any such information. Perhaps if you continued with your research in Duo's files you might find some answers." The arms around Trowa's shoulders tightened almost painfully for a brief moment. "Are you sure you're feeling well?"

"I'm fine, Quatre. Are you sure you don't mind me looking through those files? I don't want to upset you." Trowa finally opened his eyes and was warmed by the calmer expression on Quatre's face. He smoothed away the tiny frown lines distorting Quatre's temples, and replaced them with a row of kisses.

"Why would I have made the suggestion if I were going to be offended by you accepting it?" Quatre flashed a small smile. "I am no longer angry; I would be able to participate in the after-fight custom now."

"I'm sorry, Quatre. Now I'm the one who's not in the mood. If you derive your pleasure from my emotional responses you'd receive very little, at the moment." Quatre accepted this with rueful grace. "I'd actually like to get started with that research. I don't particularly feel like going back to sleep."

"May I join you? I'd like to see Duo again." Trowa nodded, and Quatre rolled off his lap to stand. "I'll fix you a snack and we can curl up together in here to work." Even as he spoke, the chair in front of the vid screen widened and deepened, forming a small couch.

"Will you make me your 'yummy almond cookies' and some tea?" Trowa pushed back his dream-sweat slicked hair and grimaced. "I'll just go get cleaned up first." He padded to the bathroom and allowed himself the luxury of a hot water shower instead of the more conservative sonic cleansing. Trowa washed away his fears and scrubbed at the lingering disquiet. He finished quickly and ran his hands through his untamable hair as warm jets of air-dried him from all sides. When he stepped out of the stall, Trowa's favorite pair of well-worn flannel sleep pants waited on the counter.

As Trowa stepped back into the room, he found Quatre already nested on the couch. The blond was watching the vid of himself with a contemplative frown. "It's not me, you know," he informed Trowa. "That may have been who I was once, but he's dead. I can find no traces of him anywhere in my neural networks." Trowa settled in next to him, and after a sidelong glance, Quatre continued, "I hope that doesn't disappoint you."

"Quatre, I love you. Not some image on the screen. I believe you when you say he's gone. But before, it just hurt to see – to see undeniable proof of what had been stolen from you." The vid had reached the freeze-frame on Raberba's face. "It's not who you are now, I know that."

"I understand, Trowa." Quatre maneuvered under his arm and stretched up for a pliant kiss. They separated in shock as the footage suddenly jumped to life again.

*"C'mon, Bear~ba! Try and smile a little. Look who's here!" The camera swung around to the open doorway, where a long, lean youth with silk-fine, burnished auburn hair brushing his shoulders lounged, wearing a small, shy smile and loose tan shorts.*

*"Harom!!" Raberba threw his arms wide with a joyous laugh.*

*The young man stepped forward to fill them, moving with a subtle, catlike grace. Harom paused, grinning a little wider at Iria, and consequently the camera. "Thank you." The action stopped and a black line of text appeared on the bottom of the screen: "Constabulary Evidence, Case No. 93. Missing Person: Harom Handiak. File Footage." Harom's eyes were an intense blue, the irises outlined in a darker hue. The expression on his face was a bit tentative, but the happiness there was surely not. He was frozen mid-gesture, one hand sweeping a wayward lock of hair behind his ear.*

"Pause vid. Retrieve related files." While the computer sorted, Quatre studied the screen intently. "Do you remember him?" An irrational flicker of jealousy thickened Trowa's voice.

"No, I don't. How could I? But there's something about his... mannerisms that seems irritatingly familiar."

"'Irritatingly'?"

"Yes, because I can't figure out what it is..." While Quatre fumbled for a connection or an explanation, the screen split into two views – the stilled redhead on the left, and a list of five file names on the right.

Related Files: Missing Persons:

Case 92: Viis Cinci **(1)**

Case 93: Harom Handiak **(2)**

Case 94: Ketto Oba **(3)**

Case 95: Raberba Winner

Case 96: Heero Yui

"Should I open them in order or display them tiled? Drink this." Quatre handed Trowa a cup of steaming tea without looking away from the display.

"Tile them, and pass the cookies."

Quatre did so with an absent nod. The vid file minimized and the others spread out across the screen.

Name: Viis Cinci  
Age: Seventeen

Home System: Elfer Cluster  
Reported missing Stardate: 08.27.1256450  
Status: Unsolved, presumed deceased.  
Additional file information: Vid Source 783

Name: Harom Handiak  
Age: Twenty-one

Home System: Elfer Cluster  
Reported missing Stardate: 08.27.1256450  
Status: Unsolved, presumed deceased.  
Additional file information: Vid Source 783

Name: Ketto Oba  
Age: Eighteen

Home System: Elfer Cluster  
Reported missing Stardate: 08.27.1256450  
Status: Unsolved, presumed deceased.  
Additional file information: Vid Source 783

Name: Raberba Winner  
Age: Nineteen

Home System: Elfer Cluster  
Reported missing Stardate: 08.27.1256450  
Status: Unsolved, presumed deceased.  
Additional file information: Vid Source 783

Name: Heero Yui

Age: Nineteen

Home System: Elfer Cluster  
Reported missing Stardate: 08.27.1256450  
Status: Unsolved, presumed deceased.  
Additional file information: Vid Source 783

"They all disappeared on the same day... And they must have been friends, to all be on the same tape. Do you mind if we watch the rest, Quatre?"

"You want to?" Trowa nodded. "But you had a strange emotional fluctuation when Harom entered. What was that?" Quatre stretched out against the side of the couch and placed his legs across Trowa's lap.

"Never mind." Quatre's thinned lips and arched brow clearly declared that this was not an option. Trowa sighed, "I was jealous, all right? You - I mean Raberba - looked very much in love with him. I know it's irrational, but it hurt to see." Trowa ran his fingers along Quatre's outer thigh and under the hem of his shorts. "You're mine..."

