

A NOVEL

Firefly: The One Song

FIREFLY: THE ONE SONG

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by

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I assure you, there will be grammatical errors. I apologize in advance. I am working on doing better. I have marginally improved, which you only need read my first book made available in 2004. Feel free to email me any corrections or complaints. I am simply a modest fan of distant worlds, science, and metaphysics; someone who finds himself caught up in the whirlwinds of something bigger than himself on a daily basis.

Sincerely

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Foreword

This book is dedicated to Joss Whedon, and the entire cast of the series/movie Firefly/Serenity. I started this with an idea to publish online way back when Firefly first went off the air, got distracted by life, and then only recently, like last month, revisited it. This series was deserving of a second and third season. The further away from that time, the less likely it would be so, and it’s a shame because it was extremely well written. I love sophisticated, meaningful dialogue, and this show had it. It is my intent, my wish, to capture that here. I am not following cannon completely. I have not read the Firefly comics that followed, tying loose ends up after the movie, and so to those who are more dedicated than even I, I hope you will show tolerance. I am confused and surprised, that there are not any authentic Firefly books. I like graphic novels, don’t get me wrong, I am just surprised there isn’t more, because there is clearly a solid fan base.

Anyone interested in helping me improve this story, feel free to contact me.

Thank you, Joss, for these dreams and more.

May the blessing be.

PROLOGUE

Kim Li sat quietly in a meditative pose, on a rock, in the middle of his garden. The sand around the rock had been carefully raked to reflect concentric rings leading away from the rock, as if they were ripples in a pond. These rings gave the illusion of circles moving out to join other circles with their own centers. The rocks decreased in size away from the host rock where Kim Li sat. The rocks in their entirety described a curve, cutting a line through the sand to create a Yin Yang symbol, which was best observed from above.

Kim Li heard his guest approaching, but he did not acknowledge them. Their approach was a distraction, even though they were expected. He treated them as he did all distractions. He observed their presence in his head, counting the foot falls, noticing the thoughts their approach provoked, and realized he was drifting away from his goal. He didn't scold himself. He didn't allow himself to get angry. He simply returned to the mantra and descended back to the purer levels of thoughts. He did this until once again all his thoughts were refined. All was peace. He remained at peace until he became aware of the next stray thought. A stray thought that said his guest had waited long enough.

Kim Li stood, eyes remaining closed. He stretched, turned slowly, each foot placement and hand turn as if he were participating in a Tai Chi ritual. He jumped to the next rock, not opening his eyes, spinning, and leaped to the next rock, and in this manner went from rock to rock until he was on the path that wound its way through his garden. He followed the path, eyes closed, breathing deeply. He opened his eyes when his feet touched the wood of the bridge that crossed the gold fish pond slash mote. Once on the other side of the Bridge, he was ready to receive his guest, both mentally and spiritually. Fist in palm, he bowed to his two lead man, James Townsend, and his associate, Kelly Peirce. Then he recognized the man they had brought to him. Kim Li's bow was not so deep to the third man, but sufficient to be polite.

"Thank you for seeing me, Niska," Kim Li said. "Your invitation was hard to refuse," Niska said

"This is strictly business," Kim Li assured him. "You have had a number of setbacks since your encounter with this rogue, Malcom Reynolds, and you're falling behind in your obligations to me. I want to know how you intend to repair the damage and return to a margin of profitably resembling your past performance."

"I assure you," Niska said. "My reputation is still strong and I will get even with Reynolds for the damage he has caused."

"I am not interested in your schemes of petty revenge," Kim Li said. "I am only interested in profitability. I think your obsession with Reynolds is preventing you from focusing on your true goals, maintaining the territory I assigned to you. Now, if you're unable or unwilling to return to the Path which I put you on, I am certain I can find someone capable of taking over your territory."

"I wish to serve," Niska assured him.

Kim Li nodded and motioned to one of his female servants. She brought a sword to him. She presented it bridged between the palms of her hand, bowing. He bowed to her, lifted the sword and slid it out of its scabbard. The metal gleamed as it turned in the sun under his inspection. He observed Niska was beginning to sweat, but he held his ground. He smiled pleasantly.

"Do you believe in a higher power?" Kim Li asked.

"No," Niska said.

Kim Li nodded and gave a casual glance to James and Kelly, who suddenly took Niska by the arms and drove him to his knees.

“Wait, wait,” Niska cried.

“Perhaps your lack of belief in a higher power is why you are failing me,” Kim Li said.

“I don’t subscribe to a deity paradigm,” Niska said, whimpering.

Kim Li nodded. “Ah, perhaps we are just failing to communicate,” Kim Li said.

“Asking you if you believe in a higher power is not necessarily limited to deities, though I, personally, think you should reconsider the available data and philosophies concerning a supernatural or Supreme Being, and many lesser beings, but I am not pressing the point. I am just pointing out there’s always a higher power. Local police force will give you a ticket if you’re speeding. On this world, the police are a higher power than you. Local principalities, mother-nature, the Alliance, the military, these are all examples of higher powers that have an influence over your life and the decisions you make. You have to answer to them if you cross them. As good as your reputation was, there is always someone greater than you, and you’re fool if you think otherwise. Even I have a higher power that I must I answer to. It’s the way of things. No man is an island or a god unto themselves. We’re social creatures. We depend on networks. So, again, I ask you, do you believe in a higher power?” “Yes, yes,” Niska said.

“I’ve always liked your ability to see reason,” Kim Li said. “So, tell me about your higher power?”

“You are superior to me,” Niska said. “I answer to you.”

Kim Li placed the tip of his sword in a strategic point on Niska body, just below the shoulder bone.

“So, where’s my money?” Kim Li asked, applying pressure.

“I’m delinquent and beg for leniency,” Niska pleaded.

Kim Li added more pressure and the tip of the sword pushed into Niska’s body. He screamed and tried to back away, but was held firm by James and Kelly.

“Give me a time table for you getting back on schedule?” Kim Li asked.

“Six months,” Niska said.

Kim Li pushed the sword all the way through Niska’s body, without puncturing the shirt on the far side, just lifting it from Niska’s body. Niska screamed horribly and began to sob.

“I thought this sort of stuff was your forte,” Kim Li said, leaning in close to Niska. He put a hand on Niska’s face and used a thumb to catch a tear. “Could this be your true self? It’s to be suspected, I suppose. Most bullies usually can’t take what they dish out. I wonder if there is something I can do to help you grow into something more than what you are?”

Kim Li smiled, flexed the hilt of the sword, and then pulled it out real slow, enjoying the wailing. He took a towel from his lady servant, cleaned his sword, and returned it to its scabbard. He bowed to his servant, offering the sword to her in the same manner in which she had presented it to him, respectfully. Even gracefully. Kim Li waited for Niska’s sobbing to fade before he continued.

Kim Li turned to enjoy the breeze and the sun on his face, smiling up at the sky. He closed his eyes and took in a breath. “Breathe, Niska. The air is so much nicer after surviving a trauma. And the silence after a good cry is hopeful,” Kim Li said, motioning for James and Kelly to let Niska go. He watched Niska crumble to a heap on the path. “Especially if you learn from the experience. There are other ways to rule, Niska. It doesn’t have to be with fear and might. Give poor people credit, charging them just enough interest that there is hope that they can pay off their debts. And give them things to buy with that credit. That’s one way to rule. And celebrate them if they step up and pay off their debt, because you know they will be back. You can also treat those you serve with respect. You earn loyalty, but also you come to the realization that you serve them as much as they serve you. Just a different perspective for you to consider. This Reynold’s thing could have gone another way. He demonstrated

his genuineness when he returned your money. He could have taken it and made himself scarce. That's a person who would be loyal. And, given his propensity for barely making ends meet, there would have been other opportunities to call him to service. Never burn bridges when you don't have to. You never know when you might need to return to the other side of the water."

Kim Li petted Niska like he would a dog. "I don't know if this is taking or not. And, it's only a suggestion, Niska. Not telling you how to govern your territory. Well, as long as you maintain the profit margin that I have come to expect from you, I won't tell you how to govern your territory," Kim Li said. "So, I'll return you to your affairs." Kim Li bowed to Niska, bowed to James, and then bowed to Kelly. James and Kelly picked up Niska, who cried out in pain again, and they escorted him out.

CHAPTER ONE

Time and space hadn't put enough distance between the crew of Serenity and events surrounding Miranda to lessen the pain of loss. To make matters worse, that fiasco had come with a bit of notoriety, something Malcom Reynolds had always, mostly, managed to avoid. Consequently, he was finding it more difficult than normal to find a legit paying job, or even one of his less 'legit' jobs that would have him and his crew once again running under the Alliance radar. Things were hardly better for Inara. Some of her regular clients had decided not to see her given the fact that she was in the news. Too many people hated the lime light and with her connection to the Serenity crew, and the very real possibility was that she was still being scrutinized by the members of Parliament and the Senate who were embarrassed by the Miranda Fiasco, as it was being called by so many, that the stigma, or paranoia, that they too would be scrutinized was too real. Many of the people who had harbored Serenity after a heist, or some other less 'legit' job, had been hit hard by Alliance. Hit hard meant many of them were wiped out to the last man and woman, and the ones that didn't get hit were no doubt still scared of the very real possibility of repercussions falling their way. What it boiled down to was that Serenity was shy on friends and hard pressed for employment. So, whether these unnamed members of Parliament were actively engaged in putting the squeeze on Inara and Serenity by applying political pressure and influence to block them from work was irrelevant. They were working less and things were getting rough.

Technically, Doctor Simon Tam and his sister, River, were no longer wanted by the law. At least, publicly they had been removed from the most wanted list. Given his abilities and knowledge, there were a number of hospitals that would welcome him, even given his questionable status with the law. He had wanted to discuss this move with Kaylee, Serenity's mechanic, but he was almost certain she would never leave the Captain or her work, especially now that things were really tough for Serenity as a whole, work wise, but also because of the death of Wash. Kaylee made no secrets that Serenity was her home and that the crew was closer to her than family. She would be hard pressed to leave at best of times. Knowing this only made it only harder for him to tell her that they needed to leave.

Simon found Kaylee in the engine room doing things which he found completely alien to him: mechanical things. Sure, he could see the analogy that Serenity was a living thing and she was just a doctor as he was, keeping the thing alive with the maintenance she performed. She was lying on her back when he found her in the engine room, tightening something with an odd sort of wrench. She really didn't see him till she stood and turned around to stow the tool. She wiped her face, smearing the grease she didn't know she had on her, smiled and kissed him as she went by.

"This is the only torque wrench I have that keeps its calibration," Kaylee said, putting the tool up. Once she had placed it where it belong, she turned back to see Simon studying her. "What?" she asked. And then she smiled fiercely and hugged him. "Am I?"

“It’s official,” Simon said. “You’re pregnant.”

Kaylee screamed a happy scream and kissed Simon enthusiastically.

Simon kissed her back, but with less enthusiasm, as he wanted to be serious for a moment.

“Kaylee,” he said. “Would you marry me?”

Kaylee’s eyes grew even wider and her mouth made a small O as she was so taken back and then suddenly she found herself nodding even more enthusiastically and then was hugging and kissing Simon so fiercely he could scarcely get his breath. “Yes, oh, yes, yes, yes,” Kaylee said, punctuating each yes with a kiss.

“Good, because I want you to come with me and River to Canton,” Simon said. “I have an interview for chief of staff at Trinity Hospital, the largest hospital on the moon.”

Kaylee acted as if she were sucker punched and backed away, shaking her head no. “We can’t leave the Captain and Zoe. Not in their current state.” “We can, Kaylee. They’re capable people,” Simon said.

“They need me,” Kaylee said.

“I need you,” Simon said. “They can hire another mechanic.” “They can’t hire another mechanic,” Kaylee said.

“No, probably not,” Simon said. “That would require them to actually pay someone.”

“My needs are met,” Kaylee said. “I have shared in the good times. I’ll share in the bad.”

“They’re all bad, Kaylee,” Simon said. “They’ve never paid you what you are worth, but that’s really irrelevant. I have a chance to make a good living, not just for me, but for us. For you. For the baby. You need to think of our child. We can’t raise a child in this environment.”

“Why not?” Kaylee asked. “What’s wrong with this environment?” “It’s not normal,” Simon said.

“For whom? You?” Kaylee asked. “What is normal, Simon? A baby born here will think this is normal.”

“And I don’t want a baby thinking this is normal,” Simon said.

“What, being surrounded by people who would love it and look out for it? This ship is more than just a family, it’s a village,” Kaylee said. “More like a circus,” Simon said.

“You take that back,” Kaylee said.

“You’re right. That wasn’t fair. These are good people. Well, except for Jayne, and except when they’re thieving,” Simon said.

“We have to eat,” Kaylee said.

“Yes, we do, and that’s why we need to go, so I can earn a living and feed us,” Simon said.

“I like my life here,” Kaylee argued. “Is your offer of marriage only contingent on me moving off so you can have status?”

“I’m trying to think of what’s best for us,” Simon said.

“Oh, no. Don’t make this about us when it’s about you. My life is good because it’s simple. I don’t need things or wealth or status to be happy,” Kaylee said.

“I don’t want to live the rest of my life on this ship!” Simon said. “Especially if I don’t have to. We don’t have to run any more.”

“Have you asked River what she wants?” Kaylee asked.

“I’m sure she knows I’ve been considering this move,” Simon said.

“Not the same as asking her what she wants, because I am betting she wants to stay here, on

Serenity,” Kaylee said.

“She has to come with me,” Simon said. “So you’re not going to ask her, you’re just going to tell her,” Kaylee repeated. “She has to come and you have to come, because it’s the right thing for us all,” Simon said.

“We have choices,” Kaylee said.

“I refused to be trapped here,” Simon said, and then realized, partly by the expression of anger that flashed across Kaylee’s face, that he had misspoke.

Kaylee backed away, pointing to him. “No. Don’t even say that. We’ve all made choices here. You made choices. I’ve never done anything but be nice to you. I’ve never made any demands on you.”

“I know,” Simon said. “I’m sorry. Trap was wrong...”

“No,” Kaylee snapped. “It was the right word, so don’t try to soft soak it. If you don’t want to be here, then you move on and find your happiness elsewhere. Knowing you, though, I doubt you’ll ever find happiness.”

“What do you mean by that?” Simon demanded. “If you can’t be happy here, then you can’t be happy anywhere,” Kaylee said. “Why do you think poor folks who are unhappy continue to be unhappy even after they won the lottery? It’s because happiness is a choice. You said you’d be happy if you got your computer, you thought you’d be happy if you got a certain grade, you thought you’d be happy after medical school, you thought you’d be happy after you rescued River, you thought you’d be happy after River’s health improved, you thought you’d be happy after you were free of the law...”

“Stop this,” Simon said.

“No, you stop this,” Kaylee said. “Happiness isn’t a destination. It’s a choice. You’re not even happy that I’m pregnant.”

“I am happy that you’re pregnant,” Simon said.

“No, you’re not,” Kaylee said. “You’re just falling back into your old routine of now I need particular home and a certain job and a certain level of provision and certain schools for the child because you can’t escape this brainwashed expectation of what life is supposed to be like as Doctor Simon Tam. You keep chasing this stuff and you will never be happy.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to marry me?” Simon asked.

“I’m saying I don’t think I can rise to meet your expectation, must less sustain it,” Kaylee said. “People think I’m just naturally happy, just happy me all the time, but it takes work and effort and a certain perspective, and I don’t have the strength to carry your weight if you can’t choose to be happy in the moment wherever you are.” “I want you in my life,” Simon said.

“Do you? Do you, Simon? Or, do you just want the idea of me?” Kaylee asked. “Trapped?! Indeed. You’re a Doctor. If you didn’t want me or a baby, you know how to prevent them.”

“So do you,” Simon said.

“Yes. We both could have... and my fault in this is in believing you had settled in here and that this was our home. I will not let you use this or me as an excuse for being ‘trapped.’ Damn you, Simon. Get out of my engine room. And get your stuff out of my room, while you’re at it, because if you’re leaving, I don’t want to get any closer to you.” “Kaylee,” Simon said, moving closer to her.

“No!” Kaylee said, pointing at him and backing up. “Out. Now!”

Simon thought about saying something, thought about staying and trying to pull her into a hug, but decided she was not going to be reasonable. And he didn’t want to fight. He departed without any further words and Kaylee sat down in her hammock. She leaned into it and softly began to cry.

Up on the Bridge Malcom Reynolds finished double checking everything was set for the long haul to their next destination and that the programs would carry them while he slept. He noted a wave coming in and that it was being directed directly to Inara's shuttle. He frowned, as if thinking, 'who could be calling her at this hour.' And then he reminded himself, he had no claims on Inara and could make no demands. He also had to remind himself, 'this hour' didn't mean anything out in space. Funny how you forget that sometimes. Thinking on it further, about Inara, not the hour it was, he thought it would probably be best if she worked because the rent she gave for the shuttle was the minimum income to keep Serenity flying.

Malcom closed down the helm, putting things on sleep mode, and stood up, feeling a bit old. He decided it wasn't old but rather it was a pain in his back from lifting and the pain in his side from a recent sparring match which had required stitches which was making him move slowly. That, and a bit of hunger. He paused to knock on Zoe's door, lightly in case she was sleeping. When she didn't respond, he shifted the door to his quarters open and began the climb down.

The engine concealed his mechanics sobbing. Zoe's door kept her mourning silent. Jayne's closed door kept everyone from hearing anything Jayne might be up to at this time of night, whether it was snoring or whatever. Malcom paused as he looked down the corridor, wanting to go and talk to Inara, but holding back. She was taking a call, after all.

When Wong Jing's wave woke up Inara's monitor, causing the screen to flash so she knew she had a call, she had a number of reactions, which reminded her of her borderline ambivalence to her profession as a Companion. She could hear Malcom saying "whore" in her head and had to suppress it. Most the time, the disparaging label wouldn't bother her, but if it came from someone she loved, that bothered her. On one hand, she was grateful that she was still desired, on the other, she would just as happily give it all up if only that someone would ask her. She was pretty sure Malcom wanted to ask her, but he wouldn't either from fear that doing so would invite her to starve and struggle as he did, as his crew often did, or perhaps because of some hidden esteem issues. She knew him to be man enough to overcome esteem issues, but she also knew he was prideful enough not to ask her to starve with him.

Inara closed her eyes for a moment and settled her thoughts. When she opened them, she was prepared to listen to Wong Jing's solicitation. She pushed play.

"Hello, Inara. It has been a long time. I know I'm too far out from the core worlds to make it profitable for you to visit, but I would truly like to see you again. Seeing your name in the news-feeds has me missing you. Even if you aren't able to visit, I would like you to send me a wave, just so I can see and hear for myself that you are indeed well."

And that was it. Inara responded. "You're very kind to think of me. I am well. And yes, I'm afraid that you're a bit far from the core worlds for me to visit at this time. Thank you, though, for the offer. And, I will look you up if I am ever in your area." She pressed send and it was away. It would take perhaps an hour or two to get to him, considering their distance and the relay station the signal would have to bounce off. Inara meditated for a while. She assumed everyone was asleep, or she would have would have sought out company. She definitely would have gone to comfort Kaylee had she known she was in distress. Kaylee was like a sister to her. Inara's eyes became heavy and it seemed like they were only closed for a minute when another wave from Wong Jing arrived.

"It's me, again, Inara. If I understand it correctly, you're still flying with the Serenity crew? If you would visit with me, I can arrange some work for the crew. Ningxia Hui is two days out from my colony and I know some people there that would like to ship some fresh produce to a mining camp

about six days out in exchange for some of their metals. It's hard to get ships out this way, especially freighters, because the profit margin is rather thin. If this is agreeable, perhaps I could see you soon? Let me know. I can compensate you for the extra trouble and will even pay Serenity if the job doesn't pan out. Inara, I really want to see you. This posting here doesn't afford me the opportunity to socialize with people I would consider peers. Even if it's just several days of talking, I want to see you. If my posting paid more, I would ask you to stay full time, but, I know you can do better, so, I will only ask for a moment. Please, come." Inara rolled her eyes. Wong had shared enough time with her that he should know it wasn't about the money. Still, the opportunity for work, for both her and Serenity, was too hard to pass up.

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"It's an awful long way to go just to talk to someone," Malcom said.

Inara didn't frown or roll her eyes, just nodded, not wanting to start a fight. At least he said 'talk' instead of whoring. "My client says there is a moon nearby that needs to hire a freighter. It would be profitable enough to fill up on fuel and what I know about Ningxia Hui is that it's practically a paradise. We can buy fresh foods really cheap," Inara said. "Maybe have some quality down time. We really could use that kind of rest." "Did I hear the mention of fresh foods?" Kaylee asked.

"Good morning, Kaylee," Inara said.

"Good morning, Inara. Fresh foods?" Kaylee asked again.

"What kind of job?" Zoe asked. She was at the table, nursing her coffee, only half heartedly listening.

"There's a mining colony that needs a delivery of fresh produce and they have promised an exchange of ore for food," Inara said. "I really don't know all the details, but my client says if the job doesn't pan out, he will pay Serenity for making the trip." "Trip?" Jayne asked, scratching himself as he pushed into the kitchen and made for the coffee pot. He looked crossly at Zoe when he found the pot was empty. "You didn't make enough for everyone?"

"You're not my husband," Zoe said, not bothering to look up from her coffee.

"Just common courtesy to fix a whole pot," Jayne mumbled.

"Did fix a whole pot," Zoe shot back. "You just didn't get up in time to share it." "Back to the trip," Jayne said, preparing to make more coffee. "We going somewhere? Perhaps towards pay?"

"It's work, Mal," Inara said. "Hauling food and ore may not be glamorous, but it'll pay."

"Ore?" Jayne asked and a cheerful smile flashed across his face. "Like gold?" "Don't know what kind of ore, but I imagine if this mine was producing gold, they wouldn't be having trouble hiring ships," Malcom said.

"Captain, if we have a vote, I'm all for the fresh food part of the trip," Kaylee said.

"Ningxia Hui is a long way off the beaten path," Malcom said, musing.

"Thought we like a long way off the beaten path," Jayne said.

"We do," Malcom said. "Just trying to think if we have enough fuel to make it. And you're sure your client will compensate us if the job doesn't pan out?"

"He has always kept his word with me," Inara said.

Malcom Reynolds glanced at his crew. The only ones not up to breakfast yet were the Doctor and his sister and he pretty much knew how they would vote, if he were leaving it up to a vote. They were all for 'off the beaten path.' Kaylee looked hopeful and excited, like a kid expecting Christmas. Zoe

finished her coffee and pushed away from the table. After washing her cup and setting it to dry, Zoe returned to her room. She needed more time and more work, Malcom decided. And perhaps a walk in the country wouldn't hurt.

"Tell your client we'll get you there, Inara," Mal said. "It's about a three week push from here, but we're on our way."

Malcom and Inara headed in different directions.

"I hope its gold," Jayne called after Malcom who was headed for the Bridge of Serenity.

"You can't eat gold," Kaylee said.

"No, but I can buy you lunch with it," Jayne said.

CHAPTER TWO

The New Province of Ningxia Hui boasted a population of roughly two million people. It was not the furthest planet from the core, but one of the most popular, distant worlds, due to its richness in biological resources. No one that lived on Ningxia Hui went hungry. A person could get lost, if they wanted, and live off the land, and not see another soul for years, but most folks that came to Ningxia Hui, preferred the company of others, which explained why the capital city was so densely populated when it didn't have to be. After the initial terraforming projects, plant life just seemed to take to the place, and now, after three hundred years of flourishing vegetation, from wheat to forests, there were plans to repopulate species that once thrived in rain forests on old Earth, species which were now extinct. Extinct except for frozen embryos and genetic materials that earlier generations had had the foresight to collect, knowing that the bio diversity of Earth was on the decline. And even if the species were "brought" back from extinction, they would never be the same species. They would adapt to their new environments and would go off on new genetic tangents, but it was hoped that the new diversity would only increase the stability and pleasantness of nature on Ningxia Hui.

There were groups opposed to this "re-emergence" program. People who believed that the plants had done quite well without a large bio-diversity present. Only tiny, artificial flying machines helped to pollinate the wild plants, supplementing the humans who did it by hand and brush. Communion with nature, the new cycle of life, was how they referred to it. There were animals introduced, like fish, and rabbits and miniature pigs, and a variety of birds, and whatever pets escaped the cities and villages to be forage in the wild, but most of the fertilizers were dead plants and human waste, because human waste was just as good a pig poop when making fertilizers. Adding too many animals at this juncture could only complicate the mix and thereby endanger the simple life they had created. An easier life than could be found on any other planet outside the Core Planets, provided you wanted the "simple" life.

One of the reasons plants, and the humans that ate the plants, did so well was that there was a reasonable distribution of minerals in the soil. Unfortunately, there were no metals concentrated enough to mine. There would be no smelting of ores or refining of metals on this moon, so the 'simple' life meant working with wood and plants to make creature comforts. All the products on this planet were made plants, from clothing to paper, to biodegradable polymers that made the bodies of the artificial insects. But to keep the good food coming, the simple life meant most people had to spend time walking with a paint brush going from flower to flower, pollinating, and collecting and redistributing the seeds from the fruit one ate. One with nature. The people, at least the apparent voting public, wanted Ningxia Hui to grow and prosper. They wanted more traffic and a better economy than simple subsistence. Shipping fresh produce wasn't an option due to the distance and time it took to get produce to a reasonable market, so the biggest source of off world income came from the Alliance Food and Natural Medicine processing centers. There were two major manufacturing labs, run by the Alliance,

employing mostly locals for the manual labor jobs to produce food supplements. It wasn't cost effective to have the entire process automated, since there were no planet side factories to make parts. All machined parts and 'hard' materials came from off world, provided by Alliance. Every six months an Alliance Cruiser would come with supplies to sustain the operation and collect the supplements to redistribute as they saw appropriate. It was rare to see the signs of a non Alliance spaceship this far out from the core worlds, but as Ely Torok looked up to identify the sound of a ship breaking the sound barrier, as opposed to thunder from another passing storm. He became hopeful. He was eager to be back in space and on his way and though he could wait another month for the next Alliance ship, he would just assume be on his way this moment. The 'simple' life just didn't hold enough excitement for him. That, and he had a time limit. Any off worlder had a time limit: on this planet, it was roughly a year and half. The gravity here was sufficiently less than standard, and so anyone who stayed longer would like have lost too much bone and muscle mass to tolerate standard Gs. There were remedies, but even those were problematic, and expensive, and time consuming. He could have extended his stay by living in the city, on the antigravity grid, but he had found it too busy with too many people, and so he had withdrew to the wilderness.

Ely untied his hammock from the tree, placed a dozen coconuts inside it and tied it shut. The hammock, a small backpack with a few personal sundries, a paintbrush, and a cutlass were his only possessions. By the time he had walked the length of the beach and climbed the path towards the clearing that was the city's only space port, the ship had already landed. Four of the crew were heading away on a small hover craft. One would have imagined that the locals would have greeted the small ship with a parade, seeing how rarely non Alliance ship's dropped, but no one seemed interested. The little bamboo hut that was the front for "customs and immigration," the only official building in sight of the clearing that was the space pad, held a sign that said "out to lunch" in Mandarin. They had been "out to lunch" for several years.

Ely recognized the ship as a Kei, a Japanese word for Firefly. He was surprised that the four had rode off leaving the ramp down, but he figured they were either trusting souls, or there was more crew on board. Probably more crew, he decided. It was a big ship. The closer he got to the ship, the better he could see the recent upgrades. New Ion engines, for starters. That must have cost a pretty penny. A new heat shield along the bottom, easily spotted as the heat shield along the neck had more scorch marks and charring stains than the lower. A ship rarely outlasted the lifetime of a heat shield. That suggested the ship had seen combat. He looked closer for evidence of it having been fired upon, wondering if he should just wait out the remaining month and risk traveling with the Alliance. The last thing he needed was to get involved with space pirates. As he completed a circuit around the ship, he had to hold his hands up to keep the sun out of his eyes as he looked towards the flight deck, or bridge, of the ship. People said it looked like an insect, but he always thought it looked like a dinosaur, its head towering above. "Nǐ hǎo," came the cheerful greeting of a woman sitting on a lounge chair, just at the foot of the ramp. She held an umbrella to the sun, and smiled pleasantly, as if she were just enjoying the day and the sun and the fresh air.

He returned the greetings and approached cautiously. She certainly didn't fit the bill of a space pirate, but he had learned that looks could be deceiving.

"Mighty fine day, isn't it?" she asked.

"I suppose," Ely said, remaining neutral.

"Suppose?" she asked. "You have a different perspective?"

"Well, the weather here runs pretty constant from day to day," Ely explained. "No seasons to

really differentiate one day from another. I prefer variations. Hot summers, the changing colors of falls, freezing winters. Perpetual spring is wearying.” “So, can I assume you’re looking for passage?” she asked.

“I am, actually,” Ely said.

“Do you have a destination in mind?” she asked.

“A preference would be a busy spaceport,” Ely said. “But I would settle for anywhere but here.”

“Oh,” she cooed. “I thought everyone loved this planet.”

“Life is fairly simple here,” Ely agreed. “And though I could find work to keep me busy, or just live off the land, I prefer a job more suited to my talents.”

“I understand,” she said. “I think. Not much metal here. Everything made from wood or plants. Doesn’t leave much room for building complex machines. Are you a mechanic?”

“No,” Ely said.

“Well,” she nodded, deciding to let him have his privacy, and going right to the crux of the conversation, “Can you afford to pay?”

“Uh?” Ely asked, noticing an uncharacteristic patch job on the nose. He shivered. His first thought was a Reaver harpoon firing through the hull and directly into the Bridge. He discounted that because if that had happened, this ship probably wouldn’t still be flying.

“For passage? Can you pay?” she asked.

“Oh!” Ely said, giving her his attention again. “Yes, absolutely. Don’t let my clothing fool you. It’s made locally from hemp. Very comfortable, but other than color schemes, it’s pretty much uniform here. Yes, I can pay. I can even pay more than the standard rates, cash, coin, or stone, and I doubt you could name an unfair price. Like I said, I just want to be on my way.”

“Stone?” she asked.

Ely sat the bundled hammock carrying the coconuts down, swung his pack around, and opened a concealed pocket in his pack. He produced a small pouch and offered to pour the contents in her hands. The small jewels sparked in the noonday sun.

“Oh, my,” she said, setting her umbrella down and leaning forward to examine the tiny treasures in direct sun light. “Are they real or manufactured?”

“They’re real,” Ely assured her. “And not stolen. Never know what kind of currency you might need, so I always keep some spares.”

“Oh, yeah,” she nodded, enthusiastically. She returned them to him, careful not to drop any.

Ely returned them to his pouch, save one, and put the largest of the stones back in her hand.

“Oh, no, I can’t accept this,” she said. “You’ll pay the Captain.” “This is for you,” Ely said.

“Oh, no, no, no, really, I can’t,” she went on.

“Please, my pack is too heavy as it is, and, well, I haven’t done anything good in quite a while, so, allow me this chance to be generous,” Ely said. And, as if an after thought had occurred to him, he quickly added, “Oh, and, it’s not a bribe. If you haven’t room for me on the flight, I can walk away, but you do have a big hold, and I don’t require much space or attention.”

“If you don’t care about the destination, your passage is as good as booked,” she said, standing, and offering her hand. “My name is Kaylee and this here is Serenity.”

Ely bowed, not taking her hand. A small frown of disappointment flashed as she withdrew her hand, but she brought her smile back full force, as if compensating for a momentary power failure. He turned to follow where her eyes were tracking. The mule was returning with the four occupants, and a

number of boxes that contained fresh produce. Ely was already moving out of the way, but Kaylee took his arm and expedited his movement. The mule barely slowed as it slid into home. A moment after it parked, a man and woman proceeded down the ramp to meet the stranger. "Secure the mule, Jayne, and get the produce in refrigerator boxes," Malcom said without looking over his shoulder. The man named Jayne mumbled, "Damn, local yocals. Never seen so many tree hugging hippies in one place before in my life."

Malcom stepped off the ramp and looked to the stranger and then to his mechanic.

"Captain, this here is a passenger," Kaylee said. "Sir, this is Malcom Reynolds. And Captain, this is..."

"Ely Torok, Captain," Ely said. "I have ID if you require it."

"I'm not so formal," Malcom said. "Where are you headed and can you pay is the only formality I need to be knowing." "He can pay," Kaylee said. "Up front?" Mal asked.

"Yes," Ely said. "Do you have a currency preference?" "Cash would be nice," Mal said.

"I can pay," Ely said.

"Four hundred?" Mal asked.

"Captain?!" Kaylee said, as shocked as she sounded.

"I can pay that, Captain," Ely said, without batting an eye.

"And where are you headed?" the lady behind Malcom asked.

"I would like to go to New Henan, if I have a choice," Ely said.

"Well, we're going in the other direction. Guess you'll have to stay," Malcom said.

"Actually, any spaceport will do, Captain," Ely said. "Just want to be moving on. I'll compensate you for your fuel loss on my weight, if that's the problem. And I have a ration bar that ought to hold me out if you're worried about your food supplies. I would require a supply of potable water, though."

"You seem awfully anxious to get out of here," the woman behind Malcom said.

"Zoe's right," Malcom said. "You agreed to 400 pretty quick. I have had enough trouble with law and Alliance. Don't need any new hassles."

"I am not wanted by local law enforcement and Alliance wants nothing to do with me, I assure you. I'm capable of paying your asking price because I'm independently wealthy," Ely said. "If you can suffer my company long enough to drop me off at the next busiest spaceport, I'll pay what you asked."

"Captain, he's looking for a job," Kaylee said.

"Oh?" Malcom said. "I thought you were independently wealthy?"

"I am," Ely assured him. "What I don't have is a job. I like to be useful."

"I am sure there is usefulness here for you," Zoe said.

"I'm sure there's a lonely tree that needs hugging somewhere," Jayne offered as he passed carrying a box of produce.

"Minimal existence," Ely agreed. "If you consider pollinating plants useful, because the locals can't agree to introduce bees into the biosphere, then very useful. Folks don't go hungry here, even kids, so even having money here is not a great benefit unless you want to buy and trade in metals, leathers, or plastics. I'm not saying I'm above the work or the life style. I just require something more mentally stimulating to hold my attention."

"And what's that?" Jayne asked. Jayne leaned against the side of the ship, staring down the ramp. His right hand toyed with the snap holding his weapon in his holster. He freed the snap, secured it, and

popped it off again.

Another girl made her presence known, spying at him from inside the ship, partially hiding behind the bulkhead.

“Do all potential passengers get the third degree?” Ely asked.

“Only those that look like they’re hiding something,” Jayne said.

“Just lately,” Malcom said. “We’ve had a bit of a rough time and are perhaps being a bit more cautious than usual. Truth be said, I could use the four hundred to fill my tanks. I have a chance at a possible contract if I can go pick up some cargo and haul it back here, but the potential new clients won’t front the job, so I have to find a way to make it happen.”

“It’s quite likely they don’t have the capital, specifically coin or cash, to give it to you,” Ely said. “The only paying job is the food processing factories, and the Alliance pays with credit, which the employees save up and use to purchase items via mail order, which is delivered by Alliance. Well fed, but poor people.”

“So I gathered,” Malcom said. “Consequently, I have a short time-table to get this trade back and still be awarded the contract. If you were able to help move cargo, I could see to it that you get a partial refund and we could drop you off at the next convenient port after I’ve seen to this affair.” “I am agreeable to that,” Ely said.

“One extra man cuts down on my percentage,” Jayne protested.

“I didn’t offer him a percentage, Jayne,” Malcom said. “I offered him transport. Now, I want to get my boat in the air and be at the rendezvous point to pick up the Ambassador, and on time, this time. Zoe, set him up in ten.”

“Book’s old room?” Zoe asked.

Malcom turned to her as Ely picked up his hammock. “Did someone convert it to a shrine and not tell me?”

“No, Sir,” Zoe said. She nodded in the direction of travel to Ely. “Come along.”

Malcom stopped Ely, one hand on his arm, and a hand out to receive cash. Ely set down his hammock, again, and fished a roll of cash out of his pack, unfolded it, counted out four hundred, and put the remaining amount back. He noticed Jayne’s sudden interest and realized they were all pretty much staring. “Captain, if you need more, please ask. You won’t have to kill me for it.”

“Well, hell, I could use some, if you’re just given it away,” Jayne said.

“You’re safe on my boat,” Malcom said. “But, what exactly is it you do so well that you’re independently wealthy?”

“It isn’t what I do that made me wealthy,” Ely said. “It’s what I did.” “And what was that?” Jayne asked.

“I’d rather not say,” Ely said.

“Why? Is wealth building a secret?” Jayne asked.

“Give him his space,” Malcom said, looking away. The jungle was interesting enough to occupy his attention a space.

“What? Don’t you want to know the secret to being independently wealthy?” Jayne asked.

“The secret is hard, honest work,” Malcom said. “Something I have a mind for us all to be doing real soon.”

“Yeah, cause that’s done us so well in the past,” Jayne said “Oh, leave him be, Jayne,” Kaylee added.

“Woo,” Jayne whistled irreverently. “Don’t tell me you got a new crush. Want the Doctor be upset when he hears he’s got competition.” “It’s not like that at all!” Kaylee said.

“Jayne, that’s enough,” Malcom said. “I don’t want you scaring off our only paying guest in over a year.”

“Right,” Jayne said. “We’ll scare him after we get in space. Hell, your flying pretty much ought to do the trick.”

“This way,” Zoe said.

As Ely crossed the threshold into the ship, he heard Malcom giving orders to Kaylee, and based on that conversation he realized that she was the ship’s engineer. The quiet girl followed, keeping to the shadows as if playing a game. Ely noticed she was barefoot, which probably explained how she moved so quiet like. And then he heard the ramp closing behind him, wondering if he had made a good decision. He followed Zoe through the cargo bay and into the common area. She was short on words as she pointed out the restroom, pointed to the stairs that led up to the dining room, and then finally showed him to his room. It was Spartan to say the least, but much improved from sleeping out in the elements for so long. He could have easily rented a house with his money, but he had chosen not to make any social ties. He had limited his visits to the city to buying food supplements and replacing clothing.

“I didn’t bring a lot of food, but I am willing to share the coconuts that I collected. It makes the food supplement bearable,” Ely offered, hefting the hammock to demonstrate his haul.

“That’s a kindness,” Zoe said. “Thank you. We’ll probably have a group meal at 1900. That’s ship time. Feel free to join us. If you get hungry before then, you can make use of the kitchen.”

Zoe turned and left.

Ely tossed his pack on the bed and took inventory of his room. He would have really appreciated a room with a view, but he would have to settle. The ship lurched beneath his feet as it climbed into the air and he found a context for Jayne’s quip about the Captain’s piloting scaring him.

CHAPTER THREE

The star system that held Ningxia Hui was a double star system. The twin star maintained one small colony, Shenandoah, which also orbited a gas giant, only its rings were not so prominent, and the colors not so bright. Shenandoah’s terraforming had not taken as well as Ningxia Hui, but it was sufficient to eek out a living. Getting to Shenandoah from Ningxia Hui took hardly any time at all, compared to some of their other trips. The only problematic part of the journey was setting down on the moon’s surface to wait for the Ambassador, as the upper wind currents were a bit tricky to navigate. Constant directional changes as they descended through the atmosphere wanted to spin Serenity one way then the next. Fortunately, there were no wind shears at the surface level, so landing was a bit easier. They could have waited for Inara in orbit, but Malcom didn’t want her dealing with the upper winds with her shuttle. She was a fair enough pilot, no one doubted that, but he still saw no need to risk his ship’s greatest asset.

“Shuttles are expensive,” he had teased her, trying to lessen the fact that he was dependant on her and the revenue she brought in. The only reason he had got the interview on Ningxia Hui was due to her influence and he was truly grateful for work. Malcom had hoped Inara would be waiting for him, finished early, but she would stay on her schedule, he imagined, even if she had finished early. He frowned and powered down the flight panel. He was tempted to wait, looking out over the bleak terrain, but he heard laughter from the galley. He decided to investigate and found Kaylee, River, and the Doctor enjoying drinks.

“Oh, Captain,” Kaylee called. “Come and have a coconut protein shake with us.” Ely poured a glass for the Captain. “Thank you,” Malcom said, tasting and then nodding in appreciation. “Your talent manifests itself.”

“No,” Ely said. “That would be the alcohol Kaylee provided.” “Mine has no alcohol,” River complained.

“Neither does mine,” Kaylee said, roughing her hair up.

“You’re not drinking with us?” Malcom asked Kaylee.

River answered. “I would like to,” she said.

“You can’t drink with the meds you’re on,” Simon repeated for the umpteenth time.

“It’s still good,” River assured Ely.

“It really is,” Kaylee agreed, hoping to avoid the topic of why she was not drinking. She gave Simon a look that was intended to communicate keep quiet. “How’s about pouring me one of them drinks?” Jayne asked, making his presence known with a loud voice.

Ely nodded and poured the remaining from the mixer into a glass. Jayne accepted the glass, took a swig, and wiped his mouth.

“Not bad,” Jayne said.

“Thanks,” Ely said, returning his attention to cutting another coconut open. “May I have the coconut water?” River asked, hurriedly in case any were spilt before Ely knew to save it.

“Sure,” Ely said. He poured the liquid from the coconut into a glass for River.

“You never did mention what you do?” Malcom said.

“He’s a definite a mystery,” Kaylee said.

“He’s hurt,” River commented.

Serenity’s crew turned to River, prompting an explanation.

“His heart is bleeding,” River said.

“Was that supposed to be less cryptic?” Jayne asked.

Kaylee expressed her concern and Malcom looked to his doctor.

“There is no apparent signs of illness,” Simon said. “I could run some tests.” “There’s nothing wrong with my heart, Doctor,” Ely assured him.

“River here has a way of knowing things that turn out true,” Malcom said. “It wouldn’t hurt to have the Doctor have a look at you.”

“Let me rephrase my last statement,” Ely said. “There’s nothing wrong with my heart that the Doctor can fix.”

“What’s the condition?” Simon asked.

“Life,” Ely said, cutting the coconut in half with his cutlass. “It’s terminal.” Malcom smiled a little. “I guess it is at that,” he said, nodding to Zoe as she came to the table.

“What’s going on?” Zoe asked. “Crew meeting without me?”

“Well, you’re here, now,” Jayne said. “And we’re going to need a lot more of them drinks over here, Ely.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Ely said.

“I’ll help,” Kaylee said, grabbing two coconuts. She tossed one to the Doctor.

“Here, autopsy that, will you?”

“Save the water for me!” River told them.

Kaylee roughed up River’s hair. “No worries,” Kaylee said. She held the coconut to her nose and

inhaled deeply. “Can’t you just smell the beach and sunshine? It’s a shame we had to leave so quickly.”

“Hoping to be back quick,” Malcom said. “I’ll make sure you get your time on the beach.”

Zoe let out a deep sigh. There was no need to verbalize what she was feeling.

The whole crew knew that if Wash were still alive, that’s where he and Zoe would have been, and nothing short of the Captain threatening to shoot them would get them back to the ship.

“So, what do you do when you’re not making drinks?” Malcom asked, trying to steer away from the potential of stirring Zoe’s sadness to the surface.

“I’m a pilot,” Ely said.

“Woo hoo hoo,” Kaylee cooed, rubbing Ely’s back as she gave him a partial hug. “Captain, is this a lucky catch or what?” “We don’t need a new pilot,” Zoe snapped.

“Not looking to hire him,” Malcom assured her. “The amount of money he has in his pack, he could afford to buy a ship if he was a pilot worth his salt.”

“I’m actually quite good,” Ely said. “It’s the only thing I am quite good at, unfortunately.”

“If you’re such a good pilot, how is it we picked you up on a world where ships are so infrequent?” Zoe asked.

“I crashed there,” Ely said.

Jayne laughed. “Ah, yeah, you’re a great pilot. Sign me up for your crew. Not!” “Still alive,” Ely said.

“You’re awful truthful for someone claiming to be a pilot and having crashed,” Malcom said.

“Well, I’m having a good day. Happy to be back in the black,” Ely said. “And, thought for a moment that this was turning into an impromptu job interview. Figured if that were so, you would be needing all the data as to make a better decision. Wouldn’t want a misunderstanding that ends with me getting shot.”

“We’re not hiring,” Zoe said. “Our crew is full.”

“Just as well,” Ely said, turning his attention back to his coconut. “I wanted something a little more professional.”

Jayne laughed. “Little more professional and easier to crash.”

Ely blushed, replaying his words. “I meant no disrespect, Captain. I...” “Don’t worry about it,” Malcom said. There was a visible shift in his mood as he closed himself off.

“No, my words were essentially correct, but the meaning and context were wrong. I see you and your crew are well bonded. You’re a family. I’m not looking for a family. I... I can’t...” Ely stumbled for words.

“His heart is bleeding,” River repeated.

For a moment Ely stared at River and then his line of sight went through her and to the back of the room. He felt Kaylee touch his arm. “Do you want to talk about it?” He shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. “Nope,” he said, and returned to cutting the meat out of the coconut, dropping the bits into the blender.

“Tell us about your crash,” Jayne said. “That should be funny.”

The cutlass went through the coconut to the counter with an audible sound. His grip was tight, knuckles white.

“Let it be, Jayne,” Malcom said.

“It wasn’t your fault,” River said. “Reavers. They tore your heart.”

Everyone’s attention went to Ely, unable to resist, and yet unable to voice their curiosity, and

unable to look away from the train wreck that was about to happen. “I was number one pilot for the commercial ship Qiye Hao, her Captain was Marlin Li,” Ely said quietly. “And I was at the helm, five months ago, when our ship fell prey to Reavers.”

“That’s a lie,” Jayne said, vehemently, his chair returning to all four legs as he sat forwards. “Captain, there can’t be any Reavers left after that stunt we pulled.” “We threw a stone and stirred up a mighty big hornet’s nest, that’s for sure,” Malcom said. “And there is no doubt a diminishing supply of Reavers. But did we get them all? No. There are Reavers still out on patrol.”

“It just can’t be,” Jayne muttered. “Besides, have you ever heard of anyone surviving a Reaver encounter?”

“We survived a Reaver encounter,” Zoe said, patiently, as if to a child. “Well, I mean, besides us, because we’re so bad ass and all,” Jayne said.

“We got lucky,” Malcom corrected.

“Some of us got lucky,” Zoe corrected. Her left fist was enclosed in her right hand, elbows on the table, her chin resting on her hand. She watched Ely as he bared down on the knife, as if he might push it through the counter.

“Go on with your story,” Simon said.

“It’s helpful to get things out,” River added. “I know.” She looked back and up as Simon touched her head. She looked at her brother as if she were not completely happy with him.

Ely seemed stuck for a moment, but then he committed to a path, and began the walk home. Perhaps his solitude over the last few months had made it possible to talk. It became apparent from his face that he was no longer with the crew of Serenity, at least, in spirit, but was somewhere in his past, in his mind, and no one saw it better than him with the exception of River. Everyone else was left to imagine, which was often worse than the truth of the matter.

“We had just made our descent star-wards, making for Ningxia Hui when they came out of nowhere,” Ely said. “I don’t know how the radar op missed it, as much radiation as it was spilling. But we learned of its presence soon enough and I went for a full burn. There was an Alliance cruiser, the Dahan, in system. Captain Li put out a cry. They said they were busy.”