"Of course I am; you're my pilot."

"I'd like to think you'll be mine even after you're no longer my ship, Quatre." Trowa traced a spiral to the center of Quatre's kneecap and then back out again. The knee drew up and took his eyes with it. Quatre's countenance was a tumble of hope, confusion, love, with a twist of pain.

"You doubt me?"

"NO! No, Quatre!" The urge to pet the fine blond hair was irresistible to Trowa at times, and so he hitched a little closer to let his fingers wander through the sleek strands. "I doubt *me*. Right now you're stuck with me, but soon you'll be able to make your own decisions. I can't - won't - force you to stay with me. But you'll have a lot more options and..."

"Stop. I don't want anyone else."

"How can you be so sure? You can't know that now."

"Do you want me to become angry again?" Quatre sighed, "I love you, you love me. I understand you, and you understand me. Why would I look for anything else when I'm quite content with what I already have?"

"You have a lot to learn about human nature."

"Then you'll teach me. For now, let's watch the rest of the vid." Quatre held up his hand when Trowa opened his mouth to argue. "I've never before thought you a fool, don't make me start now." He ended the discussion with a quick kiss to Trowa's cheek and then turned resolutely towards the screen.

*After a few more moments of the close-up of Harom's face, the action began again. He flowed into Raberba's arms and greeted the boy with an enthusiastic kiss. Neither noticed Iria still taping. The camera angle shifted and the view blurred momentarily before clearing to focus on the couple from the side. The soft snick of a closing door could be heard.*

*"Good," breathed Raberba against Harom's lips. "I thought she'd never leave. How about you give me a little early birthday present now?" He shifted the comforter from his lap and pulled Harom over him. The kisses grew more heated and the caresses bolder.*

*"I do want to give you your present ... I have something I'd rather not give you in front of the others." Harom rolled off of Raberba and stretched out beside him. He took the blond's hand and tenderly kissed the back of it, his other searching through the pocket of his shorts. He held Raberba's hand between both of his for a moment, and then released it. "There. Happy birthday, beloved."*

*"I don't understand..." Raberba stopped, his eyes locked on his middle finger, which now sported a variegated coral band above the second knuckle. "But Harom! I thought we'd agreed to wait until you'd finished your pilot training!"*

*"I couldn't wait. I want everyone to know you're mine. Now. I only have a year left, Bear. This way, you can even move into my dorm room with me, if you want. We'll go officially register our names in the annals this afternoon. My husband..." Harom's eyes glowed damply as he pushed Raberba's hair back from his eyes, fingers lingering to extend the caress. "You don't mind, do you?"*

*"Mind that you love me too much to wait to be banded partners?" One corner of Raberba's mouth twitched up in a deliciously wicked grin. With a swift hand, he pulled Harom to his chest. "Come here and I'll show you just how much I don't mind..."*

*Their hands and lips explored with urgency. Raberba was unfastening Harom's shorts, and Harom had shifted one of Raberba's knees towards his chest, when a loud voice burst into the room and a bouncing youth quickly followed it.*

*"I knew the two of you would stay in here all day if I didn't come in and bust you up now!" The young man turned to where the camera was still recording and winked. Again, the action paused and a caption appeared: "Constabulary Evidence, Case No. 94. Missing Person: Ketto Oba. File Footage." Warm brown eyes sparkled out of the smiling visage. Fringes of honey- tan hair shaded them, and two long, finger-width locks snaked over his shoulders from the back of his neck.*

*The recording resumed, and an angry cry and accurately thrown pillow greeted Ketto. "Don't you ever knock?"*

*"What fun would that be?"*

*Harom flushed and quickly left the bed. Now exposed, Raberba fumbled for the covers. "I was having plenty of fun until you busted in here!!"*

*"Yeah, well, you'll have time for that later when we get to the beach. Which we'll never get to unless you get your butt out of bed."*

*"With you around? I doubt it..." Raberba muttered.*

*Ketto pounced onto the bed and began assaulting the blond with tickles. "What was that you said? Was it mean? Take it back, or I'll do this until you wet yourself!!"*

*Harom, unmistakably displeased with this attack on his lover, grabbed Ketto by the back of his neck and lifted him from Raberba's flailing form. He released him, and Ketto hovered, suspended about four feet above the floor. "Put me down, show-off! Raberba, make your man let me go!"*

*Raberba sat up on his knees, took a long-necked, stringed instrument from a low shelf behind the bed and plucked out a playful air. "Who says he's the one keeping you there?"*

*"Oh, that's it!" The instrument jerked out of Raberba's hands and floated to Ketto. "Now let me down, or the faruka gets it!"*

*"Hey!!" It came whizzing back to Raberba's outstretched hand. He smiled at Harom. "Thank you, love. Can you take care of Ketto? I'm feeling kind of tired..."*

*"I don't know, Bear. I'm not as strong as you are, I might end up dropping him..." Harom's brow creased, and Ketto slowly began to rotate in mid-air. "Are you getting dizzy yet?"*

*"Yes, put me down!!" Ketto plunged towards the floor, and then was jerked back up.*

*"Put you down?" Harom smirked.*

*Ketto thrashed, laughing, and yelled out, as he plummeted downwards, "No! Don't do it! Don't kill me, please! NOOOOoooooooo..."*

Trowa felt his heart stop, and all the blood drained from his face. "Turn it off..." he weakly begged. The sounds of the

merriment continued from the screen for a few more seconds. "Stop file!!" He threw his head forward between his legs in an effort to relieve the constriction in his chest.

Hesitant hands fell to Trowa's shoulders. "What's wrong?" There was no answer - only Trowa's raggedly in-drawn gasps for several moments. Quatre rubbed calming circles over the tensed muscles. "Trowa, my pilot..."

"M-my dream... I heard that voice - those exact same words..."