“No way!” Kaylee said.

“By the time we got to Ningxia the Alliance cruiser was on the far side of the planet,” Ely went on. “The first harpoon ripped the starboard atmosphere stabilizer completely off. The next harpoon imbedded in the port heat shield.”

“And you panicked and did an evasive and pulled it right off,” Jayne said, as if he could predict what happened next.

“No,” Ely said. “I kept my cool. I calculated what needed to be done and I did it. Everyone walked away from the crash site, save two.” “What did you do?” Kaylee asked.

“I rolled my ship along the vertical axis, winding the chain around my ship, drawing us right in along side the Reaver ship,” Ely said.

“And they didn’t board you?” Malcom asked.

“They didn’t have time,” Ely said. “I rammed it fierce and drove them straight into the atmosphere, forcing them into a re-entry with their engines facing the planet and their heat shield pointed towards space. The plan was to let the heat of re-entry burn their ship from the inside out, sending the plasma right up their tail pipe.”

“Risky. If blow back ended up in their fuel tank instead of the engine room, you would have both

blown up,” Mal said.

“Figured I was already dead,” Ely said. “Just trying to win the game in the process. I held them there, in that position, for as long as I dared, then I rolled away, unwinding the chain, and flipped the ship away. In the process, the port heat shield tore free. A fuel line ruptured when it did. Save that info. Remind you, I already told you my starboard wing was gone. So it wasn’t going to be nice glide to a crash landing. So, I put us in a tail down position and did a control burn bringing us down with raw power, our ship standing vertical. I thought I would just cut the engines and let us fall to our prone position, but that’s when I learned about the rupture in the fuel line. Laying us horizontal would have caused the fuel to flow right into the engine and blown us up, so I powered back up, found a narrow ravine, and I set us down by wedging the ship between the two cliff faces, just as pretty as you please. One hundred and forty passengers, and seventeen crew survived. Everyone climbed up to the top emergency hatch and walked out on solid land.”

“Save two,” Jayne reminded him.

“Save the two,” Ely said, his eyes watering. He felt no impulse to wipe them. His shame had already consumed him. “My wife and daughter were exposed to partial vacuum when the port heat shield pulled free. They died instantly. Ironically, I chose that cabin for them because, structurally speaking, that was the safest cabin in case of a collision or a crash landing.”

“And the Reavers?” Kaylee asked.

“They rotated over to give chase and blew up,” Ely said. “That’s some story,” Malcom said.

“You said it, Mal,” Jayne said. “Total fiction.”

Ely put down his knife and turned to the counter behind him where his pack was. He retrieved a media player and turned to see Jayne standing, his hand on his gun.

“I’m unarmed,” Ely said.

“Jayne, you can go stow your weapon now,” Malcom said. “There’s a stranger on board, Mal. We don’t know him,” Jayne said.

“We know all that we need to know,” Malcom said.

Ely handed the media player to Malcom. “You will see all the ship’s telemetry and video recordings of the incident from the Alliance ship. They filmed it all and put it in their reports. Rooky for a cam operator, judging by some of his zooms, but enough to get the picture of what was happening. The Alliance picked up the crew to return them someplace more modern.”

Mal took the media player and then looked to Jayne to see why he wasn’t complying with his directive. Jayne muttered something as he walked away.

“Why didn’t you go with them?” Kaylee asked.

“I stayed to bury my family,” Ely said, looking to River to see if she was going to expose the half lie. River stared back.

“Alliance couldn’t wait till that was done?” Kaylee asked.

“Alliance has its own schedule,” Ely said.

“Anything left of the ship?” Kaylee said. “Salvage? Parts?”

“No,” Ely said. “Once the locals learned of it from the new settlers we dropped, they took every piece of that ship, part by part. Not a bit of scrap metal left anywhere. None of it went to waste.”

“They’re hard up for metal on that planet,” Malcom said. “I know,” Ely said.

“Why did you keep this?” Malcom asked.

“To determine if there was anything better I could have done,” Ely said. “To remind myself how I failed. Torture, I suppose.”

“Captain, we got to take him in now. He needs us,” Kaylee said. “We don’t got to do anything, Kaylee,” Malcom said. “And, if we were as welcoming as you, we’d have the whole ‘Verse in my cargo hold.” “No worries, Captain. I will get off at the next port,” Ely said.

“Till then, I could use a good pilot,” Mal said.

“Captain,” Zoe protested.

“Not replacing Wash, Zoe,” Mal said, a matter of fact and quick. “Couldn’t if I tried. But truth is, I’m not a great pilot. A great pilot could pinch fuel and get us places without running the tanks dry. And if his testimony, or this telemetry, is on the money, I reckon Ely could fly us for a while, at least until we get this contract going, or till we’re on our feet again.”

“We always seem to be off our feet, don’t we?” Zoe said.

“Seems like more than most, but don’t see any alternative to getting back up and dusting ourselves off,” Malcom said.

“You’re the Captain,” Zoe said, pushing away from the table. She went to her room and dropped out of sight.

“Captain, I’m not looking for charity,” Ely said.

“And you’re not getting any,” Malcom said. “Can you fly this ship?” “Yes, Sir,” Ely said.

“Well, let’s go. If I’m not mistakin’, that’s the Ambassador knocking,” Malcom said, heading for the Bridge in response to an alarm.

“Go on,” Kaylee told Ely. “Simon and I will clean up.”

Ely nodded, washed and dried his hand, and collected his bag. He stopped to say something to Kaylee, saw River pointing towards the Bridge, as if giving him a directive, and he nodded to her, saluting as if she were the Captain. She saluted back. He was on his way to the bridge when the Captain yelled back towards the dining room. “You coming or what?”

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’m in and locked,” Inara said. “Powering down.”

“Welcome back,” Malcom said. “Lifting off in a few. Dinner at 1900.” “I’ll be there,” Inara said.

Malcom closed the channel. “You coming or what?” he yelled back to the dining room.

Malcom got up to see what was taking so long when Ely arrived on the bridge. He positioned his pack on the back of the left flight chair, planning to fly from the “Captain’s station” old Earth rules, or auxiliary control from the normal Firefly’s pilot position. Ely walked around the Bridge, doing inventory. There was a pocket on the edge of each seat where a check list should have been, but there wasn’t a check list in either. He would have to go by memory and experience. All hatches were closed, judging by all the green lights on one of the panels. Still, proper thing to do was to go out and inspect and also do a preflight walk around.

“I did a pretty thorough walk around on Ningxia, but willing to do another quick run around,” Ely said.

“Can you fly this or not?” Mal asked.

Ely took the pilot’s chair he had chosen, which was obviously worrying Malcom a little, and clicked three switches over head with his right hand without looking up at them while his left hand moved

across the instrument cluster. He pushed a button to rotate the objective views on his monitors to views more useful for him. He could reprogram the function keys later for quicker access to his most often used views. He did some quick calculations in his head and then another on his hand, bending fingers in an odd sort of math.

“You always run the tanks this low?” Ely asked, spooling up the engines. “It is what it is,” Malcom said. “We can reach the fuel depot in the Wayne system?”

“Roco? Oh, yeah, sure,” Ely said. “I know where it is.”

“Wouldn’t you prefer to sit over here?” Malcom began.

Ely throttled up and gently pulled back on the yoke, doing a double take on the over head panel. He toggled a switch back and forth, found nothing changed, and then ignored the light. He whistled slightly to himself as he set up to roll with the changes in wind as they climbed in altitude.

Had Malcom not seen the ground falling away, he wouldn’t have believed Serenity was airborne. He drew closer to the panel to watch what screen Ely was using. He took hold of the back of the chair expecting the wind sheer as they climbed, but no bumps or dramatic vibrations occurred.

“Sorry,” Ely said, easing Serenity over so that her belly was facing space as they continued to climb. He ignored the visual cues from the windows which were contrary to the signals of artificial gravity which brought on symptoms of vertigo. “You were saying?”

“How did you do that?” Mal asked.

“Do what?” Ely asked.

“The change in wind direction and velocity had the yoke trembling in my hands as I fought it coming in,” Mal said.

“Never fight it, Captain,” Ely said. “Go with the flow, like a leaf on the wind.” “Don’t ever say that again,” Malcom snapped.

“Yes, Captain,” Ely said, returning to his more professional, neutral state, though inside he was happy to be flying, and wondering how he had offended.

Malcom turned to walk away, stopped to say something, then turned and simply departed without bothering to explain why he had snapped.

♪♪▶

Kaylee met Inara as she exited the shuttle at the top of the Serenity cargo bay, greeting her with a hug.

“Hey, you,” Kaylee said, singing it.

“Missed me?” Inara asked.

“Always,” Kaylee said. “Did you have a good time?”

“I’m glad to be back,” Inara said, noncommittal. “What’s new? You seem happy, I mean, even more so than normal.”

“We got us a new pilot,” Kaylee said. “It’s not official, yet, but, I imagine he’s going to work out. He’s really nice.”

“You have a great capacity for love,” Inara remarked. “You see people with kindness.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” Kaylee said. “He is terribly sick with a loss, a heavy burden that wrapped around him like a cloak, but it’s not hiding his aura. He really is a good person. Very much like the Captain.” The last part came as an after thought, which Kaylee thought about, and then confirmed with a nod. “Yes. Erie how similar they are. Time will tell, I guess.”

“Sorry to be intruding,” Malcom said, walking right up. To Inara he said:

“Wanted to see that you were well.”

Kaylee hugged him. “You’re never intruding, Captain.”

“Thank you, Kaylee,” Malcom said. “I am glad you’re back, Inara.”

“So am I,” Inara said. “Was my contact of any help to you?”

“Yes, actually,” Malcom said. “We have a shot at a legit job. No sneaking around. No avoiding Alliance cruisers. We have to make a practice run to show them we’re capable, but the contract was genuine. It’s an annual gig, we’d have to be out this way once a year, but it would more than cover the cost of travel and maintenance issues, and enough left over for crew bonuses.”

“The opportunity to eat well is a big plus,” Kaylee said. “You should see Ningxia Hui from orbit. It really is a paradise!”

“I really think this is going to work out for all of us,” Malcom agreed.

“That’s great, Mal,” Inara said.

“Yes, it is,” Malcom said. “Great enough that, if you are of mind to retire, you can make this your permanent home.” “Oh my,” Kaylee said.

“Are you offering to make me a kept woman or an honest woman?” Inara asked.

“Truth be known, you were always an honest woman,” Malcom said. “Far superior in class and style than I am worthy of being graced with. Not making decisions for you, mind you, just giving you other options if you wish.”

Inara hugged Malcom. “Thank you,” she said, speaking against his neck. “Your offer means more to me than you know.”

“I think I should go find some engineering stuff to do,” Kaylee said, sneaking back.

“Now, don’t be starting any gossip, Kaylee,” Malcom said. “I’m not offering marriage or a contract. You know I’m not the jealous, sort, Inara, it’s just, you’re missed when you’re gone. All of us miss you. And, I worry a bit.”

“Wow,” Inara said. “You are very open today, Mal? Is something wrong?” “I’m having a good day,” Malcom said. He squeezed her tighter to him before relinquishing her from the hug. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, the Doctor is going to remove some stitches.”

Kaylee and Inara watched the Captain walk away. Inara asked Kaylee, “Has he been drinking?”

“Just a glass,” Kaylee admitted. “Ely made us coconut shakes and I added some ‘clear’ for some kick.”

“Ely?” Inara asked.

“Oh, the new pilot,” Kaylee said. She started fishing in one of her pockets and pulled out a stone. “Look what he gave me! Gonna have to find a jeweler to set it.” “What’s his last name?” Inara asked, looking to Kaylee and not the stone.

“Torok, I think,” Kaylee said, admiring her diamond. “Yeah, Torok.” She looked around to see Inara climbing the stairs.

♪♪▶

Ely Torok was under the flight console when Inara approached, calling his name. He slid out, but not far enough out to keep from hitting his head as he sat up. He grimaced and held his head.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Inara said. She swallowed, her hands clasped in front of her. A sympathy grimace flashed over her face.

“Inara,” Ely said, his mouth suddenly dry. He increased the pressure on his head, still squinting.

“Are you hurt bad?” Inara asked.

“Yes. No. Maybe. I’m not sure how to answer you,” Ely said, finding new levels of squinting. He crossed his legs to sit Indian style and leaned back against the side of the console, rubbing his head. “I didn’t know you were on board. I wouldn’t have come had I known. I would have waited for another ship.”

“No worries,” Inara said.

“Serenity was the first ship,” Ely said. “I could have waited another month for Alliance, but, I just wanted to be on the move, and...”

“Shhh,” Inara said. “It’s okay. It’s not like you’re stalking me. Besides, you couldn’t have gone with Alliance.”

“No, not stalking you,” Ely said, not even bothering to comment on the Alliance.

“Not my style. I don’t want to be where I’m not wanted.”

“I never said you weren’t wanted,” Inara corrected the misunderstanding. “Well, yeah, you did, kind of,” Ely argued. “You never cashed in any of the credit vouchers I sent you.”

“I didn’t earn them,” Inara said. “There was no trade. No equity.” “That was the point,” Ely said. “I gave freely, no ties, no agendas, no expectations.”

“You were always generous with me,” Inara agreed. “I believe in your sincerity, and believe that the gifts were just that, but still, it would have bound me, none the less.” She chuckled at the thought. “Quite a few companions were angry that I held your attention.”

“No one gives like you,” Ely said. “And I’m not talking about your trade, or fair compensation. I’m talking about you, your kindness, the quality of the friendship you provide, the genuineness of your personality and temperament. I’m sure most of your clients fail to see how sincere you are. Maybe because they’re stupid, issues of projecting their own insecurities, or maybe because bias of a bad experience. There are bad companions and rumors of bad companions can often be worse than the reality. There are definitely bad companions. There are also the stereotypical companions. There are even good companions. And then, Inara, there is you. Class and respect beyond what any client deserves.” Ely stood and then sat in the pilot’s chair. “I always hoped you would have come and stayed with me.”

“You never asked,” Inara pointed out.

“Indeed,” Ely said, nodding. “What a simple solution. Just ask.”

“Usually works,” Inara said.

“I will try and remember,” Ely said.

“You understand, as a member of this crew, you can’t be a client...” Inara said. Ely seemed confused. “Uh? Oh! I hadn’t considered... Well, that’s a lie, I entertained the thought the moment I saw you and got the headache, but squashed it fairly quick. No, I won’t ask... Inara! It’s a kindness you thinking of me, but, I can’t, ever. Your vouchers are still good, no worries there. And my generosity is yours to tap if you have need, with no expectations, but, no. I won’t be calling again. Ever.”

“Is this the cloak of sadness Kaylee was referring to?” Inara asked. “Did I cause this?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no,” Ely said, saying each no as if he was re-evaluating the question. “That would prove that I did have expectations with the gifts. No! You taught me to give freely. I just have nothing left to give.”

“Kaylee’s gift says otherwise,” Inara said.

“Oh, that, that’s not what you think,” Ely waved it off. “I can’t get rid of it fast enough. It’s a burden I’ll be happy when it’s gone. Anyway, you didn’t cause it. I caused it. It’s not you. It’s me. I

was always too verbose around you. Rambling, mostly.

Chasing rabbits. Interesting. This feeling.” He closed his eyes.

“First rule,” Malcom said, intruding. “The companion is off limits to crew. Harassment will not be tolerated.”

“He wasn’t harassing me, Mal,” Inara said. “And, servicing or not servicing the crew is my choice.”

“I believe that was your choice,” Malcom said. “I’m just filling him in on your rules.”

“She had already informed me of the rules, Captain,” Ely said. “I assure you, I will be completely professional from here out. I apologize for my rudeness, Inara.” “You have nothing to apologize for,” Inara said.

“Well, since we’re all on the same page,” Malcom said. “ETA?”

“We’ll arrive at the fuel depot in 49 hours,” Ely said. “One oddity to report.

Though I have transmitted our ETA and requested a docking schedule for refueling, I have not received a return wave, confirming our request.”

“Not even an automated response?” Malcom asked.

“Not even” Ely assured him. “And it’s not an equipment malfunction. I bounced a wave off another ship and they sent their complements.” “Perhaps the station is having a crisis?” Inara asked.

“If they are, they haven’t bothered to change their AITAS or their transponder number to reflect the nature of the emergency,” Ely said. “There’s been no SOS, from them or any of the ships that have come and gone, and I am pretty sure I have monitored calls to and from other ships. Further, our NavCom has communicated with their NavCom, and our flight path was acknowledged. One ship altered course to give us the right away based on that info. All seems normal except for them not putting us in the cue for fuel and returning contact.”

“Call them again,” Malcom instructed.

Ely proceeded to call the fueling depot again, providing numbers and asking for confirmation. After a moment, a moment of no response, Ely looked to Mal for instructions.

“And I was having such a good day,” Malcom complained. “You did tell them we were paying cash?”

Ely nodded.

“Do you want me to try?” Inara asked.

“No,” Malcom said. “Speculate.”

“They could be having communication problems,” Ely offered.

“But as you mentioned, they would change the transponder to 4411, so people would know they were having communication problems,” Malcom said.

“That is the SOP,” Inara said, referring to the standard operating procedures. “But their staff could be inept.”

“When we’re in visual range, we will be able to use the running lights to communicate with Morse Code,” Ely offered. “Maybe they’re out of fuel?” Inara asked.

“Then they are obligated to tell us they’re not serving us,” Malcom said. “And insufficient reserves left to make our secondary port of call.”

“Want me to turn the ship around?” Ely asked.

“No,” Malcom said. “We can’t sit there and wait for a delivery ship. That could take months, and no guarantee anyone would respond. Not to mention that would more than triple the costs of fuel. Start pinching fuel, update Roco Station on our new ETA, and tell them we’re running on fumes.”

Ely updated the information and sent the wave. A moment later they received a hail.

“Roco Station to Serenity, come in?”

Malcom jumped on it, moving to Serenity’s master helm. “This is Captain Malcom Reynolds, of Serenity,” he said, apparent anger in his voice. “What’s the delay in your response?”

“I’m sorry, Captain, but we had trouble accessing your credit history,” a Roco Station clerk replied.

“I don’t use credit,” Malcom said.

“Which explains why you don’t have a credit history,” the clerk said. “I’m afraid we will be unable to meet your request for fuel at this time.”

“Excuse me?” Malcom demanded.

“Sorry for the inconvenience, but we’ve been ordered not to sell you fuel,” the clerk replied. “You have no credit history.”

“I have no credit history because I always pay cash,” Malcom explained. “Perhaps you should look into getting an Alliance line of credit, to boost your buying power,” the clerk said.

“Because with this rating, I can’t sell you fuel.” “On whose authority?” Malcom said, fuming.

“Sorry, I am not able to divulge that information,” the clerk said.

“What is your name?” Malcom asked.

“I’m not willing to give that information out, either,” the clerk said. “You should have sufficient fuel left to make your second port of call. You should veer off now.” “Had you responded sooner, I might have done that,” Malcom yelled. “You get your boss on the line and let me talk at him.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been designated to handle you,” the clerk said.

“Handle me? I need to buy fuel and I have the money to do so,” Malcom said.

“That may be, but we have the right to refuse service,” the clerk said. “On what grounds?” Malcom asked.

“You know, no shoes, no shirt, that sort of stuff,” the clerk said.

“You have an obligation to render service according to the Alliance fair trade code one one seven,” Malcom pointed out.

“True,” the clerk said. “And, you are certainly free to file the appropriate formal complaints at the nearest Alliance base. Now, if there’s anything else I can do for you?” “Like it or not, I’m coming in for fuel,” Malcom said.

“If you approach our station, we will consider your intentions to be hostile and open fire,” the man said.

“I have passengers and women on this boat, at least give me the minimum fuel to reach San Adros,” Malcom pleaded.

“Sorry, I can’t do that,” the clerk said. “However, if you are declaring an emergency, we will send a rescue shuttle for your passengers and crew. We will have to destroy your ship, to prevent navigational hazards, of course, but your souls will be safe.” Malcom cursed a long line of profanities in Mandarin.

“I will not tolerate that kind of abuse,” the clerk said, and disconnected the line. Inara looked on Malcom with compassion, wanting to help, but her helplessness was evident.

“Shut the engine down,” Malcom said. “Coast us.” He then hit the intercom button. “Crew conference, now.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“We can make Ruthers, can’t we?” Zoe asked.

Malcom paused in his pacing to watch Ely do his math. Malcom and Inara were the only ones not seated. He paced while Inara leaned against the nearby bulkhead.

“Not from here,” Ely said. “There’s a gravity sink between us and there. Dark matter is the prevailing theory, scientist aren’t real sure what’s going on in that region, but it take more energy to pass through there than it does in the regions surrounding it. Objects passing through ‘the hole’ mysteriously slow, regardless of full thrusters or coasting. And, unfortunately, we don’t have the reserve to go around that region.”

“Did we find us another albatross?” Jayne asked, glaring at Ely, who was scrutinizing electronic charts on his media player and crunching numbers, subvocalizations apparent by his moving mouth, and the fingers folding and going back up as he counted in his weird way. River mirrored him, smiling occasionally as she figured out the systems he was using.

“We were in this predicament before we met him,” Malcom said.

“One hundred forty two thousand three hundred six!” River shouted, startling everyone by her sudden loudness.

Ely looked at her, confused, and then nodded as his auditory centers processed her words after they were spoken, said “yeah,” and went back to his calculations.

“What about the fuel in the shuttles,” Inara asked. “Has anyone thought of that?” “Four hundred forty seven pounds of fuel, two hundred thousand, four hundred fifty miles, times ten to the power of eleven, minus gravity wakes, plus burn co-efficient, quantum drag,” River said, calculating on her fingers, very much like Ely was doing. “No. Insufficient fuel to sustain momentum at optimum speeds after the initial push past light.”

Malcom flashed a smile at River but she only had eyes for Ely’s fingers and math. “Coapers?” Ely mumbled a potential destination, sliding his virtual planet directory slash map over to get the numbers as the stars on his screen fell to the background and the ‘star’ Coapers became more prominent on his display.

“Insufficient fuel,” River said.

Ely looked to River, wondering if she was mocking him, worked the math out, and then nodded. “Insufficient fuel.”

“Why won’t they sell us fuel?” Kaylee asked.

“Inara?” Malcom said. “Want to tell them?”

Inara frowned, but nodded. “I have two sources, with two completely different explanations. One source said that someone doesn’t want us to get Ningxia Hui contract. If that’s true, when sufficient time has gone by for Serenity not to be awarded the contract, Roco Station should be open to business for us.”

“And the other explanation?” Jayne asked.

“Someone in the Alliance is getting payback for revealing Miranda,” Inara said. “Miranda,” River echoed. “Insufficient fuel.”

“Like we’d return there, anyway,” Jayne said.

Ely pushed the media player away and folded his hands in his lap. He turned his head away from the group and stared at the wall. The very wall which Inara was leaning against. Ely wasn’t seeing her, but Malcom believed otherwise. Inara met Ely’s gaze but recognized the fact that he wasn’t seeing her or anything but the stuff in his own head. She had seen him go away like that enough times to understand what was going on.

Malcom frowned.

Jayne laughed. “Ha, did we stumped our new pilot? Told you he wasn’t so great.” “I have a solution,” Ely said, quietly, not turning his head back to the group. “We’re all listening,” Malcom said, anger leaking through his words. Whether it was anger for the direction of Ely’s gaze or anger for the situation, no one was sure. Ely turned his face back to the folks sharing the space with him. He looked fairly somber, humbled even. “I apologize in advance if my suggestion is inappropriate. I think you are fine people and all and I don’t wish to burden you with the crudeness of my solution and reveal my inability to offer a legit alternative.”

“Burden away,” Jayne said.

“If you got something to say, say it. We won’t shoot you for speaking your mind,” Malcom said.

“Well, I might,” Jayne said. “Might even shoot you if you don’t.” “That’s quite enough,” Malcom said.

“No it aint,” Jayne said. “You went and made him ship’s pilot and didn’t even inquire if he could fight.”

“A pilot shouldn’t have to fight. He just needs to fly,” Malcom said. “Excuse me, but if you’ve been on the same ship I’ve been on, I’m thinking having a pilot that could fight might be useful,” Jayne said.

“Shut it,” Zoe told him.

“I mean, at the least, he should know how to fire a gun,” Jayne said.

Zoe stared Jayne into silence before returning her attention back to Ely. “I can shoot a gun, fairly well,” Ely said. “Can’t fight worth a spit, but I can shoot a gun. And, I don’t have a problem shooting someone to protect me or mine, but just assume not be in that position. Which makes my suggestion rather ironic, I guess.”

“What’s your idea?” Inara asked. There was always a kindness in her voice when she addressed him, it seemed.

“Would anyone care if we committed a bit of larceny?” Ely asked.

Everyone looked at him as if he were joking. Only Inara knew he wasn’t joking, but the others figured it out real quick.

“I’m appalled, absolutely shocked, that you would even consider asking my crew such a question,” Malcom said.

Ely looked extremely remorseful and cowed by Malcom’s rebuke.

“I told you he was no good,” Jayne said, leaning into the table. “Can I shoot him now, Captain?”

“Naw, just throw him out the airlock...” Malcom said. Jayne stood up.

“Relax, Ely,” Kaylee said. “They’re playing you. We’re not above a bit of larceny if the opportunity is reasonable.”

Zoe slapped the table, Malcom gripped Ely’s shoulders from behind, and Jayne was mad that he could have at least manhandled Ely all the way to the exit before the game was up, but was amused none the less, as the three of them all laughed hysterically. Kaylee frowned, feeling sorry for Ely. River looked amused by the energy around the table. Inara was staring fiercely at Malcom. Simon just shook his head.

“Did you see his face!” Malcom asked.

“I did,” Zoe said, more laughter erupting from her as she laid her head on the table. She hadn’t laughed so hard since she could remember. “It reminds me,” she began and then started crying.

Inara moved closer to her friend, pulling a chair up. She pulled Zoe towards her and held her.

Malcom went and stood behind Zoe, a hand on her shoulder.

“Ah, here we go again,” Jayne said.

Kaylee kicked Jayne under the table.

“Ow,” he complained.

“That’s it, Zoe,” Inara said. “Let it out. We’re here for you.”

“What’s your plan?” Malcom asked, hoping the conversation might move them past this moment. He didn’t want to get stuck here.

“Gonna have us crash Roco Station?” Jayne asked.

“Uh? Oh. No. No. They’re too heavily fortified and we don’t have the reserves to play that game,” Ely said. “At least, you don’t have any armaments that I could discern.”

“There are no guns on this ship,” Malcom confirmed, and then caught the look that Inara was giving him. “Well, I mean, there are guns on this ship, but not part of the ship, or anything like that. We’re a completely commercial venture. Only straying into crime when the fuel is low or we’re hungry.”

“Well, here’s the deal. There’s an Alliance military, emergency fuel cache in the Vega sector,” Ely said. “I can get us there.”

“I think we’d have better luck going up against Roco Station,” Malcom said. “The cache is fully automated,” Ely said. “A service drone flies in annually to rotate stock and or re-supply depending on the years usage.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about this cache,” Jayne said. “I have never heard of anything in the Vega system.”

“That’s because there’s nothing in the Vega system worth mentioning except the military cache, which is a secret cache,” Ely said.

“You know about it,” Malcom said, his hands tightening on Zoe’s shoulder. Zoe became more alert, wiping her eyes.

“That’s because I filled up there a couple time. I can get us there and I can get access to the fuel,” Ely said. “That’s the easy part.” “What’s the hard part?” Kaylee asked.

“Erasing the data banks so no one knows we helped ourselves to some fuel,” Ely said.

“Oh, I can do that,” Kaylee said, all chipper like. And then more somber, she corrected, “I think I can do that.”

“I want to know how you know about this,” Malcom said.

“Mal, I think you should let it be,” Inara said.

“Can I go get my gun now?” Jayne asked.

“Bizui!” Malcom, Zoe, and Inara all said simultaneously, telling Jayne to shut up.

“I can get yours for you, too, Mal,” Jayne offered.

“If there’s to be any shooting, I can fetch my own piece,” Malcom said.

“The war is over, Mal,” Inara said.

“That’s why I’m not rushing off to fetch my piece, but I will have some answers,” Malcom said.

“I flew for the Alliance in the war,” Ely said, matter of fact.

Malcom turned to go get his weapon. Inara stood and went after him.

“Mal, stop this,” Inara said.

Malcom turned on her. “You knew and you didn’t tell me?!” Malcom snapped.

“Hear his story,” Inara pleaded.

“I’ve heard his story,” Malcom said. “I heard how he saved his crew against the Reavers and lost

his wife and child. An honorable thing if ever, but the atrocities of that war committed by Alliance pilots are unforgivable.”

“You didn’t tell me about your wife and child,” Inara said, looking accusingly at Ely, allowing Malcom to slip away as she tried to recover her imbalance of thought.

“I didn’t want your sympathy,” Ely stated.

“Sympathy? How about just human kindness?” Inara asked.

Malcom returned with his revolver, putting one bullet in the chamber and clicking it into place.

“No, Mal, wait!” Inara said, blocking. “You really got to hear his other story before you shoot him because if you shoot him you will really hate yourself and I’ll be gone again. Forever.”

Malcom raised his weapon, pushing her aside to get a good shot. “No one’s stopping you,” he said.

“Captain,” Kaylee pleaded, both for the harshness to Inara and for the life of Ely.

“What’s your other story?” Malcom asked. “Explain to me how you can justify carpet bombing villages and city folks indiscriminately. Soldier to soldier is one thing, but killing folks just for killing folks, that’s enough for me to justify murdering you.” Jayne snickered, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed. “Not like anyone would know.”

“We would know,” Inara snapped.

“I aint gonna tell,” Jayne said.

“Go ahead, tell me the story,” Malcom demanded.

“I don’t know the story,” Jayne said, and only Zoe seemed to catch it, and rolled her eyes.

“I’d rather you shoot me,” Ely said.

“Oh, please don’t,” Kaylee said. She began chanting no under her breath, he eyes closed.

Simon waved his sister to come around to him as he scooted closer to Kaylee and put his hand on hers.

“Tell him the damn story!” Inara snapped at him. “He’s from New Tejas, Mal.

He was drafted.”

“If his excuse is he was just following orders, I’ll shoot him just as plain as day,” Malcom said.

“Or I will,” Zoe agreed.

“Aint this fun?” Jayne asked. “Haven’t shot anyone in a while. Missing the action, actually, but watching someone get shot is just as good, though.”

Inara screamed, her fist clenched in rage. “Both of you men are acting like pig headed...” and then she dropped into Mandarin, unable to think in her rage, the words becoming more than gibberish. “I don’t know how I can love either one of you!” Kaylee covered her mouth. Zoe eyes shifted to Inara. Malcom was looking at her as well.

“Whoa, now this is getting good,” Jayne said.

Malcom pointed the gun at Jayne and cocked the hammer. Jayne went silent.

“You love me?” Malcom asked.

“I’ve always loved you, Mal. You’re just too stupid to see what’s right in front of your face and this man here is a good man and if you shoot him a part of me will die because I loved him, but like you, he never expressed open interest,” Inara said. “I love you, Mal. I said it. I have always thought you had feelings for me, too, but stupid me, I thought you would come around to admitting as much. I just keep falling for men who are unable or unwilling to just tell me.”

“I’m a good man, too,” Jayne said.

Malcom lowered his weapon. “The reason I have never said anything is because I love you,” Malcom said. “And everyone I love dies.”

“Oh! Join the club, Mal,” Inara said. “We all die, and whether you tell me you love me or not, I’m still going to die, and I’d rather not die never having heard the words. It’s amazing how much Ely is like you. That’s what you meant on the Bridge, isn’t it, Ely? You’ve given up on love because your wife and daughter died? You’ve weathered worse. I knew you before you had a wife and I know what the Alliance took from you. If you can’t figure out how to keep on loving, then Mal should shoot you. We could all take lessons from Kaylee on this one.”

“Kaylee’s giving lessons?” Jayne asked, and grimaced when once again Kaylee kicked him under the table

“Okay, so, you have another story or what?” Malcom asked Ely.

“I have spoken more words since I’ve been on this ship than I have spoken in the last five months, cumulative,” Ely said. “And I really wanted to avoid all that.”

“I’m still of mind to just shoot you,” Malcom said.

Inara looked at Malcom, scrunching her lips, and then looked at Ely. Inara crossed her arms, staring at Ely as if she were about to scold a child.

“I’d really like to hear the story,” Kaylee said.

“I’d really like to hear the gun talk,” Jayne said. “Then we can divide up his money.”

“Not that we could spend it anywhere,” Simon said. “Has everyone forgotten we’re not going anywhere without the pilot?”

River handed Ely a bandage. “For you heart,” River explained.

CHAPTER SIX

Ely Torok folded his hands together, his eyes distant. “Never love again, to avoid killing those I love,” Ely summarized what Inara had communicated. “Funny how like attracts like, Captain.”

“Serenity has a way of sneaking up on people like that,” Kaylee said.

“Serendipity, perhaps. I kind of believe people find what they need in this ‘Verse.’” “Hope you’re right,” Ely said. “Because I’ve always worked from the principle you make what you need. Inara wasn’t completely accurate about me being drafted. As the first son, I was exempt. But, my family was obligated to put a child in service, and when they came for my younger brother, I volunteered. He was less of a fighter than I am. I just knew if I didn’t go, we’d never see him again. And, like you said, Mal, soldier against soldier is reasonable. You have a gun, I have a gun, we know the game. It’s reasonably balanced.”

“He can borrow mine, if you’re worried about fair,” Jayne offered Malcom.

“Ignore the peanut gallery,” Malcom said. “Go on.”

“Basic training came and went fairly quick, and they found I had an aptitude for flying,” Ely said. “Not a genius by any stretch, not even the best in my class, especially when it came to flying by the rules and regs, but I always came back. I was made part of a squadron and the first week I made it to Ace status. More kills than any other in Fleet and in the shortest time interval. Of course, it was rare to encounter an adversary worthy of me, and consequently, I got bored and started to make a game of it. Actually tuned into my opponents frequencies and started coaching them. Unlike the Alliance guys I flew with, many of these Brown-pilots guys were just kids, and, most actually liked flying. Built a reputation for myself that got back to the Alliance. Was severely punished for that.”

“How did you get a reputation if you shot down all of your opponents?” Simon asked.

“I didn’t shoot them all down,” Ely admitted, almost bragging about it judging by the way the smile tugged at the corners of his cheek as he remembered some of the dog fights. “I recorded the electronic kills and told them to go home. Most of them did.”

“That was you?” Zoe asked, her voice quiet like. “Silver Ghost.”

Ely didn't answer her right away. “My call sign. Haven't heard that in a while. And, again, after Alliance discovered what I was doing, I was severely chastised. I had to have legit kills. So, my solution was to talk as many of the Independents into landing their crafts, give them a few moments to extricate themselves from the craft, and then I destroyed the craft on the ground. After about a week of this, I was severely chastised. I was directed to shoot the enemy out of the air. So, I proceeded to shoot the enemy out of the air, but strangely enough, most of my 'kills' always allowed for the pilot to eject, or crash land their craft and walk away. I was severely chastised for this, but I was so good at what I did, the command didn't push it. I nearly lost my flying status when I had an 'accidental' friendly fire. One of my squadron decided to shoot at an Independent in the parachute, an Independent from a craft I had shot. I didn't take kindly to that and I showed my man what its like to be in a parachute on a strange planet. No action was taken against me, mostly because I didn't shoot his parachute out from under him. Made him think I was going to, but the tapes looked like I was just giving him cover till he landed. Everyone knew otherwise, but they let me continue flying.” “I've heard of you,” Malcom said. “I've heard rumor of you.” “So, you never carpet bombed a city?” Zoe asked.

“My squadron was ordered to take out all enemy fighters at Sichuan and after doing so, I was ordered to take my squadron back and bomb Sichuan capital,” Ely said. “I protested. I pointed out that it wasn't a military target, and further, there were over one million refugees, mostly women and children, displaced due to war related activities. The commander came online personally and gave me a direct order to comply with the bombardment.”

“But you didn't,” Zoe said. “Sichuan wasn't bombed.”

“I ordered my squadron to return and bomb the city,” Ely said.

Kaylee gasped.

“And then I took up point, following them in, and one by one, I took out each of my own squadron,” Ely said. “I then called mother ship and reported that my squadron had been destroyed by flak.”

“And they believed that?” Jayne asked.

“No,” Ely said. “They ordered me to return. On my way back, I passed two squadrons heading towards Sichuan to carpet bomb the city. I turned about and pursued. I radioed Sichuan and warned them what was coming. The warning worked, cause they lit the sky up with so much flack you couldn't see the stars from all the debris and smoke and flashes. I managed to take out a fourth of the squadrons before I ran out of fuel and crashed on the outskirts of town. It was the only time in my brief career that I took a hit from an opposing craft, technically friendly fire at that, and only because I was out of fuel and limited in my range of response. Got a bit of shrapnel in my shoulder. Broken leg from the crash. The city folks pulled me out of the wreck and hauled me away before my ship was targeted by the remaining squadron. I begged my rescuers to let me be, but they wouldn't hear it. Apparently orders came from city government that I was to be found and brought back alive. They had to sedate me.”

“And that's why Sichuan wasn't burned?” Simon asked.

“No,” Ely said. “The remaining craft from the two squadrons regrouped, lined up for their attack run, and at the last moment, a ceasefire was implemented. Three days later, the war was over.”

“Wow,” Kaylee said.

“Ahh, aint that a sweet story,” Jayne applauded. “I bet Sichuan made you a statue and sang a song.”

Ely shook his head. “Every time I came to, I begged them to turn me over to Alliance Command,” Ely said, ignoring Jayne, much like everyone else was doing.

“They thought I was crazy.”

“Why were you so eager to go and get yourself killed?” Malcom asked. “To discourage desertion,” River said. “They kill families.”

“Oh, god, that’s horrible,” Zoe said.

“A couple days after the war was declared over, I got a visit from the Sichuan Governor, the mayor of the Sichuan capital, an Admiral in Alliance Fleet, and an Admiral from the Independents,” Ely said. “Apparently the Independents had pushed for complete absolution on my behalf, and, I was made a free man, exonerated of all charges.

It was determined that my Commanding Officer’s decision to carpet bomb Sichuan had been unwarranted. I was given an honorable discharge and was freed from any further obligations in the matter.”

“Why the discharge if you were exonerated?” Jayne asked.

“Built in hypocrisy,” Ely explained. “You can’t have soldiers disobeying direct orders in a time of war.”

“They want people to think or they don’t want people to think?” Jayne asked. “I’m confused.”

“We know you are,” Zoe said.

“Well, at least you were exonerated,” Kaylee said.

“My parents and siblings were executed before I was exonerated, Kaylee” Ely explained. “Due to my obvious desertion, missing for three days, and apparently aiding the enemy, my entire family paid the price for my decision. The Alliance compensated me monetarily for that ‘mistake,’ their words not mine, and that is how I became independently wealthy. That, and the funds Sichuan raised on my behalf. I’ve given a good percentage of it away, but it grows in interest faster than I can spend it. Set up a foundation on Sichuan that takes care of orphans and the like. I’m still somewhat of a local celebrity there. Prefer not to visit there because of that.”

“I understand that one,” Jayne said, lost in his own world. “Crazy bastards.” “Do you still think you can shoot him, Mal?” Inara asked.

“Yes,” Malcom said, turning to go put his weapon away. “But not for his accounting in the war.”

“I’m sorry for the way I have treated you, since you’ve been aboard,” Zoe said. “I was out of line. My hurting is no excuse.”

Ely just sort of nodded, not knowing what to say to that.

“You never apologize to me for the way you’ve treated me since I’ve been on board,” Jayne pointed out.

“Because I am not sorry for the way I treat you,” Zoe said, and then turned and looked at him. “Anything else?”

“Nope,” Jayne said. “Is someone going to make dinner? All these ruttin stories and the potential to shoot someone has gone and made me hungry.”

♪♪ ▶

The mood over the meal was a bit somber, people caught up in their own private thoughts, but soon Kaylee reverted back to her cheerfulness, and tried to catch everyone up in that. They passed wave players out and Ely did some quick sketches of the cache they would be raiding. As he drew on his player with a stylus, the information was shared with the other players on the table or in their hands.

“It’s a standard military cache,” Ely explained. “Serenity can dock here and begin the fueling. A team can then go in and move along this corridor to the ops and access the computers. Data banks are black boxes, bottom center, so we can’t get directly access without the keys.”

“Why don’t we just blow it up when we’re done?” Jayne asked.

“Because the data banks are black boxes,” Zoe said, patiently.

“So? You can’t find them in the dark of space, or what?” Jayne asked.

“He can shoot a gun fairly well,” Zoe explained to Ely, who was looking a bit perplexed.

“What else is in this cache?” Malcom asked.

“Standards,” Ely said. “Emergency Medical supplies, rations, weapons, ammo.” “Weapons?”

Jayne asked, suddenly very interested in the operation.

“I wouldn’t mind having a look at the medical supplies,” Simon said.

“That was our most profitable gig,” Zoe said.

“Might have trouble finding buyers after our last one and his two friends were shot dead by Niska’s henchmen,” Jayne said.

“People know it wasn’t our fault,” Malcom said.

“Doesn’t take the stigma away,” Jayne said.

“He’s actually got a point,” Zoe said. “Might be different if we had actually killed Niska.”

“Well, we didn’t,” Malcom said. “And we got to share this ‘Verse’ with him till someone does kill him.”

“Free bullets would be a start in the right direction,” Jayne pointed out.

“We could fill our entire hold up with what’s in this cache,” Zoe pointed out. “Which would make it hard to fill the hold with raw ore to take back to Ningxia.”

“We could drop somewhere and bury it, come back for it later,” Malcom said. “Pushing the time table, but, yeah,” Zoe said. “Don’t see a point in pressing our luck by robbing a cache twice.”

“Getting caught with stolen Alliance property isn’t such a good prospect, either,” Ely pointed out.

“We should have some time to disperse the traceables before any of its marked as missing,” Malcom said. “We take only what we can use or fence.” “Isn’t Vega a Nebula or something?” Simon asked.

“Oh, hell no, we can’t go in no cloud,” Jayne said. “It’s like driving in the fog. You run into things.”

“It’s a non-condensing hydrogen cloud, yes,” Ely said.

“Insufficient mass to be a stellar nursery,” River said. “Cloud is probably hydrogen ejected from a nova several billion years ago. The nova created a pulsar, which still to this day energizes the nebula, creating a harmonic wave front, B flat, sixteen octaves below middle C.” “The One Song,” Ely said.

“Explain that,” Mal said.

“The One Song,” River answered. “Uni-Verse. One-Song. If you were to interpret the entire known Verse in terms of total frequency, you get B flat.”

“Is there a joke somewhere in that?” Jayne asked.

“Radio and radar is ineffective in the hydrogen cloud,” River said, changing the subject. “Bouncing sound waves should work. Bats, not Fireflies.”

“The trip in is blind,” Ely confirmed. “When we’re within twenty meters of the cache, jets will automatically activate and clear out a spheroid region around the cache so we can see to dock.”

“And you can find this in the dark?” Zoe asked.

“Yes,” Ely assured her.

“Because if you don’t, we run out of fuel and no one will ever find us again,” Malcom said.

“You have my permission to shoot me if that happens,” Ely said.

“I don’t want you saying that again,” Inara said. “It causes me to worry about your state of mental health. The fact you didn’t resist Mal wanting to shoot you has me concerned. You need to work on being more positive, the way I remember you.” “If we get lost in the cloud with no fuel, the Captain shooting me is me thinking positively,” Ely said.

“We’re not going to get lost,” Kaylee said.

“Pilot,” Malcom said. “Take us there.”

“Okay,” Ely said. He finished off his coffee, took his cup and plate to the sink, and started to rinse both.

“Oh, I’ll get that,” Kaylee said.

Ely looked at Kaylee, trying to determine if she was just being nice, saw that everyone was staring at him, and then nodded. He turned the water off and pushed on towards the Bridge.

Kaylee started to get up, but Malcom motioned her to stay put. As soon as they heard the engine kick in, Malcom directed an open question to his crew. “I want your thoughts?”

“I like him,” Kaylee said.

“That’s saying a lot,” Jayne said, forcing a laugh. “You like everyone.” “That’s not true,” Kaylee said. “Name one you didn’t like,” Jayne asked. “Early,” Kaylee said.

“I take it you don’t like him,” Simon directed to Jayne.

“One crazy person on this boat is enough,” Jayne said.

“I’m only as crazy as the craziest person in my presence,” River said, smiling pleasantly at Jayne.

Jayne shook off his uneasiness about that. “No, really, Mal. What was all this autistic stuff,” Jayne said, mimicking Ely’s finger math, badly.

“No, you’re doing it wrong,” River corrected. “Example, nine times tables. Nine times any single digit up to ten, using your finger to stand in for that number times nine. Reading from left to right, which ever finger you hold down the fingers standing to the left of it represent tens, and the fingers to the right represent ones. Hold first finger down, none to the left, zero tens, and you got nine fingers right of that, nine ones, standing. Nine times one equals nine. Second finger down, one tens, eight ones is 18.

Third finger down, two tens is twenty, seven ones makes 27. 36, 45, 54, 63, 72, 90 ...” Jayne actually saw the finger representation of the nine times tables on her hands. “You mean I didn’t have to memorize that niou-se?” Jayne asked. “Wait, this aint gonna work. What I do when I get to eleven?”

Zoe dropped her head to her hands and her elbows to the table, shaking her head, her left hand covering her mouth to keep her from saying something.

“Can’t on your fingers,” River explained. “And he’s not doing nines. He’s moving thousands, millions, and variations,” River said. “Holding some in his head.” Jayne was quiet for a while as he worked out the nine times tables on his hand, looking for some kind of trick, and constantly amazed that it worked. He actually giggled.

“Zoe, you’re being awful quiet,” Malcom said.

Zoe nodded. “If what Ely says is true, he’s a good man. I know a couple people he schooled,” she said. “You don’t get many second chances in a war. You remember Philips, don’t you? Philips went up against him several times. Claims they established a rapport and he got several lessons. Better training than any of the Independent trainers. He swore if he ever met the man after the war he was

going to buy him a drink.” “Maybe we could introduce them,” Kaylee said, all cheerful like.

“Philips is dead,” Malcom said. “Shot down while providing support over Serenity Valley.” “Oh,” Kaylee said.

“Guess the schooling didn’t take,” Jayne said, holding his hands out in front of him, fingers spread. He lowered the thumb on his left hand and flexed all four fingers. “Four tens is forty,” he counted, and then flexed the fingers on his right. “Five ones is five. 45. Hun-dan! Why didn’t no one show me this before?”

“Maybe we should find him a Chinese finger puzzle,” Zoe said. Inara chuckled.

“Inara, you and Ely?” Malcom asked.

“Wouldn’t tell you if I did, Mal,” Inara said. “And you know better than to ask.” Jayne looked up.

“Did I just miss something?” Jayne asked.

“Keep playing with your fingers, Jayne,” Inara said, without looking at him.

“Ah, hell, I’m bored with that,” Jayne said.

“I will tell you this much,” Inara said, ignoring Jayne. “I hold a great deal of respect for him and consider him a friend.”