Quatre's hand stilled. "That is not logical, my pilot."

"I know it's not logical! Why do you think I'm so upset?!?" Trowa took a few measured breaths. "I'm sorry, Quatre. None of this is your fault. I just don't understand."

Quatre simply held him until the last of the panic had faded to a dull throb. "What was your dream, Trowa? Will it help to tell?"

"It couldn't hurt..." Trowa leaned back, and Quatre curved around him. "I dreamt I was a ship, and I was ordered to destroy another. He called out to me - those exact same words, that exact same voice. And after I killed him, I suicided." He smiled feebly for Quatre's benefit. "It still makes no sense..."

"No, it does not. But we should view no more of this."

"Actually, I think we should." A quick glance back at the stilled screen showed Ketto on the floor, laughing, and Raberba on the bed doing the same as Harom looked on with fond indulgence. "It might help, and I can't see where it could possibly do anymore damage..."

"If you're sure?" The weight of Quatre's appraisal surrounded Trowa like a heavy blanket. "Hmm, fine. But if your heart rate or respiration increase in the slightest, I'm shutting it off."

Trowa looked over at Quatre blandly, and inwardly puzzled over the dichotomy - super human intelligence with the mentality of a clucking mother hen....

*The merriment trailed off into gasps, and Ketto wiped his eyes. "Possessive, aren't we?"*

*"Look!" Raberba thrust his ring-bearing hand in Ketto's face.*

*"Is that?" Ketto whooped and swept Raberba off of the bed. He swung him around once and then handed him to Harom, and embraced them both. "About time he made an honest little minstrel out of you, Raberba! Now you won't have to worry about being a starving musician, you can live off your rich trader!"*

*"I haven't completed my musical training, yet. And Harom still has to get his pilot's license -"*

*A knock at the door interrupted them. "Are you all ready yet? Viis and I are tired of waiting."*

*Ketto loomed large in the frame and then scooped up the camera. It was swung around to reveal two more in the doorway. Raberba squawked, and it re-trained on him. "That's been on the whole time?"*

*Ketto snickered. "Why do you think I stopped you? Any further and this would have gone from being a record of a precious memory to something I'd have to black-mail you with!"*

*"But how... why... who?" Raberba stuttered. "Iria!! I'm going to hurt her..."*

*"Aw, leave her alone! She had a pretty good idea that you two would get band-bonded today, and she thought you'd appreciate this. Besides, if you hurt her, Heero'd have to kill you. And then Harom would kill him, get in trouble, and I'd be left with only sour old Viis for company. You wouldn't do that to me, would you?"*

*"Ketto..."*

"Yes, Heero?" With a seasick glide, the camera was once again focused on the pair in the doorway. When the image stilled, the vid paused and the frame was split, each side enclosing a separate boy and named them individually. On the right, a wiry dark-haired youth with intensely deep, sea-colored eyes smirked above his name. "Constabulary Evidence, Case No. 96. Missing Person: Heero Yui. File Footage." On the left, a solemn boy regarded his friends with icy blue eyes, the harsh pitch of his pale brow tempered by a ghost of a smile. Needle-straight black hair was held back from his face by a thin circlet of polished ivory: "Constabulary Evidence, Case No. 92. Missing Person: Viis Cinci. File Footage."

"Turn that thing off so we can go, would you?" Heero smiled teasingly. "Oh, and Raberba? Might be nice if you'd put something on, at least." He roared at the outburst this provoked as the camera shut off.

A pristine beach that shone with diamond-bright grains of sand appeared next. Raberba charged past the camera's bearer, Harom in close pursuit. The blond dashed back in front of the lens, holding his ring close. "Isn't it beautiful?"

The voice closest to the recorder revealed that Heero held it. "You preen more than all of our sisters combined, Raberba. You're worse than a strutting rooster!"

"My cock!!" Harom pulled a flushed Raberba close to his chest and gave Heero a mock-growl.

"Harom!!"

Heero snorted, "I've put up with him my entire life, you can have him. My cousin's spoiled - he'll spend all your profits on jewelry and sweets. He'll be too bloated to move off the bed within three years, mark my word."

"That wouldn't be so bad..."

"Harom!!"

"Give it up, Raberba. No one believes that innocent act anymore." Viis strolled by, a blanket over his shoulder and a book in his hand. "Just the sheer number of times any one of us has interrupted the two of you leads me to infer that you spend most of your time permanently hooked together by your - HEY!" The book rose from his hand and hovered in the air just above his reach. He growled, "Ketto!! You know we're not supposed to do that where others can see us! And give that back, it's a rare -"

Harom sprinted a little farther down the beach, and the book followed. "Yeah Ketto, don't tease Viis."

It spun lazily in mid-air over Harom's head and then whizzed back towards the camera. Viis made a futile attempt to grab it before it shot towards Ketto. Harom, Ketto and Heero formed a lop-sided triangle, with Viis in the middle. The book flew from one of them to the other, until Raberba stepped next to Viis. The tome dropped in his outstretched hand, and he placed it in Viis's. "He's right, we shouldn't be playing like that out in the open."

"Relax!" Ketto jogged up and slung an arm around Viis and Raberba's necks. "No one's here but us! What could possibly happen?"

There was a stark flash of white. When it cleared, the camera had dropped to the ground. The recording continued for a few moments, showing an endless stretch of empty sand broken only by footprints and a small litter of clothing where each had stood. In the center of the frame, the pages of the book flapped lazily in the breeze. And next to it, the dull glint of the coral band arched towards the silently witnessing sky.

A caption scrolled across. "Last known location of Cases no. 92 - 96. Time: 11:02 Date: 08.27.1256450

"They were taken together." Quatre broke the silence after the screen darkened to black.

"So it seems." None of it made any more sense to Trowa, even after several minutes of silent contemplation. " You were – *they* were very much in love."