“You’ve always demonstrated good taste in friends,” Malcom said. “That alone speaks highly of him. If he decides to stay with us, I’m inclined to let him.” “He did make it clear he was heading out,” Simon said.

“Wouldn’t blame him,” Inara said. “You did come close to shooting him.” “But I didn’t,” Malcom said. “But you were gonna,” Jayne said. “Just as well you didn’t. You’d probably have made me clean up the mess.”

“Probably,” Malcom said.

“He needs us, Captain,” Kaylee said.

“Front it like that and he’ll fly,” Malcom said. “He’s already flying,”

Jayne pointed out.

Zoe gave Jayne a severe look. “Did practicing your nine tables short out your brain?” Zoe asked.

“No,” Jayne said. “I don’t think so. Why?”

Inara just shook her head, trying not to laugh.

“Well, if he works out, Captain, River and I are going to be moving on,” Simon announced.

A new sort of silence fell around the table. Inara caught the dual flash of anger and sadness pass across Kaylee’s face.

“Don’t speak for me,” River said.

“I have to speak for you,” Simon said. “I need to take care of you. And further, I have asked Kaylee to come with me, Captain.”

“You did that?” Malcom asked. “If you need to be going, you’ve always been free to do so, but I don’t see any reason for you to be dragging away my mechanic.” “Mal,” Inara said, softly.

“What?” Malcom asked. “I know Kaylee has affection for him, but he’s not right for her.”

“I think she and I should be the ones making that decision,” Simon said.

“I told you I’m not leaving,” Kaylee said.

“There you have it,” Malcom said.

“Kaylee, if Serenity gets this contract, Captain Reynolds can hire a new mechanic,” Simon said.

“I don’t want a new mechanic,” Malcom said. “I like the one I got.”

“Well, she’s not just a mechanic anymore,” Simon said. Kaylee was shaking her head.

“I asked her to marry me,” Simon said. “And I have been offered a good position at a hospital in Canton. It’s better for us, giving the circumstances.” “What circumstances are you referring to?” Malcom asked.

“I’m pregnant, Captain,” Kaylee said.

Zoe pushed away from the table and walked away. Inara covered her mouth, unsure if she compliment or hold back. She wasn’t exactly sure what emotion to reveal or to be having. Malcom’s mouth dropped. Jayne laughed.

“So, at least we know the Doctor aint shooting blanks,” Jayne said. When everyone stared at him, he asked, “What?”

“I was waiting for a better time to tell everyone,” Kaylee said. “I was kind of afraid of how Zoe might take it. Always figured she’d be in the maternal way before me.”

“If this is so, the Doctor does have a legitimate claim on you and argument for asking you to leave,” Malcom said.

“Claim?” Inara asked. “She’s not property, Mal.”

“You know what I mean,” Malcom said. “Raising a child on a ship has its own set of troubles.”

“I know that, Captain,” Kaylee said. “But I made the ship my home and I see you all as extended family and I want my child to know the love and support I have found here.”

“That’s a kindness,” Malcom said. “But as you said, you made this your home and love and support followed, which means, anywhere you make your home, love and support will follow.”

“I don’t want to leave,” Kaylee said.

“I don’t want to leave, either,” River said.

“We don’t have to run anymore, River,” Simon said.

“You don’t have to run anymore,” River said. “They’re not through with me. We may have a temporary quiet, but there is another storm coming. Neither law nor Alliance can prevent it. It’s bigger than either.”

“What’s bigger than Alliance?” Jayne asked.

“Whether you’re on Canton or you’re on Serenity, they know where you are,” River said. “They won’t act now. We’re too hot.”

“Who’s they?” Malcom asked.

“I can’t tell you,” River said. “I only know that they’re coming.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A thumping rhythm played over the loud speaker, the radio signature for the pulsar on the far side of the nebula. The surface tension of the air mass, which consisted primarily of hydrogen and helium, made it easier for the cloud to reflect light from a nearby white dwarf and a red giant, the light from each star fluorescing various elements diffused into the cloud that were harmonic to the wave length, creating rainbow patterns when looking at the cloud from certain angles. Ely orientated Serenity towards the nebula, visually marking his reference points in the cockpit windows. The Red Giant was to Starboard, and the White Dwarf was to Port, and if he were to look directly above, the next closest star, Vega Six, shone down. He mentally marked several other stars for reference.

“Very pretty,” River said.

“How do you know there aren’t chunks of stone and metals in there?” Jayne asked. “There are,” Ely assured him.

“Okay, let me try this again,” Jayne said. “How do you avoid running into them chunks of stone and metal when you can’t see where you’re going?” “Trust in a higher power,” Ely said.

“I’d rather trust what I can see,” Malcom said.

“Amen,” Jayne said.

“Everything that was ejected from the star when it went nova are in the nebula,” Ely said. “The lighter stuff flew out further and faster and the heavier stuff dragged behind and has probably been slowed up some by the massive gravity well created by the neutron star, which is technically what is now the pulsar. The nebula fans out from the pulsar in a spheroid region, thicker towards where the star’s equator was, thinner towards the poles, with clear regions where the pulsar can actually beam out. God’s wink they call it. The nebula gets denser the further in you go.” “And how far in do we have to go?” Malcom asked.

“Roughly four hundred kilometers,” Ely said. Jayne cursed.

“There’s no turning back now,” Zoe said.

“True enough,” Malcom said. “If you’re certain of your vectors, proceed in.” Ely gently pushed Serenity towards the nebula and a circular rainbow appeared in front of them, like a target. The rainbow pattern of concentric circles shrunk as they approached and vanished as Serenity entered the nebula. It was like breaking the surface tension of water, which sent a small wake down the cloud’s exterior surface. At the beginning of the push in, there was enough light diffused into the surrounding gas that there was white against the cockpit windows. It faded to dark fairly quick. The quiet on the bridge made the noise more apparent.

“What’s that sound?” Zoe asked.

“B flat,” River said.

“It’s spooky,” Jayne said. “Turn us about.”

“It’s normal,” Ely assured him. “Ship’s hull resonating with the nebula. We might get some harmonics as the pressure increases.”

“Harmonics?” Malcom asked.

The instrument panel began to hum, a high pitch frequency and the glass on one of the monitor cracked and the screen went dark.

“Harmonics,” Ely said.

“You didn’t say anything about harmonics breaking my ship,” Malcom said.

“It varies from ship to ship,” Ely said. “Never know what’s gonna vibrate loose, but she’ll hold

together. Well, fairly certain, she will.”

“Kaylee, do a run through,” Malcom directed. “Make sure nothing’s vibrating unwarrantedly.”

“Gotcha,” Kaylee agreed. “I’ll check the shuttles,” Inara said.

“We’re approaching four hundred kilometers,” Jayne said. “Where’s this cache?”

“It’ll be there,” Ely said.

River was pressed up against the port, her forehead touching glass, her hands touching to either side of her face. She could feel the music pulsing through the ship.

“Better find it soon,” Malcom said. “How much fuel was left?” “Enough,” Ely said.

“How do you know it’s still there?” Zoe asked.

“I don’t,” Ely said.

Main power went off and emergency batteries kicked in. Malcom looked at Ely. Ely only stared forwards.

“You look pretty calm for a dead man,” Jayne told Ely.

“Now,” River said, tapping her fingers on the glass. Suddenly a pocket appeared in the gas nebula, with Serenity’s running lights illuminating the spheroid region. A large, nondescript rectangular object, ten times the size of Serenity was centered in the pocket. It was like coming across an unattended aircraft carrier’s refuel tanker.

“No more music,” River sighed.

Zoe closed her eyes and said a quiet prayer of gratitude.

“How did it know we’re here if radar doesn’t work?” Jayne asked.

“It heard us,” Ely said. “The cloud allows for the transmission of sound.” Ely burned out the last of the fuel doing course corrections with the small jet, and docked Serenity up against the cube, with hardly a metal clang. He pushed a button and typed in some commands to extend the utility cable and fuel lines, listened for the sound of them connecting, and then opened the valves.

“We should be fueling now,” Ely said.

“Awesome,” Jayne said. “Now, let’s go play a little game of finders keepers.” “Zoe, go below and Kaylee monitor the refuel,” Mal said. “And tell Inara to make sure both shuttles are fully fueled. The rest of us are going to go take a look see.”

♪♪▶

Lights in the cache came up as Serenity’s crew crossed over into the passageway. A sign in multiple languages warned unauthorized personnel of the severity of punishment that came for violating the cache. Below that was a map directing authorized personnel to the appropriate supply compartments. Malcom scrutinized the map.

“Funny, your pass code is still good and all,” Jayne said.

“Not my pass code,” Ely said.

Malcom looked to him for an explanation.

“An Admiral had me making some unauthorized runs, which required fueling under the radar. That’s how I know about the caches,” Ely said. “And at the time I held a key that gave me access to the databanks. The Admiral liked his privacy.” Malcom nodded as if he understood. “Okay, we’re going to split up to expedite our smash and grab,” Malcom said. “Doc, you and River go and fetch whatever you think is good from the medical supply room. Kaylee, you and Ely go to the control room and sweep our footprints. Jayne, you and I are going to go check out the weapons locker. Call if you

need, folks, but for sure report back in thirty. Move out.”

The crew moved out down the corridor, which went straight to the other side. The corridor branched off at the middle, ramping downwards, dividing in two and branching out at the far wall, ramping down and cornering at the far end, repeating this trend to the bottom of the cache. They split up, Malcom and Jayne going right and Simon and River going left. Kaylee and Ely proceeded on down the corridor towards the other side and stopped at the door for the cache control room. The door opened for them, allowing them passage. The far wall had a number of computer monitors and terminals available. Kaylee followed him towards one of the monitors and he typed in the Admiral’s secret access codes. It gave him a pass.

“The last service drone was over two months ago,” Ely said. “No other activity has been registered since the war’s end. No. Wait. There was someone here last year. Interesting. Full access, no identity recorded. Wish I had his level of access.”

“Be nice, uh?” Kaylee agreed. “The guy that chased us to Miranda had that kind of clearance.”

“That’s the second time I have heard that name since I’ve been on board,” Ely said. “You have a story?”

“You don’t know the story?” Kaylee asked. “You don’t watch the news feeds?”

“Not if I can help it,” Ely said. “And there was no news on Ningxia Hui.” “Well, it was not quite a year ago,” Kaylee said. “Wait, go back a screen. This is the maintenance menu. Maybe there is an option here to reformat the memory disks.” Ely followed the tabs, searching for the correct prompts.

“No,” Kaylee said. “That’s not going to work. Look, it’ll carry everything virtually until the disk are reformatted and relay the data. We’re going to have to insert my assist.”

Kaylee opened her cloth tool box, removed some tools and her own computer and keyboard. With the tools she started tearing the panel apart. Ely got out of her way and went to another keyboard. He opened up camera feeds to view outside. One cam offered the sight of Serenity, its head sticking up over the cache. The size of the pocket was decreasing as the Nebula gasses crept back in towards the cube. In about an hour, they would be back under the cloak of darkness.

♪♪▶

The door opened for Malcom and Jayne just as if they belonged there and the lights flickered on to reveal the contents of the room. Cases and cases and cases. Malcom walked in and read the markings on a stack of cases.

“Ammo,” Malcom said.

Jayne pulled a long slender case from the wall, flipped it horizontal and opened it. He almost cried with pleasure.

“A rocket launcher,” Jayne said.

Malcom came over. “Pretty, but we have no need for anything like that.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jayne said. “I’m taking one.” “You can’t buy ammo for it,” Malcom pointed out.

“Reckon that case over there ought to hold me for a little while,” Jayne said.

“Just want to shoot it a couple times.”

“We got better things to do,” Malcom said, looking around. “Take that anti gravity forklift, and start hauling these crates of ammo up to the ship. And leave room in the cargo bay to take the forklift. Moving ore, gravity or no, is hard work. I’m going to check what’s across the way.”

“Alright,” Jayne said, still admiring his piece.

“No to the rocket launcher,” Mal repeated.

“Fine,” Jane said, slamming the case shut and putting it back.

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“Get that gurney,” Simon told his sister. “And start piling those boxes on it.”

“You really should ask me,” River said. “Please?” Simon said.

River went to inspect the boxes. “Oooh, gum,” she said, and opened up the box. “Oral hygiene supplement, mint flavor, orange flavor, spicy cinnamon, no doze amphetamine, anti allergens...” She opened up a spicy cinnamon. “Want a piece?” Simon was examining an endoscope and tools on a snake. “No,” he said, closing the box back up. “We’re going to need another gurney.”

“Wheel chair?” River asked.

“Uh?” Simon asked. “Oh, yeah. We’re going to have to make more than one trip.

Come on, start piling.”

River began moving boxes of gum to the gurney, until her wheel chair was piled high with just gum. “I’ll take this and come back.” “Right,” Simon said, marveling at a diagnostic kit.

River pushed the chair back to Serenity and started carting the boxes of gum back to her room. On her third trip Zoe was there, examining her find.

“Gum,” River said.

“So, I see,” Zoe said.

“This kind is good for you,” River assured her.

Zoe nodded and helped River carry the boxes back to her quarters. “May I have one?”

“Sure,” River said. “I’m going to bring lots more.”

“The ship’s almost fully fueled,” Zoe said. “As soon as that’s done, I’ll join you to help.”

“Shiny,” River said.

River collected her wheel chair and proceeded back to the room where the gum was and where she had left her brother. She was fairly certain that he wasn’t in the room, but she felt as if someone was there, watching her.

“Simon?” River asked.

No one responded. She went out and crossed the hall to the other side. The door opened and she was startled by her brother’s reaction to her sudden presence. He dropped what he was carrying, sighed, and scolded her for scaring him.

“Sorry,” River said.

“It’s okay,” Simon said. “Why don’t you continue in the other room? I want to go unload this gurney and come back here.”

“Okay,” River said.

She returned to the room with the gum and put a few more boxes of it on the wheel chair. She walked down the row, reading boxes, thought she heard a noise and stopped and looked back towards the wheelchair. She tilted her head, as if a new angle would offer her a different perspective on the room. She saw nothing new, turned back to suddenly find Shepard Book standing there just as plain as day.

River screamed and bolted back to the ship, screaming all the way. She didn’t stop until she ran full length into Zoe, who grabbed her up. Simon emerged from the back and ran to her. Between Zoe and

her brother, River finally calmed down enough to report what she had seen.

“You saw Book?” Zoe asked.

River nodded enthusiastically.

“What was in the gum you’re chewing?” Simon asked. “It’s not the gum,”

River assured them.

“The ship is done fueling,” Zoe said. “I’ll go back with her and check it out. Let me get my gun.”

“You can’t shoot a ghost,” River said.

“Maybe not,” Zoe said. “But I can shoot someone pretending to be a ghost.” While Zoe went to get her gun, River helped her brother unload the gurney, while he read over the gum label. Confident she wasn’t chewing a hallucinogen, he watched her as she put supplies in their appropriate place until he was confident she was not drugged. Zoe returned with Inara and the four of them went to investigate and steal more stuff, bringing the gurney with them.

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“I can’t do it from here,” Kaylee finally said. “I’m going to have to have direct access to the drives. Can you show me where they are?” “Yep,” Ely said.

Kaylee followed Ely. They paused only to see what the Doctor, Zoe, and River were fetching back to the ship.

“What are you chewing?” Kaylee asked.

“Oral hygiene supplement, spicy cinnamon,” River said.

“I want one,” Kaylee said.

River handed her the pack that she had opened earlier. “I took all of them.” “Awesome,” Kaylee said, eagerly opening a stick. She offered one to Ely who accepted. “Good find, River.”

“Thank you,” Ely said, popping it into his mouth.

“Ah,” Kaylee cooed. “This is absolutely delightful.”

“It is, actually,” Ely said.

“Yes, and let me know if you experience any hallucinations,” Simon said. Ely spit his gum out. Kaylee merely stopped chewing.

“Excuse me?” Kaylee asked.

“River thinks she saw a ghost,” Zoe said.

“I’m not paying ya’ll to loiter,” Malcom chastised, driving his forklift up the ramp. The forklift was the small, walk-behind, model and the push grips turned to power the wheels. He let go of the grips and it stopped

“Did she say ghost?” Jayne asked, on the forklift behind Malcom.

“Let’s get back to work folks,” Malcom said. “I’m meaning to leave just as quick as possible.”

“If there’s ghost, we need to be going now,” Jayne protested. “Ah! Damn it.

Who went and spit gum out on the floor?” Jayne asked.

“I’m sure there are no ghost,” Inara said.

“Then who’s gum is this?” Jayne asked. “And why is Zoe packing?” “Work now, ask question later,” Malcom said.

“I did see him,” River said.

“Oh, I get it,” Jayne said. “Crazy person went and spooked herself and now she trying to spook the rest of us.”

“It was Book,” Zoe said. “He said make sure Jayne changes his ways.” “That aint funny,” Jayne snapped.

“Why are we still here talking about this?” Malcom asked. “Let’s move. Chop, chop.”

Ely and Kaylee pressed on towards their goal, going down the ramp towards the medical supply. They passed a room marked tools and Kaylee paused. She opened the door and her mouth fell open. “We got time, right?”

“I reckon we could come back,” Ely said.

“Yeah,” Kaylee kind of nodded.

They pushed on and came to a small closed compartment.

“No keypad or mechanism,” Kaylee said, feeling around the obvious hatch.

“Electronic,” Ely said. “You have to have a key.”

“I think I have a key,” Kaylee said. She turned and went back up the ramp, with Ely in tow, entered the tool room, and retrieved a laser torch. “A Universal key. Alliance always did have the best toys.”

They proceeded back down to the hardware access point and began to cut into the panel. Thirty minutes later, Kaylee was still cutting her side, and Ely was cutting the opposite side, having gone and retrieved a second torch. Malcom came up behind them.

“So, how’s the safe cracking going?” Malcom asked.

They killed their laser torches, raised the visors, and looked at the Captain. Kaylee wiped the sweat off her forehead. “This is one tough safe, Captain,” “Well, we’re ready to go when you are,” Malcom said.

“Oh! I really wanted to go shopping in the tool room,” Kaylee whimpered. “Tell you what,” Malcom said. “Why don’t I take over the cutting for a while, and you go shopping. And see if they don’t have a new monitor for the instrument cluster while you’re at it.”

“Really? You don’t mind?” Kaylee asked.

“Go, that’s an order,” Malcom said. “And round up the Doc and Jayne to help you carry stuff. Knowing my luck, the longer we stay the more likely someone’s going to come along and want some of the things we took.”

“I love you, Captain,” Kaylee said, hugging him. “Oh watch out, that’s hot.” “You love everyone,” Malcom said, pushing her along her way and stealing her visor right off her head in the process. “Shall we continue?” he asked Ely.

“I guess so,” Ely said.

They resumed cutting. Twenty five minutes later they were nearly done cutting through the access panel. And, they had gathered an audience.

“Sure glad we’re not in a hurry or nothing,” Jayne reminded them.

Malcom’s torch ran out of juice and he tossed it aside and removed his helmet. “Stand back, Ely,” he said, picking up the crow bar he had gone and collected. He pried the hatch out and started beating on it, bending it down and back towards the wall. They stared in the hatch at the various computer hard drives, all in clear, locked cases. Kaylee inched forwards to get a closer look.

“In the past, how did you do it?” Kaylee asked.

“I used the key, opened the drive bay, and swapped out the drives,” Ely said.

“But the cameras are still recording?” Zoe pointed out.

“No. I turned them off. All recording devices are timed out. Put it on a twenty hour sleep cycle for

diagnostics,” Ely said. “All we have to do is replace the drives or wipe them clean.”

“Hell, just take them all out,” Jayne said. “No need to replace them.” “Stand back,” Malcom said.

They stepped back. Malcom wound up to swing the crow bar at the casing for the drives.

“No, wait,” Kaylee said, realizing too late what Malcom was intending to do. The crow bar hit the clear casing, causing no damage. Still, an alarm went off, the casings slid away, dropped into a box, and fell into a lower compartment.

“What just happened?” Malcom asked.

“We need to get out of here, now!” Ely said. “What?” Malcom asked.

“We got four minutes,” River said. “To either enter a reset code or reach minimum safe distance.”

“Go, go, go,” Malcom yelled.

They all ran. Ely’s impulse was to pause and marvel at how efficiently Malcom’s crew had been in filling the cargo bay, but he didn’t have time. He dodged between crates and flew up the stairs. Inara asked him for info as he flew by her, but he didn’t answer. Malcom made sure everyone was on and closed the airlock door. He hit the com panel and yelled, “We’re all on, go!”

“Gone,” came the cry back. “Hard burn coming.”

“Brace yourselves,” Malcom said.

Everyone grabbed onto something as they felt the sudden change in inertia. Inara grabbed the railing and barely kept from falling. Cargo containers slid towards the back and to the right. When they could move again without worry of falling, Malcom headed for the Bridge. He arrived just in time to see the windows ‘whited’ out by gas and then they broke out into the clear dark of space with the full back drop of stars. A backwards view would have revealed a column of gas pursuing them out of the cloud, followed by a plume of secondary gas expanding out, as the cache exploded, clearing out a large, spheroid pocket that left a partial dome in the outer skin of the cloud. Ely spun Serenity around to witness the dome expanding and then breaching, so they could see back into the dying ember that use to be the cache.

“Didn’t you tell me we didn’t want to blow it up?” Jayne asked.

Ely slowed their departure and pushed back towards the remains of the cache.

“We’re going back in there?” Jayne asked.

“We got to find the black box or we’re humped,” Malcom said.

“Won’t it have a transponder?” Zoe asked.

“Yes, which will become active in the presence of an Alliance ship,” Ely said. River’s mouth fell open as she stared at Book, standing amidst his old crew as plain as day. He looked at her and told her, “You need to leave here, now.”

River screamed, pushed back against the window and slid to a sitting position on the floor. Inara went to her.

“You mean, like that ship,” Zoe said. “We’re humped!” Malcom said.

“Scanning,” Ely said, increasing thrust. “Come on, where are you?” “Run,” Malcom ordered.

“Give me a second,” Ely said.

“I’m giving you a directive. Turn us about and run,” Malcom demanded.

“They’re here!” River said.

There was a low volume pinging on the speakers. “Got it,” Ely said, swooping in towards the black box. He opened up the outer airlock, rammed the black box against the inner airlock, and closed the outer hatch all the while spinning Serenity around for a hard burn out of the system, its tail light aimed at the approaching Alliance warship. They accelerated away.

“If they identified us us, we’re humped,” Zoe said.

“Whether they scanned us direct or got it off the black box, we were humped,”

Ely explained. “I am betting that that explosion temporarily blinded their sensors.”

“Next time I say turn and run, I expect you to turn and run,” Malcom said. “Is that perfectly clear?”

“Crystal,” Ely said.

“No one’s pursuing, Captain,” Zoe said.

“They’re not pursuing,” Book said. “They were blinded by explosion.” “He’s here,” River mumbled. Inara tried to comfort her.

“Who’s here?” Inara asked.

“Book, he’s on Serenity,” River said.

Kaylee stepped onto the Bridge as Book was making an exit. She didn’t seem to notice him.

“What’s the word?” Malcom asked.

“No damaged from the explosion,” Kaylee said. “We have a full cargo bay and full fuel tanks.”

“Yeah,” Jayne said. “We made out like bandits.”

“We got lucky,” Malcom said. “And I’m tired of depending on luck to get us out of scrapes.”

“Maybe Book is here to help us?” River asked.

“That will be enough talk of ghost,” Jayne said.

“Inara, why don’t you take River down to see her brother,” Malcom said.

“I’m not crazy,” River snapped. “He was here. I saw him.” “No, cause that’s not crazy,” Jayne said. “Seeing dead folks.” “That’s enough, Jayne,” Zoe said.