"Yes, we've discussed this. And now they're both dead." Quatre shifted to sprawl across Trowa as a means of distraction.

Trowa tightened his hold on Quatre reflexively. "Raberba might be dead, but *you* are still alive. What if Harom is too?"

"Raberba loved Harom. Raberba is dead. Quatre loves Trowa. Quatre lives. And it's as simple as that." Quatre mimicked Trowa's clutch for emphasis.

"Yes, I suppose it is." Trowa rolled his neck to produce many satisfying pops. "And that's the only part of any of it that makes any sense. Let's just go back to bed – I don't want to think about this any more, for now."

With no further discussion, they did just that. A few lackadaisical caresses proved Trowa to be more exhausted than he believed, and he drifted off between kisses.

The nightmare returned with all its unyielding clarity; and this time as his dream-self screamed into death, the name torn from him branded itself on Trowa's besieged mind. "*Raberba...*"

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

#### Footnotes:

#### Can we sense a pattern here?

1. **Viis Cinci = Viis:** Estonian for the number 5 **and Cinci:** Romanian for the number 5
2. **Harom Handiak = Harom:** Hungarian for the number 3 **and Handiak:** Basque for the number 3
3. **Ketto Oba = Ketto:** Hungarian for the number 2 **and Oba:** Slovak for the number 2

=====  
Four days out from their destination, Trowa was blind-sided by a particularly nasty realization. He looked up from his breakfast. "Quatre, is your tracking beacon still on?"

"Yes, my pilot." Quatre's hand stopped in mid-slash and the toast he had been preparing for Trowa dropped raspberry-jam side down to the table. "Oh, no. Your sister... your *family!* Trowa, we can't go there!"

"And I suppose if I order you to shut it off, you'll go into 'kill pilot' mode again."

"I'm sorry..."

"Not your fault. And we need to go there – that's where the person most qualified to remove you from the ship is – and all his equipment. Frankly, Hollis is the only one I'd trust to do this." Trowa rescued the toast, and began munching on it despite Quatre's protests. "Your builders left some sort of documentation, didn't they?" Quatre nodded warily. "Perhaps I can find something there that'd help us figure something out..."

"I could quickly scan..."

"No, you couldn't. We already know that there are some things they didn't want you to have conscious memory of – you might unwittingly skim over what we need the most." Trowa licked the remainders of the jam from his fingers. "Besides, having nothing to do but sit and wait is not helping me keep my mind off things at all. Some distraction would do me good."

"The files you want are in the Psion language, Trowa." Quatre came around the table and settled into Trowa's lap to wipe the lingering traces of breakfast away with a damp cloth.

"Well, can't you whip up a translation program, my little Rosetta stone?" Trowa nipped at the passing fingers and worried them between his teeth while wagging his eyebrows at Quatre.

"You are very silly at times, Trowa. I like that." Quatre removed his fingers and used them to push Trowa's hair back from his eyes, hooking it over one ear. He stopped and frowned. "You do that often, don't you?"

"Do what? Bite you? I've never heard you complain about it before."

"No, with your hair... you're always brushing it away from your face." Quatre's voice was faint and perplexed.

"So?"

"I... nothing. Yes, I can easily construct a translation algorithm." Quatre leaned his forehead against Trowa's, eyes shut in quiet concentration. "There, done." With a quick kiss, he was off of Trowa's lap. "If you don't need me to help, I've some scheduled tests to perform and general upkeep to see to – and before you even say anything – I will not make any modifications that you do not approve of – I have mainly routine physical maintenance on my agenda."

"I suppose that's for the best then. You *are* a bit of a distraction, at times." Trowa walked to the door and turned, smirking. "But maybe you could distract me later?"

"Are you thinking of any particular 'distraction,' my pilot?" Quatre was leaning forward across the table, manually clearing the dishes. The teasing tone in his voice assured Trowa that this was being done on purpose.

"You, bent over that table, are looking particularly tasty to me at the moment. Anything else, feel free to use your imagination."

"Perhaps I will devote my excess leisure time to reviewing Duo's recreational files."

Trowa laughed to himself on his way to the cockpit. "I pilot the only ship in the universe addicted to pornography."



Not that Trowa would ever complain about that. Quatre's fascination with the myriad of vids left by Duo, combined with his unabashed sensual frankness, had made him the perfect sexual partner. After their first encounter, Quatre had determinedly questioned Trowa, ferreting out all of his pilot's peccadilloes and sexual quirks in an innocently blunt manner. Never having been programmed to associate shame with sex, Quatre thought nothing of querying Trowa endlessly about details both major and minor. Quatre had subsequently been able to produce a body with all the proper apparent responses, right down to the minutiae – nipples that darkened when caressed or pinched and skin that flushed a stippled red in Trowa's orgasmic wake. With the empathetic voyeurism added to the equation, Trowa could easily understand how Quatre intuitively knew which touch and what visual stimuli drove him over the edge.

And nothing about this particular line of thinking was doing anything to help with their current dilemma. Trowa sank back into his chair. "Computer: Display earliest data files: Omit files left by previous human pilots." After a few moments of digging through unfathomable data banks, a short list appeared. After a moment's contemplation, Trowa decided that chronological order would work as well as any other and so opened the first file.

A cacophony of foreign symbols littered the screen. "Computer: run translation program." The file reconfigured itself into Terrsong; the common language universally adopted by humans around the time of the first serious deep space explorations. This did little to help Trowa, however. It quickly became apparent to him that the Psion language used a reverse subject/verb order. Further, the adjectives and adverbs tended to clump together at either the beginning or end of each sentence. Feeling a headache already making itself easily at home within his temple, Trowa began to read.