“What?” Jayne demanded. “She’s been crazy since before she stepped on board and now she seeing things that aren’t there.” “She was always seeing stuff that wasn’t there,” Zoe said.

“Yeah, but this is new stuff, and I don’t like new stuff if it’s old crazy stuff,” Jayne protested. “I hope we got some meds for her, because this is just creepy.” “Speaking of the cargo, go make sure things are netted and strapped properly. And then get about filling up our personal ammo stores,” Malcom said. “We can sell the rest.”

“We still have time to pick up the Ore in San Adros and get it back to Ningxia Hui,” Zoe said.

“And, I intend to do that,” Malcom said. “Just as soon find a quiet, out of the way place to hide this bounty. You can do that, can’t you Ely?”

“Sure,” Ely said.

“There is no quiet place,” River said as she was about to exit the Bridge with Inara. “We’re immersed in sound and light and they follow us even to the grave.”

After she was gone, Ely looked to the Captain. “Is that girl alright?”

“She has her good days and bad days,” Malcom said. “Find us a good rock, somewhere near but out of the way. We need to bury our treasure.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

San Adros was a small community of miners, living in the boroughs that they had dug into the very asteroids they were working. From outside the asteroid field, it was obvious which immediate cluster

was being worked. Six asteroids sitting close together liked stacked eggs, and now doubt secured together with anchors and bridges going into each. To make it easier to defend against pirates who would come and take the smelted ore, they had hauled the asteroids where they lived in close together, while the asteroids currently being mined were arranged in a spheroid fashion around the center habitats. The process of placing the asteroids was called circling the wagons, because it was kind of like being in the old west. This whole asteroid belt was their claim, and it would be there as long as they could hold it, or the bank didn't come take everything due to excessive late payment penalties.

Mining, of course, was not like it used to be. Most of the arduous work was done by machines. A drone, called the rabbit, would attach itself to an asteroid, with the business end eating its way into the rock. The pieces went through the rabbit where it was smelted, separated into its constituent parts, which then collected in the appropriate chambers. Non useful materials were ejected out the back end of the rabbit. Useful stuff, like iron, copper, nickel, zinc, clay, and even gold, would also shoot out the tail end, once a sufficient mass of it was collected. The collected materials were formed into ingots, or pellets, and shot out the back. A catcher drone would be notified and come about to catch the pellets and haul the purified metals back to one of the bases.

"We've been expecting you, Serenity," San Adros acknowledge their wave. "My name's Henry. You're cleared to enter the perimeter. Just follow the homing beacon."

"Great," Jayne said. "First tree huggers and now rabbits. I don't like miners, Mal. They're as about as useful as mudders, only meaner. Notice the guns on the asteroids."

"They're well fortified," Malcom agreed. "Keeps folks honest." "It keeps outsiders honest," Jayne said.

"We're just here to drop off some fresh produce, pick up some ore, and hope we get a contract," Malcom said.

"Why don't they just deliver ore for themselves?" Inara asked.

"Some outfits do," Ely said. "The more successful the group, the more likely they'll have their own ships transporting ore. This is a start up community and I suspect they're too worried of loosing their claim by being away from it. Plus, it's a lot of work to stow up equipment and come and go."

"Well, how did they get it here, then?" Inara asked.

"Someone dropped them off with a small boat and some rabbits, and the first thing they did was hollow out a habitat. The habitat will also double as their spaceship when they move on to the next system. Unless, that is, they are really successful and can buy enough ships to accommodate the tools of their trade. Depends on how much debt they took on to buy the initial equipment, how much ore can be processed out of the asteroids, and how much of that metal they can sell on the market. Bank gets paid first." "That's why I never took up mining," Jayne said. "Someone's always in your pocket. Always fixing machines. Breathing hard air and living in a tunnel. I'd rather just shoot someone."

"Well, lets hope we don't have to shoot someone today," Malcom said. "Pack your piece, just in case. Ely, I want you packing, too. Zoe, I want you, Inara, Kaylee, and River to make yourselves scarce. Heard stories that miners are hard up for women and they don't care how they get them."

"I'm sure they're just normal folks like the rest of us, trying to make a living," Inara said.

"None the less," Malcom said. "I want you out of sight. Do we have an understanding?"

"We do, Sir," Zoe said, speaking for all of them.

"Okay, we're docked," Ely said.

"How is it when he docks I feel no jarring, but when you dock, I'm picking myself up off the floor," Jayne asked Malcom.

“How is it I told you to get your piece and you aint got it?” Malcom asked.



The asteroid airlock was such that Serenity could have full ramp extension and full air lock open, which was designed to expedite the transfer of cargo. As the ramp descended, Malcom headed down the ramp to greet Henry. Jayne stood prominently exposed, as did Ely, and the Doctor holding slightly back. The air was hot, and, as Jayne had said, was ‘hard’ which meant the recycler was probably laboring to keep the air purified from the metals.

“Aren’t you supposed to spray plastic up along the walls to help insulate and keep particles of toxins out of your air?” Simon asked.

“Yep,” Henry said. “But, our test show the toxicity levels are within acceptable parameters and I wanted to save the money.”

“That man there,” Simon said, pointing to the only visible miner. “The discoloration in his skin and the twitching suggest he’s been exposed to toxic levels of mercury or led.”

“Actually both, but he’s still alive,” Henry said. “He’s my brother, Charley. Not very bright.”

“That could be the led,” Malcom said.

“Possibly,” Henry said. “But you’re not here to discuss my family medical history. You have some food for us or no?”

“We do. Ely, start bringing down the coolers,” Malcom said, and then to Henry. “You have some ore for us?”

Henry motioned to his brother and the inner airlock opened, revealing a cavernous space and pallets stacked with metal ingots. The most noticeable was the gold. Jayne chuckled with pleasure.

“Gold,” Jayne said.

“The order was for eight pallets of gold, twenty of iron, twenty nickel, and ten copper,” Henry said.

“I see you have your own forklift. You can start moving it yourself. I’ll observe.”

Ely sat the first crate of food down. Henry opened it up and his mouth watered.

“Wonderful,” Henry said.

“My tomatoes in there?” Charley asked.

“Yep,” Henry said.

“Seems like we’re getting an awful lot of ore in exchange for such little food,” Jayne said.

“The food is a bonus. Most of the exchange was done through credit, through

Alliance banks,” Henry said. “The banks always get theirs first, you know. Charley, show this man here were to put the coolers. You don’t mind if we keep the coolers?” “Not particularly attached to them,” Malcom said. “Jayne, start moving ore.

And no pinching any gold.”

Jayne’s smile diminished, but he got to work with the forklift.

“You want a tour of my humble abode?” Henry offered.

“If you’ll permit a rain check, I’m in a bit of a hurry to get this loaded and moving, so I can win the contract,” Malcom said. “If I get it, you’ll be seeing more of us.

Doc, is there anything you can do for Charley?”

Simon shook his head. “Not really. Once the initial damage is done, it’s pretty much done,” he said.

“You’re a real doctor?” Charley asked. “I am,” Simon answered.

“Maybe you can look to my girl,” Charley asked.

“Won’t be necessary,” Henry told the guest. To his brother, he said: “Now, Charley, we already talked about this. Your girl’s gonna be fine. You just got to stop hitting on her. She’s not a punching bag.”

“Maybe I should...” Simon offered, looking to Malcom for instructions.

“Doc, just hold your peace,” Malcom said. “These folks got their way, and we got ours, and we’re not looking to be intruding. We’re just doing a job.”

“But,” Simon said.

“You heard me. We’re not social workers,” Malcom said. “This is a transport job. So, you’re either moving ore, or your back on the ship.”

Simon nodded and went back on the ship. Henry smiled prettily at Malcom, revealing missing teeth. Malcom lifted the corners of his lips. He really didn’t want to shoot anyone today and so it was best they kept the socializing to a minimum, and though he would normally shoot a man for hitting a woman, and there was evidence here to say he should explore and start shooting, not knowing the particulars was helpful. And it was true, people had their ways. Sometimes you go intruding into a couples fight, and the woman would hit you because that was her man. Too much to sort, and he already had a bad feeling, as Henry seemed to be growing more fidgety the further they got into taking ore. Malcom tried to believe it was because miners hate parting with the stuff they collected, but his intuition kept telling him to be weary. It took an hour to fill the hold properly, stacking the pallets of ore on top of each other so that they stretched as high as the railing and all the way to the door. Due to the height of the door, the last row was only two pallets high, with one space missing to stow the forklift they had stolen from the military cache. Each stack was netted to better ensure they wouldn’t fall or shift during transport. The four men of Serenity were at the bottom of the ramp admiring the work when Henry came up to bid them farewell.

“Didn’t think you were going to get it all in there,” Henry said. “But, by god, you did at that.”

“Yep,” Malcom said. “Thank you for your hospitality.” “Not quite done being hospitable, yet,” Henry said.

Charley and six men, armed to the teeth, rifles at ready, stepped into view.

“I don’t understand,” Malcom said. “I thought you and I had an arrangement.” “We do,” Henry said. “You just weren’t privy on all the details. My understanding is you have a Companion on board. You’ll be leaving her. Oh, and all the other women folk you have on board as well.”

“That wasn’t part of the arrangement,” Malcom said.

“I like you,” Henry said. “I could just shoot you and take your ship, which I am in mind to do since we haven’t had fresh meats in a while, but it leaves a lot of legal troubles and we don’t have a pilot. So, you just hand over the women folks, as per the contract, and we’ll let you be on your way.”

“If the contract you have with Ningxia said there is to be women folk in the deal, you need to talk to them, because that wasn’t part of my arrangement,” Malcom said.

“Jeff, go and collect the women,” Henry said.

Jeff moved forwards cautious like, giving Jayne a wide birth. He pulled his revolver out so as to be double armed. Ely stepped over to block Jeff’s entrance into the ship.

“I can’t let you pass,” Ely said.

Jeff shot Ely in the gut, dropping him. Jayne’s and Malcom’s hands moved towards their guns, but the other rifles were suddenly up close and personal.

“Don’t make me kill you over a few women,” Henry said. Malcom gritted his teeth.

“He’ll live, Henry,” Jeff said. “If they don’t protest too much.”

“Go fetch the girls,” Henry instructed.

Jeff proceeded, two of his brothers going with. A moment later the girls were walking, in line with their hands on their head, Inara in the lead. She saw Ely on the floor and started to kneel down.

“No, just keep moving this way,” Henry said. “Go stand over there.”

“Let them go and I can make this worth your while,” Inara said. “I’m a trained Companion. You know that I can make this good for you.”

“I reckon you can, miss,” Henry said. “But truth be known, I got some powerful hungry boys here, and one woman, no matter how good she is, just aint enough. Now, quickly, over there.”

“You are all going to die,” River told him as she passed him.

Henry laughed. “Well, of course we are, sweetheart. In your arms tonight,” Henry said. He winked at the Captain. “I like them young feisty ones.”

“You’re no doubt getting more than you bargained for with that one,” Malcom said.

“I’m not leaving my sister,” Simon said.

“Your sister?” Henry asked. He seemed different, suddenly. A more reasonable man. “Well, that changes thing, don’t it, Charley?”

“It does,” Charley agreed. “It means we’re family now. Mom always said it would be nice having a Doctor in the Family.”

Henry pointed to Ely. “Go ahead and drag him back into your ship and be pushing on,” Henry said. “And don’t make me shoot you out of the sky. I’ve got a contract with them folks and I aim to see it delivered in a timely fashion. After you get this delivered, you should have enough money to buy your women back. The quicker you do, the more likely they’ll still be alive. My boys can be a bit rough, you understand. And, if they die, we can’t let fresh meat go to waste.”

The miner’s guns were trained on both men and women as Henry waved good bye and shut the outer door to his airlock. Simon rushed the door and pounded on it. “Jayne, get Ely to sickbay,” Malcom said. “Come on, Doc, before they loose the seal on the airlock.”

“We’re not leaving them!” Simon shouted.

“We’re not leaving them!” Malcom shouted back. “But we are leaving. Now get to sickbay and stabilize my pilot because I’m going to need him! Your sister can take care of herself in the mean time, so if we’re going to do them any good, we’ll be on our way for a spell. Now move on.”

Malcom closed the outer airlock door. Simon was torn, but he had learned to trust the Captain. And they needed the pilot. He forced himself to focus on that end. “Just once I would like to be not right about people,” Jayne complained to no one in particular. He didn’t hear Book respond, “They’ll be alright.”

It was a hard thing for Malcom to push Serenity away from the asteroid and his crew, but he did it. He had to do it in order to regroup and return to get them. He had no doubt that Zoe and River could account for themselves in a fair fight, once the miners let their guards down, but he was going to try and make sure it was not a fair fight. Once outside the firing perimeter of the mining colony, Malcom turned Serenity back around to study it. Jayne stepped onto the Bridge.

“So, what’s the plan?” Jayne asked.

“You’re going to go to your room and you’re going to unpack that rocket launcher I told you not to pinch and then we’re going rabbit hunting,” Malcom said. “Suit up.”

“Hot damn,” Jayne said, turning to go and retrieve his new toy. “I was wondering when I would get

a chance to fire that thing.”

Malcom made his way to sickbay just in time to hear the bullet clink into a tray.

“How is he, Doc?” Malcom asked.

“Just a flesh wound,” Ely grunted.

“He didn’t want to be sedated. I gave him a local, but it won’t kill all the pain,” Simon said.

“Started artificial blood infusion infused with antibiotics which we got from the cache. It will give him energy and reduce the risk of infection.” “Sew him up quick, I need a pilot,” Malcom said.

“Mal, he’s not in any shape to be piloting,” Simon said.

“Patch me up and put me in my chair,” Ely said.

“I intend to do just that,” Malcom said. “Got some questions for you. Can you fly Serenity and a shuttle on remote simultaneously?”

Ely opened his mouth to say something and then shook his head. “Not proficiently. Not in this condition.”

“Just need a distraction, Ely,” Malcom said. “Not asking for perfection. You can even ram the shuttle into one of the habitats if you want, just as long as it takes out a gun in the process. There are six asteroids, two guns a piece. I don’t think they’re automated, but the shuttle’s first pass will prove if it’s human or machine.”

“I understand,” Ely said, and grimaced something fierce. “Are you through yet, Doc?”

“Five more minutes,” the Doctor said, shaking his head. He wanted to preach about how he needed to be still for a time and allow the patchwork to take, but he also knew that people were depending on this man’s piloting skills. “I don’t want you to bleed to death.”

“I’m going to go prep the shuttles,” Malcom said. “You get him patched and then get him on the bridge. Strap him in the chair if you have to, but you get him there.”

“I’ll do it, Captain,” Simon said.

CHAPTER NINE

Serenity picked up a wave from the miner's warning them not to come in. They didn't respond to that wave. They only watched all the guns swivel to keep pace with Serenity as she circled the habitats. Serenity circled with her nose facing the asteroids.

Frequently the habitats were out of sight, occluded by the asteroids arranged around them to provide additional cover. Had the mining camp been more profitable, there would no doubt have been guns on the outer asteroids as well. Every fourth asteroid had fixed positioned cameras that allowed the miners to see what was coming. But they weren't perfect. As Serenity circled the miner's camp they were visible directly for brief moment and they were visible by asteroid cams but there were blind spots. At opposite sides of the circle, inside the blind spot, shuttles departed Serenity. Both shuttles crept in closer to the asteroids taking advantage of those blind spots.

Shuttle one was designated North Pole of the spheroid shell of asteroids. Shuttle two, Inara's shuttle was designated south pole. When Serenity returned to the 'east' position in its circle, shuttle one moved in. Guns swiveled towards it, haphazardly, revealing the human presence behind the controls. When Serenity hit the six o'clock position, it proceeded in. The guns closest it started to swivel back around. That's when the first rocket left Serenity's open airlock, fired by Jayne.

"That's what I'm talking about," Jayne whooped, scoring a direct hit with his first shot. "Hand me another one of those firecrackers, Doc."

"Are you sure this won't penetrate the asteroids and depressurize them?" Simon asked.

"Of course I'm sure," Jayne said. "Pretty sure. I guess it depends on how comfortable the miners are with thin walls."

Inara's shuttle followed Serenity in towards the camp, hiding in its shadow. As they passed overhead of their intended target, Jayne took the gun turret off the top with the second missile. The guns tracked both Serenity and shuttle one as they passed each other. Shuttle two crept along the shadow of the target asteroid until it was up close and personal with the airlock.

The asteroid airlock had the big door for cargo haulers such as Serenity and a smaller door for the likes of shuttles and emergency tubular bridges. Inara's shuttle crept up and latched onto the door. Malcom was double and triple armed, with a spare gun to pass to Zoe the moment he was in throwing distance of her. He confirmed the airlock was secure and pressurized and then flashed his shuttle's beacon to visually alert Serenity that he was in place and going in.

Serenity made another pass, giving Jayne more practice with his rocket launcher. The first shuttle turned to make another pass, but the guns scored several hits. In its dying throws, Ely was barely able to fly it close enough to scrape the lower turret off the target asteroid. This action was enough to start the asteroid spinning, giving it a slight vector away from the other habitats. The spinning would not affect the inside orientation any, unless they had skimmed on their artificial gravity deck plating as they had the wall plastics.

Serenity left the firing perimeter and began to circle again, the guns tracking it. He crept in close enough to allow Jayne to fire at the gun turrets. Unlike Serenity, the asteroids couldn't take evasive action. Plus, Serenity could remain well outside of the miner's optimum kill range. Something the miners hadn't counted on when buying their defensive system. They weren't military, just folks trying to make a living. True enough, their projectiles carried velocity, but it wouldn't penetrate Serenity's hull with one shot. It would take several shots, each shot scratch digging in, and distance enabled Serenity to move left or right of the projectile stream. With the type of ammo the miners were using, probably their own ingots, they would need to score sustained hits in the same place to pierce the ship and

depressurized it. Unless they got lucky and hit the windows. They had skimped on the armaments as well, fortunately for Serenity, because explosive rounds would have changed the situation.

“That’s the last cannon!” Jayne yelled. “Take us in.” “What’s that?” Simon asked.

Jayne turned to see the business end of a rabbit coming towards Serenity. He looked about him and saw that there were at least ten rabbits with teeth coming.

“Huh choo-shung tza-jiao duh tzang-huo!” Jane cursed. “Um, Ely, you might want to kick in the gas. These rabbits bite.”

Serenity passed over the miner’s camp, chased by a ravenous pack of ore eating, gold pellet shooting rabbits. The rabbits accelerated, passing off pellets of ore and junk to lighten their load and increase their speed.

“I can’t shoot at them if I can’t see them!” Jayne yelled.

Serenity pivoted about, maintaining its current vector. The maneuver caused Simon to become ill in his suit from vertigo. Jayne was disgusted.

“Don’t drown in there,” Jayne said, reaching over to the Doctor to turn on the suit’s suction. Jayne wanted to puke himself at the sight of the volume that the Doctor had expelled. It disappeared and was vented through a flap valve and was expelled outwards of the ship. “I need you to keep handing me the rockets, hoe-tze duh pee-goo.” “Thank you,” Simon said, gasping for air, no doubt influenced by the smell. The contained smell in the suit could make someone want to keep vomiting. He grabbed hold of the line that secured him to Serenity for extra support.

“Now, be very, very, quiet,” Jayne said. “I’m huntin’ rabbits.”

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When shuttle one collided with the asteroid, there was a jarring and rocking, but the airlock seal held. Malcom opened his side of the airlock, put an assist on the miner’s side, and opened it as well. He closed his side and then the miner’s side, just in case another explosion were to separate the shuttle from the far side. He didn’t want to die from lack of air, though, in all eventualities, that was probably the easiest, and most likely, way to go out. The sudden drop in air pressure would cause everyone to pass out before they died.

Malcom approached the inner airlock door cautiously and put his ear to it, hoping to get an idea of what the situation was on the other side. There was no hint. Nothing more to do, he simply opened the door, prepared to shoot the first person he saw. Relieved that no one was immediately present, he stepped in, and closed the door. The main cavern seemed much more spacious now that the ore had been removed. There were still pallets left, which offered places to hide behind in a fire fight, and he used them for cover as he made his way across the floor, a gun in each hand. There were three tunnels leading away from the cavern. He was just going to have to pick one.

“I hate rabbits,” Malcom mumbled to himself, oblivious that Book was near. Book said ‘go left’ and Malcom debated, finally choosing the closer tunnel. When Mal went the wrong way, Book faded, apparently frustrated. Malcom was perhaps a fourth of the way down the darkened tunnel when he felt a gun in the small of his back.

“I can’t let you take them girls,” the person behind him said, revealing a feminine voice.

“I’m just come to take what’s mine and be on my way,” Malcom said, hoping the female of the mining clan would be more open to rational talk. After all, she hadn’t shot him right away, so there’s was hope.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “These four will keep the boys entertained and take some of the

pressure off me.”

“I can understand how your burden is lifted by the extra females, but I can’t let them be held here against their wills. You’ll have to kill me to stop me,” Malcom said.

She cocked the weapon.

“Or, we could negotiate,” Malcom offered quickly.

“The only thing you have that I want is passage out of here,” she said.

“If you help me, I’ll promise you that,” Malcom said.

“Then you and I have a deal?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Malcom said.

“Very well then, the girls are being held at the end of the tunnel you just passed,” she said.

Malcom told himself, ‘I knew I should have gone that way,’ and turned to see the woman behind him and grimaced. She was no doubt by far the ugliest, fattest woman he had ever seen. She was stained with dirt and sweat, missing teeth, hair clumped and missing, and her skin blemished with bruises and sores. Some of them clearly fresh bruises.

“Guns empty by the way,” she said. “They don’t give me bullets cause they know I’ll kill them. Name’s Anna.”

“Nicely met, Anna. I’d like to hurry this along, if you don’t mind,” Malcom said.

Anna scoffed. “Men. Always in a hurry,” she said, and pushed by him. Anna led the way to the holding pin where she and Malcom found twelve dead and six injured men lying prone on the ground, Zoe holding a weapon, obviously confiscated from one of the men, and River standing in the midst of the downed men, posed like a ballerina who had just finished act one of the ballet.

“What took you so long?” Zoe asked.

“I was waiting on you, actually,” Malcom said. He unhooked Zoe’s gun belt from around his waist and handed it to her. “I brought you your gun.”

“Thank you,” Zoe said. “They took Kaylee and Inara that way.”

“Boss never had him a proper Companion before,” Anna said. “Figure he’s trying to work it in before he dies.”

“Lead on,” Malcom said.

Anna opened a door, found it empty and moved down to the next door. The next room revealed Charley chasing Kaylee around a crate, protesting that she was just making it worse on herself. Kaylee flew to the Malcom, burying her face in his chest. Charley slid to a halt uncertain what to make of this.

Malcom tilted Kaylee’s head back to make certain he had seen what he thought he had seen. Kaylee was going to have a nice shiner come morning.

“Did you hit her?” Malcom demanded.

“Of course,” Charley said. “She weren’t obeying my authoritah.”

Malcom directed Zoe to take Kaylee. As soon as she was out of sight, Malcom shot Charley right between the eyes. He gave a sermon about hitting women after the fact. He moved on to catch up with the girls. As they approached the end of the hall, and the last door, it opened and Inara walked out, looking none the worse for her troubles. The door closed behind her.

“You alright?” Malcom asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Inara said, standing tall, and all dignified.

Malcom went past her, opened the door, went in part way, and then returned. From outside the open

door, Henry could be seen, his nudity interrupted by pillow, clumping of sheets, and the miscellaneous placed contents of the room. Malcom exited the room.

“He’s dead?” Malcom asked, pointing in with his weapon.

“Quite,” Inara said. “There’s more than one way to kill a man, Mal. You don’t always need a gun.”

“I’ll be sure to sleep lightly around you,” Malcom said. “Let’s be on our way.” They returned to the end of the tunnel to find the way blocked by men with guns. They retreated back into the tunnel as the miners opened fire on them.