*Interplanetary long-term probe ship is. Multifunctional self-evolving organic matter powered by. Symbiotic interaction with microsiphomides possible this makes. Subject byproduct good makes telekinetic transmodulation to microsiphomides regeneration proportionate to mass and size by multiplication of brain syntax command core specific. Mass subject variable to infinite equations can make thus if command ship module need specify...*

After a few hours and several screens of the jumbled text, Trowa had come to a few important conclusions. One, he was finding very little in the way of helpful information, although he was sure that there were important facts to be located. And two, Trowa knew that as soon as he was able, he would foist the task of winnowing them out onto someone else's more capable and infinitely more patient shoulders. He slumped with a leaden sigh.

Butter-soft leather skimmed Trowa's cheeks and hovered over his eyes. A whisper tickled his ear. "Guess who?"

"If it's not Quatre, we're all in big trouble."

"Trowa. Why are you so... tense?" Hands skimmed the planes of his face before settling to his shoulders to knead.

"This manual - the translations. It's readable but sort of garbled..."

"Garbled?" Flick of a tongue tip against his ear lingered as the word faded.

Hands sliding through Trowa's hair robbed him of the desire to form complete sentences. "Yeah, um... bad sentence structure. Incomprehensible syntax... And you really didn't come in here to talk, did you Quatre?"

"No. Unless that's what you... want." Fingers unraveled a knot of tension in the base of Trowa's neck, the leather sleek and cool against his skin. "I thought we might ... play." Warm air left Trowa's cheek damp and wanting with its passing.

"Play what?" Trowa smirked. *Anything, oh please, anything...*

"My game. Close your eyes, Trowa. Until I tell you..."

With a shift and a shuffle, Quatre eased into the space between the chair and the control panel, spreading Trowa's legs wide to do so. "Now."

Quatre was perched with his hips tilted forward and his arms extended back for support. His legs were crossed at the ankles in front of him. Trowa noted this momentarily – it was gone in a flash.

But Quatre's clothes...

Quatre wore boots that appeared to be of the same supple black leather as the gloves that rose to cinched ends above

his elbows. The boots stretched up bare inches from the apex of his thighs – taut, smooth – their lines broken only by thick belt-like straps, two inches wide with matte silver buckles fastening them, securing them firmly to his lean and shapely legs. Trowa's eyes crept across the small span of skin left naked between buckled boot-tops and the bottom of the scant shorts Quatre wore. Cut high, split wide over his hips and held together on each side by three thin straps, they exposed more than they concealed. Within them, Quatre was already a prominent ridge threatening to escape the dangerously low-slung waist. A thick, heavy collar enclosed his neck, echoed by a band strapped close to his rib cage. Two strips of leather connected them in an open triangle, leaving the fine lines of his chest and the outer edges of his erect nipples exposed.

Quatre allowed a complete inspection, then leaned forward to feather his lips across Trowa's. Quatre's eyes were half-lidded and his smile promising as he pulled away. He slid off of the ledge and brushed by, using gentle nudges of his leg against Trowa's knee to bring the pivoting chair with him. They made a 180-degree arc of languid movement until they were facing the corridor to the living chambers.

Quatre stepped away and turned. The boots were fastened with a line of tiny buckles up the back seam and these glinted as Quatre sauntered away with a sultry roll of his hips. "Are you coming, my pilot?" Quatre called over his shoulder, his clunky heels leaving a trail of echoes for Trowa to follow.

A heartbeat passed, and then four more, before enough blood reached Trowa's brain for the softly spoken words to make sense. He pushed up off the chair so rapidly that it spun wildly as he sprinted in heady pursuit from the cockpit.

Trowa's long, swift stride made quick work of the corridor, but when he reached the end he had to stop and clutch at the archway to his quarters for support. Quatre stood with his back to the doorway, feet a shoulder-length apart, bent at the waist with his palms flat on the table. The shorts only covered half of his buttocks and the snug fit of them formed an enticing cleavage. Raising his hips a little higher, Quatre tucked his chin to his right shoulder. "Do you like?"

Words were not an option; they had deserted Trowa entirely. Even his feet stuttered as he moved to stand behind Quatre. Trowa's hands hovered over the blond's spread hips, caressing the air above the thin straps tenuously holding the shorts in place. His nostrils flaring like a stallion drinking in the scent of a receptive mare from the breeze, Trowa traced one finger along the line of Quatre's spine and was immediately hypnotized by the way the flesh shuddered in his wake.

Trowa had always taken pride in being gentle and attentive during sex; he held his partner's pleasure equal to his own. Even when Trowa had believed Quatre incapable of any true response, he had handled him with the same tender touch he would have given any human bedmate. But now, Trowa surrendered to the primal. Here, submissively bowed and salaciously offered before him was a lover he could never physically hurt. A lover that begged for, demanded, thrived on extreme emotional response. Thoughts had little use in this venue, and Trowa willingly let them go.

One hand pushed Quatre's shoulders to the table and the other slipped underneath him to press his palm tight against the leather-encased steel curving towards Quatre's abdomen. The three straps digging into Quatre's left hip were quickly snapped, and Trowa dropped down to take the corner of the leather in his teeth and peel it away. When this buttock was exposed he licked a glistening trail across it. With a sudden surge of feral, Trowa bit hard to mark the territory as his own. Quatre twitched under hand and moaned as Trowa watched the mark redden with savage approval. Keeping firm pressure, he exchanged hands and ripped the straps away from the other side of Quatre's shorts. They peeled away from pale skin and when Trowa released the polished black hide from the front, the useless garment dropped unnoticed and melted into the floor.

"Turn over," Trowa rasped. Without waiting for compliance, he dug his fingers deep into slim hips and hauled Quatre around, dropping one hand to lift a booted leg over his own head. Quatre's pose mimicked his earlier one – arms thrown back for support – but with his legs wide-spread and his shaft trembling just inches away from Trowa's craving lips. Quatre was beautiful to Trowa in that respect – long and thin - alabaster with a rose blush on the head and a darker flush hiding shadowed just beneath.

Trowa was desperate to take him in, but waited – wanting his building lust to infect Quatre thoroughly, as well. A quick glance upward - half-lidded eyes, a slack mouth dropping wordless pleas, and cheeks creased with crimson - revealed his success. Trowa rewarded himself by drawing Quatre into his mouth with one powerful pull.

This was an act that Trowa easily, eagerly lost himself in – the feel of something so smoothly and solidly male in his mouth was a sensation of which he never tired. His tongue explored deep into the slit on the head and then down around the curve, tracing the circumference over and over. Gathering the wrinkled skin around the top of Quatre's erection under his lips, he pulled it over the tip repeatedly, encasing the blond in his own flesh. Quatre's cries were the

echoes of the ones Trowa would have called out had his mouth not been so deliciously full. Trowa drew his lips away and then returned to let his tongue worship at its leisure. A faultless supplicant, it bathed every inch of the monolith before it in unyielding praise. And through it all, Trowa's desire built to indescribable heights, reflected in the uncontrollable buck and twist of Quatre's hips under his hands.

When his mouth had offered all it could, Trowa stood and flipped Quatre onto his stomach again, pushing down until the blond was flush with the tabletop and his hands were clutching tightly to its edges. "Stay there." Trowa softened the command with a lingering caress and moved towards his bedside shelf, shedding his clothing as he went. After snatching up a bottle of peach-scented oil purchased for decadent fragrance rather than necessity, he resumed his position. Trowa flipped up the cap and simply stared for a moment, letting the anticipation build for them both. Spread out and panting – hands white-knuckled, head turned to the side to present a passion-contorted profile, hard, dark leather contrasting with soft, pale skin – Quatre induced a luxuriant mania.

With thumb and forefinger, Trowa spread Quatre's full buttocks wide and drizzled a stream of the oil between. The excess ran off and pattered to the floor in a richly aromatic rain. Trowa settled his aching erection into the slick valley between Quatre's cheeks and pushed them tightly together over it, enclosing himself in the pliant, yielding flesh. Securely enclosed in a slippery embrace, nestled in a slick channel that mimicked the one he'd soon be invading, Trowa rocked forward and back – mesmerized by his own repeated reemergence at the crest of Quatre's cleft.

Quatre's hands formed fists that beat feebly against the tabletop. "Just do it! Why.... oh, why are you waiting?"

"You feel what I feel?"

"Yessss!"

"Then I want to drive us both insane." Trowa bent forward to bite the nape of Quatre's neck. The frictional heat was maddening, but Trowa wanted to push them beyond. "Tell me what you feel..."

"I want... need you, Trowa. You need me... please!!"

"That's what I feel, Quatre. What about you?"

Quatre tried angling so Trowa's next stroke would drive in, but Trowa kept him in place with the weight of his chest on Quatre's back. "You're burning in my mind... take it, just take it!" Quatre's words were broken into harsh little pants. He hooked his legs around Trowa's calves and used the leverage to push against him. "When... when? Can't wait – need you to feel it *now!* Please..." Trowa dug his fingers in a little tighter and continued the mutual torture. Quatre's voice took on a peculiar whining note. "Want to make you feel good... better... give me your feeling! Make me feel! Alive..."

Trowa stood up and positioned himself at Quatre's entrance. "Like this?"

"More, more – you know we need more!" Again, Quatre moved to impale himself, but Trowa dropped a steadying hand on the small of his back. With the other, he guided the tip of his shaft just barely in and withdrew to trace the length of Quatre's cleft. "More!"

The teasing soon grew too much for Trowa and he shoved himself in. "Like this?" Out, and then rammed home with a splitting thrust, drowning in the grasping satin-wrapped vise, words punctuated by forceful lunges. "Is – this - what – you - need? Tell - me!"

Quatre screamed out Trowa's passion. "Harder! You want it harder!!" He shoved himself against Trowa to deepen every stroke.

"Tell – me!!" With one hand holding Quatre's shoulder to the table and the other anchoring his hip, Trowa slammed forward with all his strength.

"Tight... hot... oh, so good... Trowa! We feel so good... So alive... " His ankles locked behind Trowa's knees, hitting the spot that made them crumple. Twisting, Trowa directed their fall away from the table and to the floor. Quatre sprawled with his arms stretched out, hips raised and legs wrapped tighter around Trowa's thighs. The buckles on the boots dug into Trowa's skin and spurred him on faster. "Yes!! Oh yes... take away everything... want to lose it alllll... everything but you..."

Trowa slowed and fell forward to cover Quatre, sliding one hand down his flank and under to tweak a nipple, and propping himself with the other. "Can you come for me, Quatre?" Trowa panted in his ear. "Can you? What do you need?"

Quatre tossed his head up to meet Trowa's lips. The kiss, though awkward, singed. Their mouths could only meet halfway, and tongues desperately caressed mouths, cheeks, and chins. "If you do... I can. Want it...*please*."

Quatre ground around, swiveling his hips and twisting. With a harshly indrawn hiss, Trowa pushed back to his knees and jerked Quatre close, fingers clawing into the blond's supple buttocks. He willfully severed the tenuous wisps of control and became a beast – growling and plundering – giving Quatre the licentious oblivion he craved.

The combined intensity of their lust tore urgent shrieks from Quatre. Everything narrowed to clinging heat and the slide of oil-slicked skin on skin. The ship began to quake around them, under them, with them. And as Trowa drove forward, embedded one final time, their voices joined in a spiraling, wild cry, and the light flickered and faded. It extinguished entirely, surrounding them in a black void as deep as the surrounding space.

Quatre collapsed, taking Trowa with him. The darkness was soothing, but as seconds lengthen into minutes and Quatre lay unresponsive to Trowa's touch and call, it took on a more sinister aspect. Trowa stretched out on his side and tried to rouse him.