“How many?” Zoe asked.

“Figure six, maybe seven,” Malcom said.

“Eleven,” River corrected.

“Or eleven,” Malcom corrected.

“May I have a gun?” River asked.

“I’d rather you not be killin,” Malcom said.

“They got us pinned down,” Zoe said.

“It looks that way,” Malcom said.

Gun fire erupted from the cavern. Men screamed, scrambling to reposition themselves. Malcom took a quick peek and saw an opportunity to shoot a couple as they were orientating their fire towards the airlock. He stepped around and shot one point blank and then shot another. Was about to shoot the third but Zoe got him. And then the gun fight was over. Jayne, Ely, and Simon walked out into the middle of the cavern.

“You alright?” Jayne asked.

“Yes,” Malcom said.

“I’m alright,” River protested as her brother checked her for injuries. After insuring his sister was alright, he went to Kaylee and gave her the same degree of scrutiny.

“I’m alright,” Kaylee told him, more concerned about Ely than she was about herself.

“Ely?” Inara asked, rushing to support him.

Ely set his gun down on a stack of gold and leaned into her.

“Fine,” Ely assured her. “You?”

“You shouldn’t be on your feet right now,” Inara said.

“Let’s get you back to medical,” Simon urged. “You no doubt tore my stitching up.”

“No doubt,” Ely said.

“Mind if I take a gold bar, Captain?” Jayne asked.

“Help yourself,” Malcom said. “Anna, are there any other women being held hostage in the other habitats?”

“No. They’re pretty rough on the women around here,” Anna said. “They don’t last long.”

“Make it quick, Jayne,” Malcom said. “We’re out of here.”

“But we can’t just leave all of this,” Jayne protested.

“We can and we are,” Malcom said. “Take what you can carry. Need to be gone before the others regroup.”

“But!” Jayne said, finding out two rabbit pellets worth of gold was all that he could carry. And he was struggling at that.

Anna grabbed one as well. So did River, Kaylee, and Zoe.

Back in Serenity, Malcom piloted the ship away from the habitats, pausing long enough to remote

pilot Inara's shuttle back into the bay. He then logged onto the rabbit net work and found a couple remaining rabbits. He redirected their diggings so that they would drill into the habitats. Serenity waited long enough to see the air vented from the habitats before powering up. A brilliant, silent swirl of orange and yellow enveloped the tail end of Serenity as it pushed away into the black.

CHAPTER TEN

Malcom found Inara sitting next to the observation window, watching over Ely as he slept. She saw his shadow, looked up, and gave a fraction of a smile.

"How's he doing?" Malcom asked.

"He'll live," Inara said.

"Good," Malcom said, and turned to walk away.

"Mal?" Inara asked.

Malcom paused, turned towards her, but didn't meet her eyes. "It's kind of funny," he told her. "Had my mind on a certain direction of things and now I'm kind of feeling there's an obstacle and I should just keep to myself, seeing how I haven't actually earned the right to even entertain what I was..."

"Why is it so complicated?" Inara asked. "With all we've been through, you've earned the right to at least ask. And even if you hadn't earn the right, it's always reasonable to ask, because you know, it's not about earning. True human value is not a value of a person's level to produce. We're not economic functions."

"Perhaps. That's a nice way to see things but not the way most people see things," Malcom nodded. "And looking back, I'm seeing things that I obviously missed, things that make sense after your declaration."

"Maybe you just didn't want to see it," Inara said.

"Quite possibly," Malcom said. "And, I suppose I also never considered myself a candidate for you affections. There are so many better men, with more to offer, and given all the qualities you have that I hold in high esteem, I just always figured... Well, doesn't matter what I figured. I made some assumptions, instead of simply doing the right thing and just asking."

"I wouldn't have stayed so long if I didn't want to be here," Inara said. "I only left because it pained me so much to be close to you and not be close to you." "I'm also thinking, you could have been more direct with me, had you wanted," Malcom said. "Might have decreased the number of fights we had."

"You're right," Inara said. "I made some assumptions, instead of simply doing the right thing and just asking. You made it no secret what you thought of my profession."

"What a person is and what a person does is often not one and the same thing. Besides, I'd like to think I was just trying to be protective of you, but, more likely that was some of my jealousies," Malcom said. "I'm not usually the jealous type. I like live and let live, but I got some power feelings about you. I'm sorry, Inara."

Inara embraced him. After a long moment, she whispered. "Where does this leave us?"

"I don't know," Malcom said, honestly. "I have my wants and my inclinations, and I was hoping a regular line up of legit work would make a difference, but I don't see this contract going through, given the circumstances and all. I don't want to bring you down, and I don't have much in the way of offering you, and I certainly don't want you participating in some of my more questionable ventures."

"Still trying to protect me?" Inara asked.

"That's one of the inclinations I have, yes," Malcom said. "Even knowing that comes with an

occasional sword in my side. And, there's questions. Knowing you're career, do I have a right to ask you..."

"To be monogamous?" Inara asked. "Contrary to popular belief, being a Companion is more than just providing physical gratification. It's about providing comfort, compassion, friendship, therapeutic massage, alternative healing, kindness. I suppose I could become a madam, or a guru, or both." Malcom laughed. "Those also come with a price," he said.

Inara tensed, but had expected that. "As a Companion, I have chosen who I will spend time with. I didn't always choose my clients on their ability to pay. It's one of the reasons I came to you to rent the shuttle in the first place. It's the cheapest lifestyle there is. I don't need or want lots of stuff. I live well below my means so that I can choose the kind of people I would like to associate with. I always sought out qualities of spirit and personality or education that I thought would enrich my life when sharing a moment in time with them, whether that was holding hands or just talk. And I have always hoped that I have brought some level of quality to the table to make that a mutual exchange. I've not always chosen well, especially if you consider some of my clients were just plain mean after they got what they wanted, after I opened myself up to them, thinking they were better people than they were. And when I make a mistake, I learn, and I never see those people again."

"That means there are still people on your list that you consider good people and intend to see," Malcom said.

"Yes," Inara said.

"And that would be something I would have to learn to live with," Malcom said.

"I'm not sure that I can do that."

"And, that is one reason I haven't admitted my attraction and affection for you, Mal," Inara said.

"I want to ask you a hard question," Malcom said. "And you can decline." "Go ahead," Inara said.

"Do you enjoy it?" Malcom asked.

"My profession?" Inara asked.

"No, more precisely, do you derive pleasure..." Malcom said.

"Do I orgasm?" Inara asked. "Mal, let me educate you about sex. A person can be made to climax, and not enjoy it. Even rape victims can be aroused and have a forced orgasm, which has frequently complicated the process of recovery because people aren't educated about the fact orgasms are simply a physiological response to stimulation. That said, let me be very straight with you. I have spent time with people I did not like, and I experienced physical pleasure. There were people that I genuinely liked, and didn't experience physical pleasure. But the thing is, when I am serving someone, it isn't about me. I am in there. I experience things and sometimes I need to step back and process things, but almost all of my pleasure comes from serving others, not from the physical benefits that can be derived from serving. As a sexual surrogate, I have helped handicapped folks that might never have experience a connection with another human being. I have helped people recover from sexual trauma, so that they can connect with another human being. I have even helped a paraplegic rewire his brain so that he could get off just sucking his own thumb..."

"Seriously?" Malcom asked.

"Your primary sex organ is your brain, not your genitals," Inara explained. "Mal, I always accepted the level of friendship that you can give and not tried to push you beyond your comfort level. I know things, and I have gotten these things from books, videos, and direct experience. I don't talk about my

wants in general to anyone because, well, what I want is alignment, spiritually, mentally, and physically with the person I love. You see me as this complex creature, but truly, I am the simplest female you'll ever meet. I don't require wealth, or extravagant expressions of affection, public or private, but I do want kindness in my life. A Kaylee kind of kindness. I want kindness, understanding, and respect, and it's even better when that's mutual. I've not always been kind to you, Mal. Some of that is because there wasn't a mutual exchange, but some of it because I had certain expectations of you and I tried to influence you towards those expectations and you went right instead of left, I got mad, and I wondered what I was doing wrong, but the fact you exercised your own mind just made me want you more. And, whether I was right or wrong, you stood strong and gave me equal back. I like that.

And I'm rambling like..."

Malcom kissed her to hush her up.

"Oh, Mal," Inara cried. She allowed herself to cry. "I do love you."

"I love you," Malcom admitted. "We'll just see how this goes. Not sure how this triangle thing works."

"Triangle thing?" Inara asked.

"You still love him," Malcom said, pointing to Ely.

"Yes," Inara said; it was an admission, and a hard one because she feared how he would respond.

"Doesn't mean that I intend to be with him. Just as your love for Kaylee or Zoe means you're not likely to be with them. It's that kind of love." "I'm sorry if I misspoke," Malcom said.

"If we're going to work, you have got to have the right to ask without fear of reprisals," Inara said.

"You can't let your doubts and insecurities stay buried to ripen into monsters. Our communication will have to be superior to the average person's. Our talks will be hard, but they will be the most meaningful dialogues we ever have."

"Then we'll start with that," Malcom said. "It's my turn to prep a meal. Perhaps we can continue a conversation while I cook?"

"I'll help, even," Inara said, happily. "That will guarantee the food is eatable." "Ouch," Malcom pretended to be wounded.

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As the meal was winding down, a quietness fell over the table. There had been a good conversation going, a bit of laughter, but not the chest hurting laughter that comes followed by tears of mirth. Talking about those left behind often stirred people into silence. Zoe sniffed a little, swirled the wine in her glass, and then took another sip. River kept looking about as if she were expecting someone to join them.

"So, what's the plan, Captain?" Zoe asked.

"Yeah, what's the plan?" Jayne asked. "Like, we go round us up some tree huggers for a bit of revenge?"

"Not revenge," Malcom said. "Just to get paid."

"Given the fact that they weren't up front with us about certain things, I doubt they're going to pay what they promised," Zoe said. "And, if Ely is right, they're not likely to have the cash lying around. And we've done well enough avoiding Alliance credit."

"I don't want no Alliance credit," Jayne said.

"Won't be taking any," Malcom assured them. "After the transfer fees, the banker's fees, and Alliance tax, there's little left over to run a proper business. And, I don't like the Alliance knowing our

business, or giving money to governments to fund policies I don't agree with. We could forget about Ningxia Hui, but that means the only cargo we have worth its weight in fuel is the gold. We won't break even on the other metals, except maybe the copper."

"We could take it out of their hide if they don't pay up," Jayne said.

"Or, we could take food supplements," Zoe said. "We can get them right off the factory line, before the government seal is on them."

"I figure we couldn't haul enough supplements away to collect what they promised," Malcom said. "But, it's an option if they don't dig up enough cash." "I could call Wong Jing and see if he can't persuade them into paying us as promised," Inara said.

"I'd rather you not do that," Malcom said. "Considering he hooked us up, I don't imagine he's completely innocent in this mess. In fact, I'm of the opinion he has some cards on the table he hasn't revealed yet." "I don't believe that," Inara said.

"And, I could be wrong," Malcom admitted. "I'm just asking you not to break radio silence until after we've paid a visit to the Ningxia Hui. After we see how this plays out, if you want to contact him to inform him that his contacts are not as reliable as he imagined, I'm okay with that."

"So, we're going back?" Zoe said.

"Yep," Malcom said. "I want to get paid for my troubles."

"Given Ningxia Hui's gravitational force, our cargo exceeds our maximum landing weight," River pointed out.

"It does," Malcom agreed. "Which is why we're going to unload the stuff in orbit, and take one fourth of it down at a time. We'll get paid for each up front, or we don't bring the rest down. The gold will be the last delivery planet side, if we're paid." "I put the gold in first," Jayne said, showing a bit of anger. "That means we'll have to unload the entire cargo bay in orbit and then bring some of it back on." "That's what that means," Malcom agreed.

"Gravity or no, that's hard work," Jayne said. "I don't like hard work." "But you do like to get paid," Zoe said.

"Well, yeah, but," Jayne tried to find away about it. "Well, we better get paid, that's all I'm saying."

"I'm glad that's all your saying," Inara said.

"And another thing," Jayne went on. Inara rolled her eyes. "We're just going to leave the cargo floating up here in orbit for any Tom, Li, or Harry to come collect at their convenience?"

"Not many ships passing this way," Malcom said. "It should be safe long enough for us to make the first transaction and come up for the second haul. Even so, I was going to ask Inara to baby sit it with her shuttle. In fact, I was intending to leave all the women folk in orbit in Inara's shuttle. I want to keep a certain appearance about things. Now, unless there is anything else to be discussed, we'll be in parking orbit in about thirty minutes. Soon as we're parked, I want people suited up and moving ore. The Fork lift won't work outside the ship, much less in a vacuum, so I reckon we'll just cut the straps and unload the pallets one bar at a time, putting them into nets so they don't go drifting all over the place. Cargo bay will be vented for unloading, so I'll need people in their places, and all interior hatches secure. Inara, if you'll see to your shuttle, I'd appreciate it."

Inara nodded.

"Can I help?" River asked. "I like space walks." "You can," Malcom assured her.

"First, help me with these dishes," Kaylee said, hugging River.

“I’ll go prep the nets,” Jayne grumbled. “One for every two pallets ought to work. It’s gonna be a log day.”

“Yep,” Malcom agreed. “So let’s do it and be done with it.”

Everyone pushed away from the table to go about their business. Zoe made sure all the hatches were secure and proper seals were made. She then started prepping suits. She was about finished with the suits when Kaylee approached her.

“You okay?” Kaylee asked, softly.

“Yeah,” Zoe said, not looking up from her work.

“You mad at me?” Kaylee asked.

Zoe softened and stopped what she was doing. “No, Kaylee. I’m not mad at you. I’m actually quite happy for you.”

“Really?” Kaylee asked, hopeful.

Zoe went to Kaylee and hugged her. “Really,” Zoe said. “You and the Doctor are going to raise a fine family. Smart and kind is the sort of thing I see you producing.” “I don’t want to marry him if it means leaving you and the Captain,” Kaylee said.

“Hush,” Zoe said. “You are a marvelously talented person and you can do better than this. What you lacked in social knowledge will come from Simon. The two of you together would be unstoppable. You might be running maintenance at a space port while he’s the head Doctor. Those are good things.”

“And what if I just want to be happy and be surrounded by friends?” Kaylee asked.

“You, girl, will always be happy,” Zoe assured her. “And consequently, you will always be surrounded by friends.”

“Then why do I feel so uncertain?” Kaylee asked.

“Because you’re charting new territory,” Zoe said. “You just have to walk a spell and get your feet accustomed to the new ground. I’m confident you will be alright, no matter what you decide.”

“You’ve been walking a spell already,” Kaylee said.

Zoe nodded. “I am walking. I have my bearings. I didn’t say it was easy.”

“I love you, Zoe,” Kaylee said.

Zoe hugged Kaylee up to her again. “Oh, Kaylee, I love you, so much.”

“Have you notice we all use the love word more easily?” Kaylee said.

“Yeah,” Zoe said. “I think everyone should be using it more.”

On her way to prep the shuttle, Inara went to check in on Ely. He seemed to be asleep, but Ely stirred when she touched him. His eyes opened and he squinted at her.

“How are you doing?” Inara asked.

Ely said something inaudible, swallowed, and tried again. “Thirsty,” he said. As Inara went to get a glass of water and a straw, Ely focused his attention on the stranger in sickbay.

“They’ll take good care of you son,” Book said. “If you let them.”

Ely blinked. He turned to Inara as she brought him a glass of water and directed a straw into his mouth. Ely sipped a little and then laid back.

“In my quarters, in my bag, you’ll find some money,” Ely said.

“Shh, don’t talk right now,” Inara said.

“I want you to make sure,” Ely pushed on, despite the comfort of Inara’s voice.

“That you pay that Doctor exorbitantly.”

Inara chuckled. "You can work that out with him later," Inara said. "Rest, I got to go to work."

"But I haven't paid you yet," Ely rambled.

"Your account is in good standing," Inara said, running her fingers through his hair. "Just sleep. And dream good dreams." "Inara?" Ely asked.

"Yes?" Inara said, touching his hand.

"Don't you think it was a bit premature to call for the Shepard?" Ely asked.

Inara did a double take on that, looked about the room, and was about to ask what Shepard when Simon entered. The Doctor acknowledged her as he made his way to check Ely's vitals. Ely acknowledged the Doctor and closed his eyes.

"He really is doing good," Simon said.

"I know," Inara said. "The artificial blood obviously came in handy. Does it cause people to hallucinate?"

"No, why?" Simon asked.

"He asked why we called a Shepard," Inara said.

"Maybe I should run some tests on that gum," Simon said.

"Is it possible?" Inara asked.

"Is it possible what? That Book's ghost is wandering Serenity?" Simon asked. "Well?" Inara asked.

"No," Simon said. "Look, I will concede that River has some extraordinary sense which seems to suggest telepathy at times, but the hard science of it all would explain it away by saying that everyone's thoughts can be discerned if you are able to read body language well enough. And maybe there is something to the collective unconscious and we carry archetypes and models of every personality we ever met, and she's tapping into that. I also know my sister to have a fairly active imagination and I suspect this is just another symptom of all the stress we've experienced, plus her body adjusting to the new meds."

"But then, how come Ely is seeing Book?" Inara asked.

"We don't know that he's seen Book," Simon said.

"He said he saw a Shepard," Inara argued.

"Exactly. He said he saw a Shepard," Simon repeated. "And earlier, River said she saw a ghost, Shepard Book, and now, Ely, under a great deal of physical stress and doped with meds says he saw a Shepard. It really isn't rocket science to figure this out. Humans are fairly open to suggestion. If one person claims to see a ghost, pretty soon every one starts noticing weird things, which are really just normal things, but when coupled with the context of supernatural events, everyone gravitates towards supernatural explanations. Don't believe me, we can run an experiment with Jayne, and I swear by the end of the week, he will be seeing ghosts."

"That would be mean," Inara said. "Funny, but mean. Anyway, you can't rule Book out."

"If you want to box me in like that, yes, technically, I can't rule Book out," Simon said. "But I prefer things I can measure and test and prove."

Inara nodded as Simon filled out the chart on his patient's file, put the clip board down, double checked the flow of fluids through the IV, and then patted Inara.

"He's going to be fine. Well, I better go get suited up," Simon said. "I'm probably going to help Kaylee shift some ore..."

"Yeah, well, we all got work to do, Simon," Inara said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Serenity had settled down on the grass landing pad, in front of an audience this time. There were a few men with guns, several with homemade bows and arrows, some men with sticks, and a lot of men without any weapons. A string of about six horse drawn carriages and carts were there, ready to haul away cargo. Their contact, Lam Suet, greeted Malcom as he came down the ramp. Behind Lam were two guards, armed with bamboo staffs. There were strange markings burned into the wood.

"I'm so glad you made it back on time," Lam said. "Timing is really critical at this juncture."

"Nice of you to meet us at the space port," Malcom said. "Judging by the reception, though, you know I'm not too pleased with you."

"Sorry, Captain Reynolds," Lam said. "Business is business. Your women will be fine and returned to you after we completed our transactions, in the proper order."

"There isn't going to be any transactions till I see the color of your money," Malcom said.

Lam nodded, clapped his hands, and several unarmed men picked up chests made of wood and brought them over. They set them down and opened the cases for inspection. One crate had bags of dried leaves, the other had bags of white powder, and a third box a variety of items. There were two wagons full of boxes, which would fill up Serenity's hold.

"I don't get it," Malcom said. "This doesn't look like money."

"Drugs," Simon said. "That's probably an opiate, cocaine, I suspect. This is probably cannabis. This other box, DMT? Shrooms and... I don't recognize that one." "We call it 'vector,'" Lam said.

"We aint shipping no drugs," Jayne said. "That's a death penalty."

"You want to get paid, you're going to have to run these crates to Roco Station for dispersal," Lam said.

"We're not moving drugs," Malcom said. "We agreed on cash and I expect to get paid, per our agreement. No triangles."

"You want to see your girls alive again, you're going to do as you're told," Lam said.

"No," Malcom said. "I think you're going to go fetch us some cash, or you're not going to see any metal."

"Except maybe the led from my gun," Jayne said.

"Funny thing about led," Lam said. "It's a precious commodity around here. We'd have to cut it out of you once you're dead. Then I'll have your ship and will make the runs myself. I'd rather let you do your job, though. I hate flying."

"My understanding is once you've lived on this little moon for a couple years, you can't leave," Malcom said. "Something about the lesser gravity allowing your muscles to atrophy."

"I can always adjust your gravity systems," Lam said.

"Perhaps. But it's either cash or food supplements," Malcom said. "Or a combination thereof."

"I don't understand," Lam said. "Wong Jing assured us you would deliver if we took your girls hostage."

"He said that, uh?" Malcom said.

"You don't care if they live or die?" Lam said. "Oh, I care," Malcom said.

Inara's shuttle did a fly by, breaking the sound barrier nearly right over head, right on schedule. Malcom pulled out his revolver and shot Lam in the leg, and then shot both his body guards between the eyes. Jayne started firing as well, taking out some of the armed men. An arrow caught Jayne in his

armored vest. It didn't penetrate, but it scared him at first when it stuck, and out of anger he blasted the bow man next. Zoe came out of the hatch, firing her rifle. The unarmed men, who were here simply to be moving cargo, ran. As Malcom, Jayne and Zoe moved out to finish off the fight, Lam pushed himself to a sitting position and pulled out a small revolver and was about to shoot Malcom in the back. Malcom turned in time to see Ely responding to the threat. Ely knocked the gun out of Lam's hand with a bamboo staff and then reversed the stick and cold cocked Lam in the head, knocking him out cold.

"Thought you said you couldn't fight," Malcom said.

"I can't," Ely said. "That's why I hit him with a stick."

The fighting was over fairly quick and Inara's shuttle settled on the ground. The door opened and Inara flew out to make sure everyone was alright and then demanded to know what Ely was doing up.

"Couldn't sleep," Ely said. "All the racket you guys were making." "Sorry," Malcom said.

Ely sat down on one of the crates of drugs. Simon checked the arm where Ely had removed the IV. River emerged from the shuttle, checking out the carnage.

"I wanted to play," River said. "I know," Malcom said.

Anna emerged from the shuttle, carrying her gold piece. "You're sure it's safe for me here?"

"Just head up that path and you will come to a village on the outskirts of the capital," Ely said.

"Talk to the man in the first green hut. Tell him you want to trade your gold for a place to live. Tell him Ely sent you. He'll set you up." "Thank you," Anna said. "I could just kiss all of you."

"That won't be necessary," Malcom assured her. "Take care."

"Now what are we going to do for pay?" Jayne asked. "We done killed just about everyone, except him."

"We'll get paid," Ely said. "Hey, Anna? Tell my friend if he and some boys get down here, I got a whole mess of metal for him. First come first serve, bring cash or unmarked cases of food supplements and or medicines."

"Will do," Anna said.

"We'll get paid," Ely said. "Maybe not as much as they promised, but we'll get paid."

"You're going to wish you hadn't done this," Lam said. "Wong Jing has a powerful reach."

"Yeah, well, I'll make sure to tell the villagers you have some led in your thigh," Malcom said.

"Don't want any metal going to waste, now."

"And what do we do with the drugs?" Zoe asked.

"Throw it over the cliffs into the ocean," Malcom said.

"You're throwing away good money!" Lam said. "It's a fortune." "And unless you burn this planet, you aint gonna stop the trade," Ely said. "No wonder these folks are so happy," Jayne said.

"Don't want to make my fortune selling stuff that hurts folks in the long run," Malcom said. "Now, had you some good beer or wine, we might have been able to negotiate, but this stuff, can't condone it. Not opposed, mind you, adult folks can do what they want, but minors have a way of getting derailed, and I ain't contributing."