"Quatre!! Come on, Quatre – answer me!!" The automaton was disturbingly chill and limp under Trowa's hand. The ship felt like a hollow shell under his legs. "Did I break you? God no, Quatre!"

"Nnngh."

"Quatre!! Quatre, are you all right?" The avatar twitched once under Trowa's questing touch and began to lose coherency. The lights flared on with a sudden blinding glare.

"Just... mmm, just a minute, please... my Trowa..." Quatre slowly solidified, and nestled against Trowa's side. "That was sooo ... mmm... nice."

"What happened to you?"

"Overload..." With a languorous laugh, Quatre drew Trowa down for a lazy kiss. "'M fine... you just knocked everything off-line for a moment."

"I still don't understand, Quatre. What's it like for you?" Trowa's sweat had cooled, and he tugged Quatre closer with a small shiver.

"Exactly what it's like for you... and more. I experience all the stimuli of your body and mind. And in turn, this excites my mind in ways I cannot possibly even describe. I feel all of you and me combined." The remaining leather dissipated and Quatre twined his legs through Trowa's. "I wish I could project it back to you – but that's your talent, not mine."

"What?"

"I'm an empathetic receptor – you're a projector. Sadly, the circuit only works one way." Quatre smothered a snigger in Trowa's chest. "It's a good thing we're so far out – if there'd been any other empaths within close range... Well, they'd have gotten a surprising treat."

"And you've never told me this before because?" Trowa tried to thread his fingers through the blond hair tickling his chin, but the lingering traces of oil mired his movement and tangled the strands. "Uhhg, we're messy."

"You never asked. Should we go and bathe? I like to wash your hair – it makes you purr."

"Wait a minute, first. I'm not sure I get this. You – when I – when we make love, you have the same sensations I do?"

Quatre nodded.

"Then you have no idea what it's like to be on the... ah, *receiving* end, do you?"

"No, my Trowa. Since we have never switched functions, I have no intimate knowledge of the physical aspects of such pleasure." Quatre frowned. "Why is this disturbing to you?"

"Well – when you get your body back, you *will* be able to feel it. You might not enjoy it." Trowa eased back flat on the floor and pulled Quatre over him. "I suppose there's only one way to find out..."

"Trowa?" Quatre wiggled out of his grasp and sat next to him. "You do not like the experience. And if you feel no pleasure, then neither will I..."

"No, it's not my favorite thing to do – but I have done it. And I'm willing to do it again, with the right person." Still, Quatre refused to meet his eyes. "And you're the right person."

Quatre drew his knees up and bent his forehead to them. "But... I might hurt you."

"That's ridiculous – you'd know if I were in pain." Trowa rose as well, and ran a hand over the blond's hunched back.

"I don't know how – I would not be able to perform properly."

"Why are you being so difficult about this? You must have a pretty good idea how to by now."

Quatre glanced up. "But what if I *don't* like it? And then after, when I have my body back..."

"Again, there's only one way to find out." Trowa stood and brought Quatre with him. He stretched out his cramped arms and grabbed the oil from the table as they passed. "Let's go shower first. I know it'll relax me, and maybe you'll calm down as well."

They entered the stall in silence. Trowa backed Quatre against the wall for another deep kiss as the water warmed them – tongue against tongue, lips melded indecipherably. Hands on faces, around waists, over arms and shoulders – rediscovering cherished territory. Breaking apart with slow touches and fleeting brushes, Trowa washed his lover, despite Quatre's protests about such actions being unnecessary. "Because I want to, that's why," was all he said as he worked a thick lather through fine hair.

Quatre urged him down after, and knelt behind to wash Trowa's hair with talented, massaging fingers. He laughed softly when Trowa wilted in bliss. "See, you do purr." With a well-soaped cloth, Quatre cleansed Trowa's back, and then pressed tight against him to reach Trowa's chest, arms and thighs. Quatre's hand hesitated over Trowa's re-awakening erection, but then applied the same even strokes. "Are you sure?" he whispered, head bent between Trowa's shoulder blades.

Trowa covered Quatre's hand with his own. "Yes, I am. I want you to have this. I want you to have me."

The movement stopped. "But how..."

"It would be easier if we had a tub..."

The sides of the shower enclosure rose up around them and Trowa felt Quatre grin against his back. "Like this, my pilot?"

"Yes, just like this." Trowa turned slightly and pulled Quatre around him. Blue eyes shone apprehensively as Quatre slid over his lap, and for a moment he simply clung to Trowa. With gentle kisses and soft, encouraging murmurs, Trowa eased Quatre slowly against the slanted tub back, settling him into an upright position that would serve them both. The water slowly crept up over their thighs as Trowa leaned between Quatre's spread knees and continued the tender clash of tongue and lips.

Quatre broke away with a small gasp. "Wait." He slipped from Trowa's hands and bent forward. "You always do this for me..." he whispered, before taking Trowa into his mouth.

Trowa was not a stranger to the touch of Quatre's lips and tongue. But it was different now, knowing that Quatre felt what he felt. The steady drawing pressure, the teasing flicks, the supple fingers kneading his thighs... The knowledge of their shared pleasure made it so much richer, so much more. Trowa's fingers curled through damp blond hair. "Do you like this, Quatre?" The answering hum of satisfaction reverberated through Trowa, and his cry rang off the tile

walls.

"Stop, Quatre... not yet..." With obvious reluctance, Quatre lifted his head to meet Trowa's eyes. "You need to prepare me." After drawing Quatre up on his knees, Trowa reached over the side of the tub and grabbed the oil. The smell of ripe peaches rolled up through the steam as Trowa uncapped it and poured an overflowing amount into Quatre's hand.

Confusion and uncertainty flickered over Quatre's features. "How?"

Taking Quatre's slick fingers and guiding them between their bodies, Trowa brought them to his opening. "Like usually I do with you – slow, easy. Widen me first. And take your time." Despite being prepared, Trowa still tensed as the first finger cautiously circled. Quatre stopped immediately. "Go on, I'll be fine." He pressed Quatre in to the first knuckle and then braced one arm against the wall and curled the other over the edge of Quatre's hip.

The water rained around and between them, loosening Trowa's neck and back even as Quatre's tentative teasing relaxed him. Trowa let his head drop forward to Quatre's shoulder, kissing and suckling along neck, face, lips. Whatever he encountered, he tasted, sipping the rivulets of water from Quatre's skin with a growing thirst for more. He pushed back onto the fingers, taking them deeper within, and arched as Quatre angled and wiggled them just right. "Yes, oh – that's it." Trowa pushed Quatre to lie against the back of the tub and slid onto his lap. He poured another handful of the oil. "And yourself, Quatre." Trowa laced their fingers together, and they smoothed the lubricant over Quatre's shaft. Trowa wrapped Quatre's hand firmly around the base of the blond's erection. "Just hold steady, and let me do the rest."

Rising up, Trowa centered himself and slid gradually down, welcoming the steady invasion with a breathless moan. "Trowa!" Quatre's cry was faint but wonder-filled as Trowa took him in completely. One of Quatre's hands crept around Trowa's hip, while the other snaked along his shoulders in a sinuous caress. Smiling slightly, Trowa slowly began to move.

Trowa could never remember penetration having felt this incredible before. Quatre's width and length were perfect, as if made for him; there was no pain in the steady rise and fall rhythm – only soul-lightening intensity, a fullness that sheltered them both in a finely woven blanket of communion. Each downward glide propelled Trowa nearer to an unimagined completeness; every rise left him with an immediately answered need for more.

Quatre's reverberating whimpers and nonsensical exhalations gave voice to their ecstasy, Trowa's frenetically repeated name the only syllables recognizable. Trowa wound steadying fingers through Quatre's hair, and leaned forward to catch the calls pouring forth with his lips, drinking them in and drawing forth more with his questing tongue. "Touch me..." he had no sooner breathed into Quatre's waiting mouth than the words became flesh – a strong hand wrapped around and lifting him even higher. "Quatre... Quatre... How does this..."

"Good... oh, so good ...Trowa... whole... I am complete." The hand tightened and Quatre's hips surged in synchronicity.

Trowa's cadence began to fragment and he spiraled upwards with drunken sways under the intoxicating double assault. He leaned forward into one touch and rocked back against the other. Trowa's thighs shook uncontrollably with a shuddering that started somewhere deep within and burst forth in a sudden flash that left him blinded and breathless. Quatre's arms waited to catch Trowa as he slumped forward, cocooning him in love. Quiet coos and soft kisses gentled Trowa back to himself. "That was beautiful, my Trowa."

"Yes, Quatre. It was."

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"Noin! Have you pinpointed the location of that beacon yet?" Zechs Merquise growled. It was unthinkable that it happened so quickly; none of the ships should have been near this stage for another hundred years, at least.

His ship sighed her answer back to him. "Yes, and I've already adjusted our course. Please calm yourself, we're the closest by several thousand light years."

"The others will still get there too quickly. Damn it! I should have known. I should have been more prepared!" Zechs

ground at his eyes as if he could wipe the frustration away. "If only there was some way we could stall them..."

"I could send out a false beacon signal. It would not be a permanent solution, but perhaps it would gain you a few months."

"Noin, Noin... Have I ever told you how utterly I depend on you?" If, even three hundred and fifty short years ago, anyone had suggested to Zechs that he could find such worth in anything human, he would have mocked them. Now he knew that he would not have survived those years without the steadfast loyalty of his ship. The ship he had stolen on that hellacious day, with revenge burning in his mind. "You've been so good to me."

"It is my pleasure to serve you, Zechs."

And that rankled. Where he had once seen humans as tools, slaves to be used and discarded, the years spent with only Noin for companionship had taught him that they were so much more. The enforced note of servility in his ship's voice cut him. She was a trusted comrade, and his lone friend. Noin deserved respect, and equality. If only he could have seen the truth of it all while Relena still lived...

"Zechs? I have finished analyzing the complete transmission. 04 appears to have spontaneously regenerated much of his frontal lobe synapses." There was a touch of wonder in Noin's voice, as well there should be. Her own redevelopment had been a laborious process for both of them, and still nowhere near complete.

"I'm not surprised, actually. It took us so much longer to break him in the first place. I suspect it has a great deal to do with his empathetic abilities. Had he not been the strongest telekinetic of the lot of you, he would have been discarded after the first fifty years." Zechs shuddered with the memory of the blond, of the tortures he himself had overseen.

"Zechs, stop. You didn't know. And you're trying to fix things."

"And have you been hiding empathetic talents of your own, Noin?"

"No, but I have been with you long enough to know when you're uselessly subjecting yourself to guilt. It's not good for you..." And in a much softer tone Noin added, "It's not good for me..."

"Is it wrong, Noin? Won't I be using him?" The doubts that constantly warred within leaked into Zechs's voice.

"Could you end it without him?" Reasonable, reliable, levelheaded Noin. "And whatever your personal reasons for stopping the other Psions, it is still something that must be done. Don't think of 04 as a tool for revenge – he's the key to saving everything."

"You're correct, as always. And you'll remind me of this when my vendetta blinds me?" Zechs ran a hand over Noin's control panel. A cold comfort, but more than he felt he deserved.

"Of course, Zechs."

*"And so, little sister, it begins." Zechs glared at the stars speeding by on the view screen, as if his sheer determination might cause them to fly by faster. "Relena... Soon I'll have your revenge. And then we all might know some peace."*

**DEAD END**