"Captain," Ely said. "Maybe we should consider it." "We're not moving drugs," Malcom said.

"We could take the transponder out of the black box from the military caches, reconnect the power supply, hide it in the bottom of the drugs, and then hand it over to the peoples at Roco Station," Ely said. "Roco station always has an Alliance cruiser nearby. They pick up that transponder, they will be

on Roco Station before any of the drugs could be dispersed. You'd get paid and close down a major trafficking hub at the same time. And it's a good bet, if they're trafficking drugs, they're trafficking women. Or kids. Or both. Plus, it would pass the suspicion of the military cache being infiltrated by these drug runners. So, I say, we deliver and shut it down."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Zoe said.

"We don't want to get caught with the drugs on Serenity," Jayne said. "We done walked into enough traps. And this smells like one of them traps that the deeper in you go the more dead you get. Like them plants that eat bugs, or even rats!" "Nepenthes rajah," Ely said.

"See, he knows about them. I have seen some that could eat a grown man! In fact, when I saw it, there was a man floating in the digestive juices and you could see his naked silhouette..."

"Why would he be naked?" Kaylee asked.

"Pheromones draw humans in thinking they will get sex," Ely said.

"How do you know about this stuff?" Malcom asked.

"That particular breed of Nepenthes comes from my home world," Ely explained. "I told you, I grew up on a farm, and our house was surrounded by Nepenthes rajah, and other flesh eating plants. It helps cut down on the frogs, rats, and insect populations. Without them, mosquitoes would likely swarm enough to suck a man dry in minutes." "Why the hell would terraformers release mosquitoes?" Zoe asked.

"Their great pollinators. Just happens to be one of those worlds where creatures were introduced and they did really well," Ely said. "Some rumors suggest they were introduced by a competing colony. Trade routes can be fierce." "We're not taking drugs on Serenity," Malcom said.

"Maybe we don't take Serenity," Zoe said.

"They're going to know something's up if Serenity doesn't show up with the drugs," Jayne said.

"Serenity would have to make an appearance to put on the show," Zoe said.

"We're assuming Lam here doesn't have to check in with his boss," Inara offered. "When do you have to report in?" Malcom asked Lam.

"Like I'd tell you," Lam said.

Malcom shot the man in the shoulder, stepped closer, and cocked the gun again.

"I was supposed to call as soon as you were on your way to Roco Station with the drugs," Lam said.

"That could give us some time get a second ship, for the decoy," Ely said. "I'll front the money for this operation."

"We already have a spare ship," Malcom said.

"We do?" Jayne asked.

"Yep," Malcom said. "Was thinking about stripping it and selling the parts, but this is a better thing for it. Jayne, haul this man back to medical. Doctor patch him. Don't want him full dead, yet. Oh, any compliance drugs in that crate?"

Simon picked up a vial without difficulty in sorting

"Compliance drugs? You mean like date rape drugs?" Jayne asked.

"You can't have any," Zoe snapped.

"I don't want any!" Jayne said. "A girl wants to be with me or she doesn't, and if she's drunk, that's a no go. She has to agree sober, and it is helpful if she agrees sober, on video, because I don't want that other kind of reputation we gunslingers get... What? You know how people stereotype us. Just because I like killing doesn't make me a bad guy. There a lot of folks that need killing..."



It took Serenity's crew four trips to bring all the metal down to the planet and people were still arriving to barter for the first haul by the time Serenity had unloaded the last. The citizens practically drooled over the last bit, the gold. There were all sorts of bids and deals offered in exchange for the metal, even an offer of by a young lady who said very publically she would even sleep with Jayne if there was no gold. Very few had cash, so most of Serenity's profit came in the form of fresh foods, preserved foods such as home made jams or preservatives, spices, naturalized medicines and or unmarked food supplements created at the Alliance processing plants. As their take pile grew, the metal slowly dwindled away. A jeweler bought half the gold with cash and coin, so by the end of the day, when all the metal had finally been hauled off, they had earned only half of what had originally been promised them, but still netted a little profit.

Simon made a break from loading Serenity to go check on his patient, who had been relocated to his room. The IV pack was almost finished so the Doctor changed it out.

"How are you doing?" Simon asked.

"Restless," Ely said.

"Some of that is the artificial blood," Simon said. "It's more efficient at nutrient and oxygen delivery than normal blood. It should thin out in a couple days."

"I don't think I can stay still that long," Ely said.

"You can stay here on your own volition, or I can sedate you," Simon said. "You need to rest and give my patch work some time to stick. Don't remove your catheter or your IV again."

"Fine," Ely said, resigned. "But I don't see why I need them when I can drink and walk to the toilet."

"I mean it," Simon said. "Stay in bed or I will sedate you. I'll be back to check on you in a while."

"What's going on outside?" Ely asked.

"Business," Simon said. "I'll bring you a book if you like."

Ely shook his head. Simon patted his patients arm and then returned to assisting the crew as they loaded up the ship with the goods they had collected. He noticed River sitting on the cat walk over the cargo bay, dangling her legs, her arms over the railing. He waved at her. She frowned and stuck her tongue out at him. He just shook his head, wondering what he had done this time, and went on.

River didn't jump when Book came and sat next to her.

"They don't believe me," River said, watching the activity below. She was very careful not to look directly at him, and she kept her voice down. Some of the locals were helping Serenity's crew load the ship, partly just to be social, one to stay in proximity of Jayne, gold or no, but also partly just to see the inside of a working spaceship. Most of these were young people, most likely born here, and had never been on a real spaceship, much less seen one, other than books and schooling and media.

"It isn't necessary," Book said.

"Why are you here?" River asked.

"I have unfinished business," Book said.

"Was it something you did?" River asked.

"It's not what I did, River. It's what I was. See, this is thing people don't get, but the book is very clear on this point: You don't get punished for what you do. We all fuck up," Book said. "It's what I was."

"I don't understand," River said.

“The things men do, most of those can be forgiven,” Book said. “In fact, to remain healthy, the best thing to do is forgive and move on. But who you are, that’s harder to change, and there are not enough good deeds in the whole ‘Verse that can cancel what I was out. Not even thousand lives could change what I was.” “But you changed,” River pointed out.

“I did. I got lucky and hit a small window, and I am trying to hang on to it for fear of sliding backwards,” Book said. “Changing who one is takes time, persistence, perseverance, and unwavering vigilance. Sometimes it means coming back. I haven’t put in enough time to come back, and there is a real danger in that, because karma is hell, and that could derail this present trajectory.”

River nodded as if she understood. “What did you do?” River asked, quietly. She had seen some of his anger and meanness leak out of him from time to time, but she had never really managed to unravel his past, as he had locked down on it fiercely.

“It’s not time yet,” Book answered.

“When?” River asked.

“Two by two,” Book said. “They’re coming. It would be best if you could avoid them a while longer.”

“Alliance?” River said.

“They’re not Alliance,” Books said.

River turned to look at Book, square in the eyes, but he was gone. Kaylee approached her and knelt down.

“You okay?” Kaylee asked.

“I don’t know,” River said.

Chapter Twelve

Some of the locals who had arrived merely to watch the spectacle started a barbecue and so by evening, everyone was eating and laughing, making an impromptu party which the Serenity’s crew was the guests of honor. Serenity’s cargo bay lights illuminated the immediate area with a soft, yellowish glow, which blended in nicely with the torches placed around the landing strip. Jayne was still chatting up the tree hugger gal that he was able to tolerate since she was willing to hug on him for a time and so the two of them drifted off to drink and find their own level of social. Musicians arrived and added to the sound and there was even some dancing, which made River the center of attention. Malcom found an opportunity to excuse himself from a young lady who had invited him to dance and then made his way over to Inara. He offered his hand, she accepted, and they danced.

Zoe didn’t want to participate and so she fixed a tray of food for Ely and was going to use that as an excuse to escape, but no one seemed to notice her slipping away, as they were all pretty much caught up in their own thoughts and fun. She found Ely in his quarters, watching something on his media player. He set it down beside him as she came in, smiling faintly.

“Thought you might be hungry,” Zoe said.

Ely tried to sit up, grimaced, dropped his portable ‘viewer’ and before he knew it Zoe had set the tray down and was helping to adjust the pillows and collecting the item. “Okay?” she asked.

“Better than I deserve,” Ely said, quietly.

“Were you watching the accident again?” Zoe asked.

Ely shook his head ‘no’ and brought up the viewer. He hit resume and shared the image with Zoe. In the video, he was sitting next to his daughter, playing a banjo. She was singing along, not getting all the words right, but she was obviously happy, big eyes and smiling. When the song ended, she said, “again, Daddy.” “She was beautiful,” Zoe said, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Thank you,” Ely said.

“Your wife was Asian?” Zoe asked.

“Yes,” Ely said. “Do you have...”

“No,” Zoe said, not letting him finish, and then, made her voice softer. “I wanted to, but, well, we had talked about it, and...”

“How did he?” Ely asked.

“Reavers,” Zoe said.

Zoe didn't have to say anything else. Ely imagined the worse and didn't ask for details. Zoe got up and brought the tray of food over to Ely.

“The locals really out did themselves, preparing food and all,” Zoe said, revealing what she had brought him.

“Spicy mango chicken,” Ely said. “This is very nice. Thank you.”

“Didn't want you to starve,” Zoe said, preparing to leave. She then noted the ill placed IV and imagined the awkwardness it would be for Ely to cut his food. She returned to the bed with intentions of cutting the chicken for him.

“I can do it,” Ely said.

“Let me,” Zoe said.

“No, really, I've got it,” Ely protested. “Don't make me shoot you,”

Zoe snapped. Ely surrendered the utensils.

“You always a bad patient?” Zoe asked.

“You always threaten to shoot patients?” Ely asked.

“Just the non compliant ones,” Zoe said. She had stabbed a bite of chicken with the fork and had raised it to Ely's mouth before realizing she had only intended to cut it and be gone. She covered by trying to make it look as if she had intended to feed him.

“I really am capable,” Ely said.

“Are you telling me you don't want my company?” Zoe asked.

Ely accepted the bite of chicken without further protest. His eyes watered and he sucked air. “Wow,” he managed after a moment. “Now, that's spicy mango chicken.” “Drink?” Zoe asked.

“No,” Ely said. “More chicken, please.”

Zoe proceeded to feed Ely the chicken, trying to make small talk which came out a bit forced, as if she were trying too hard, but the chicken was soon gone and so she surrendered the fork to him, knowing he could manage the rest on his own. She found she really didn't want to leave him, yet. She found an excuse to stay by buttering the bread as he ate his greens. “You always eat one thing at a time?” Zoe asked.

“Mostly,” Ely said, after swallowing. He still placed a hand in front of his mouth as he spoke to her, not wanting to be rude. “Eating the stuff I like least and saving the best for last. When I'm not doing it that way, I'm mixing everything together in one big mess.”

Zoe looked away, trying to hide her hurting. “You obviously loved him very much,” Ely said.

“I did,” Zoe said. “Some of your quirks remind me of him, but then, I'm probably just seeing you with the wrong glasses on, so, forgive me if I seem...”

“It's okay,” Ely said. “I choose solitude to handle my grief and perhaps being social would have been the better answer, because I still feel it.”

“I’m told, often of late, that time will ease it,” Zoe said. “But there were so many things I wanted still to do with him. And I wanted a child. I wanted to grow old with him. I…”

Ely touched her hand.

Zoe nearly surrendered to his kindness, would have patted his hand back if not for the IV, and then she stood up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you so long,” Zoe said. “It was a kindness,” Ely said. “You’re whole family here are good people. And maybe Kaylee is right, we find what we need and you and I needed to commiserate and help each other. Maybe there is something to that.”

“But I don’t want to get over him!” Zoe snapped.

“And you think I want to just forget about my wife and daughter?” Ely snapped back. “Does it look like I’m giving this up?” he asked, holding up the video of his daughter. “I didn’t ask for you to come in here. You chose to because you wanted to be kind and I accepted because, well, because, I wanted the kindness.” Zoe nodded. “I’m sorry I raised my voice,” Zoe said.

Ely laughed. “Me, too,” he said.

Zoe laughed. “Maybe this is good for us,” Zoe said.

“Do you think the Captain would permit me to string my hammock up on the Bridge and sleep there?” Ely asked.

“You don’t like your room?” Zoe asked. She wanted to depart and at the same time, she wanted to find a reason to get close again. “Would you like jelly on your bread?”

“Yes to the jelly,” Ely said. “And the room is fine. I just, well, I like windows. I want to see the stars. If the Doctor gets his way, I’ll be cooped up in here a week and I’ll just go stir crazy.”

“I’m sure you’ll be permitted to walk a bit in a couple of days,” Zoe said, sitting down next to him to spread the jelly. “At least to eat with us at the table.”

“Are you kidding?” Ely said. “I was expecting you to feed me for now on.” Zoe laughed.

“Don’t count on it,” Zoe said.

“I was just joking,” Ely said.

“I know,” Zoe said, feeling as if her smile was the first smile she had ever had. She had to suppress the urge to kiss Ely. She wondered where that thought came from and scolded herself and then told herself it was a ‘friendly’ kiss not a ‘romantic’ kiss, and her words to Kaylee earlier returned, ‘Maybe everyone should be using the word love more.’ For a moment she thought Book was nearby, perhaps remembering an odor, or a bit of a song.

“I really appreciate you company,” Ely said.

“It’s nothing,” Zoe said, returning the bread to the plate. Inara entered. “And I was worried you were lonely,” Inara said. Zoe stood, feeling suddenly very awkward.

“I’m being treated very well,” Ely said.

“Do you need anything else?” Zoe asked. “Dessert perhaps?”

“Oh, no, no,” Ely said. “This was more than enough.”

Simon arrived with a tray of soft foods, like jello, something much more appropriate for someone who had been shot in the gut. A look of dismay flashed over his face.

“Tell me you didn’t eat solids,” Simon said.

“Yeah, why?” Ely said, and then suddenly, he felt very sick at his stomach.

Simon managed to get a waste basket to Ely before the contents of his stomach managed to escape. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” Zoe said.

“What were you thinking?” Simon asked Zoe, as Ely paused for a moment to speak but then

returned his face to the trash bin.

“I thought he could manage, having seen him up and about earlier,” Zoe said.

Simon sighed. “Ely, your body has had a major trauma, and whether you accept it or not, you still need to take it easy. Medical science has done some marvelous things when it comes to treating wounds of this type, but you still need time to heal.”

“Are we having a crew meeting or a mutiny?” Malcom asked, entering in the room.

Ely wanted to respond, but again became sick. The worse part was that each time he heaved his gut his whole body was wracked with pain. One arm held the trash bin and his free hand held his side. His body wanted to cease the activity from the pain, but was unable to prevent the purging.

“I thought you healed him,” Malcom said.

“I did,” Simon said. “Perhaps too well cause he thinks he is a hundred percent.” “It’s my fault, Captain,” Zoe said. “I gave him hard food.”

Ely panted, trying not to be sick further, sucking air from the sheer pain of the exercise. Inara wiped his forehead with a wet cloth.

“Well, can you talk?” Malcom asked Ely.

Ely opened his mouth to say yes and threw up again.

“I am so sorry,” Zoe said.

River entered and assessed the situation. “Are you taking psychotropic medicines, too?” she asked.

Ely sucked air, panting, and then reclined back, exhausted. Inara took the trash bin away to go clean it. “We should just let him rest,” Simon said.

“I got to talk with him,” Malcom said.

“Mal,” Inara said, obviously complaining that it could wait.

“I need some directions and this is something he is good at,” Malcom said.

“I’m happy to be of service,” Ely managed to say. He even sounded exhausted.

Inara had brought the trash bin back, but he shook his head “no” and waved it off.

Malcom nodded appreciatively and handed Ely a media player with a star map.

“We had a confrontation with a bounty hunter at these coordinates,” Malcom explained. “We set his ship adrift, a little over a year ago, with this vector, and I want you to help me find it.”

“You want Early’s ship?” Inara asked.

“It should be only a couple days push from here, given the drift we left it in,” Malcom said.

“It would be like finding a needle in a haystack,” Inara protested.

“I need more information,” Ely said.

“It was a Yannan class, model 748 Tango, Kilo, Foxtrot, tri Sevo-engines, with a Sevo-fusion APU, armament upgraded to...” River began.

“Stop,” Ely said, holding up his hands. “You set a Yannan class ship adrift? Do you know how much they cost?”

“Didn’t want anything to do with it at the time,” Malcom said.

“And, to ensure Early wasn’t able to get back in his ship, I programmed the computer to do a full burn to put some distance between it and Early,” River said.

“Early?” Ely asked.

“The bounty hunter that wanted to kidnap me,” River said.

“Can you help us find it so we can put our plan into affect?” Malcom asked.

“You’re joking right?” Ely asked.

“It was your idea to put a damper on this drug distribution center,” Malcom said.

“Since when did we become crime fighters?” Zoe asked.

“Not crime fighters,” Malcom said. “Bad guys fighting bad guys doesn’t make us good guys.”

“Well, I’m going to need a lot more information,” Ely said. “How hard was the push, what was the fuel, how much did the ship weigh...”

“Twenty two hundred tons, thirty two thousand pounds of fuel, and if you want I can provide you with an accurate description of every setting on the instrument cluster,” River said.

“How can you do that?” Ely asked.

“Photographic memory,” River said.

“So, can you pin point where the ship is?” Malcom said. “Can’t she?” Ely asked, nodding to River.

“I already told him where we’d find it,” River said.

“I want confirmation before I push out that way,” Malcom said.

Ely did the math with his fingers, sub vocalizing as he went. He then checked the charts, looked for potential modifiers, such as gravitational masses, and then recalculated, and then drew a circle on the screen with his finger.

“Should be in here, with a margin of error of about ten thousand kilometers,” Ely said.

“Told you,” River said, sticking her tongue out.

“You gave me a margin of error of two thousand kilometers,” Malcom told her.

“I’m better at math than he is,” River said.

“Why aren’t you the pilot?” Ely asked.

“I get distracted,” River said.

“I don’t understand,” Ely said.

“If there is a crisis, you want her, she can focus and she can do things like no other, but short of a crisis, well, she gets distracted,” Zoe said.

“I don’t understand,” Ely said.

“Just trust them, son,” Book said.

Ely and River looked to Book who was sitting quietly on the dresser slash bench that was part of the wall and design of the room. River was now aware that Ely and she were hearing and seeing the same thing. “Like that,” Malcom said.

“Whether it’s two or ten thousand, that’s an awful big area to find such a relatively small object in space,” Inara said, bringing them back to the conversation.

Book announced: “You get me within ten thousand kilometers of the ship and I’ll direct you the rest of the way.”

“I can find it,” River and Ely both said. Ely added, “You just have to get me close.”

“What?” Simon asked. “We’re just going to go on blind faith?”

“Not blind,” Book said.

“All the time,” Malcom said.

River echoed the sentiments. She smiled at Ely as if she had a friend with a secret.

“Zoe, see if you can’t find Jayne. We’re leaving,” Malcom said.

“I’d rather not,” Zoe said.

“Does he know, she just wants his gold?” Simon asked.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Inara said.

“Umm, nothing,” Simon said. “I guess, if he’s willing to trade.” Ely moved as if he were going to get up. “Where are you going?” Simon asked.

“To pilot the ship,” Ely said.

“You, sir, are on bed rest until further notice,” Simon said.

“But I feel fine,” Ely protested.

River picked up the trash can and delivered it just in time for Ely to be sick into it.

“Yes,” Simon said. “You’re the perfect picture of health.” “I am so sorry,” Zoe said.

“Why are you sorry?” Malcom asked. “It’s not like you forced fed him.”

♪♪ ▶

It took four days to find Early’s ship, but find it they did, with a little help from Book. The Yannan class ship, a scout ship in the war, was relatively new, at least compared to Serenity. It floated lifelessly, its fuel reserves long burned out and all batteries dead.

“It’s a miracle we found it,” Simon said.

“Not really,” River said. “Book helped.”

“Are you still seeing Book?” Simon asked.

“Yes,” River said. She was not sharing that Ely saw him to. “He’s here with us

now?” Kaylee asked, looking around.

“He’s standing right next to you,” River said.

“You’re serious,” Zoe asked.

“Yes,” River said.

“This aint funny,” Jayne protested.

“Well, what does he want?” Inara asked.

“He hasn’t made any demands,” River said. “But he did confirm my suspicions that the men with blue hands want me.”

“Ghost or no ghost, we still have a job to do,” Malcom said. “Kaylee, I want you to suit up and extend a power cable from Serenity to the Morning Sun and get the batteries charged. As soon as it has power, we need to get some fuel in it. Jayne, I want you to start transferring the drugs to Early ship.”

“Did you fix the Alliance transponder?” Zoe asked Kaylee.

She nodded and handed Malcom a trigger. “You push that button and it will turn on the transponder I took out of the black box from the military cache. I hid it at the bottom of one of the crates. I’m certain no one will find it before it needs to be found.”

“Good job,” Malcom said.

“Who are we going to get to fly Early’s ship?” Jayne asked. “I aint going, especially with no ghost around.”

“The ghost is on our ship,” Zoe said.

“Yeah, well, if Book is a ghost, Early can be a ghost, too, right, and Early wasn’t such nice person so I doubt he’s going to be a nice ghost,” Jayne said.

“Ghost can’t hurt you,” Zoe said.

“Can they?” Inara asked River. River shrugged her

shoulders.

“I think Ely is up to flying the Morning Sun, wouldn’t you say, Doc?” Malcom asked.

“Yes,” Simon said, grudgingly.

“Simon and I should go with Ely,” River said.

“Why is that?” Malcom asked.

“Because you’re going to be boarded by Alliance,” River said.

“Why would they board us?” Zoe asked.

“The pretense will be that all ships having visited Ningxia Hui must be searched for illegal contraband, namely drugs,” River said. “But if they find me, they will take me.”

“They’re not searching for you anymore,” Simon said. “We were told it was over.”

“None the less, they will come for me,” River said. “Two by two, hands of blue...”

“Oh, not the poetry thing again,” Jayne complained. “Just tell us who it is so we can shoot them.”

“Just shoot anyone with blue hands,” Zoe said.

“It would be best if you didn’t let them get close enough to shoot them,” River said.

“And you’re certain we’re going to get boarded?” Malcom asked.

“Has she ever been wrong?” Inara asked.

“Point taken,” Malcom said.

“Drugs or no, if Alliance finds unmarked food supplements, there is going to be a penalty,” Zoe said.

“They’ll just confiscate it,” Inara said. “It’s only a misdemeanor.” “The medicines on the other hand, have a stiffer penalty,” Simon said.

“Aint that the truth,” Jayne complained.

“I’d rather them not be taking it,” Malcom said.

“So, do we stow it in space, or find another place to burry some loot?” Zoe asked.

“All this running around burying stuff is getting old,” Jayne said.

“Once we’re finished at Roco station, we will be coming back this direction, right?” Inara said.

“Why don’t we just store our stuff here?”

“Alright, lets do that,” Malcom said. “While Jayne and Kaylee are busy servicing the Morning Star, Zoe, you and I will unload anything that might be confiscated by Alliance. As soon as we get this over with the better.”

“So, what’s the plan at Roco station?” Zoe asked.

“We get paid, they get the drugs, we push the button and give the whole thing to Alliance,” Malcom said.

“And do we keep the Early’s ship?” Zoe asked.

“No,” Malcom said. “We want stuff from the cache found on Early’s ship so that the Alliance can have their explanation for who was helping themselves to Alliance property.”

“This plan better work,” Jayne asked. “What could go wrong?”

Malcom asked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jubal Early’s ship was rather Spartan, but it was not absent of artifacts. Early was human, after all, even if he was on the far side of the psychotic spectrum, and he collected things. What would probably surprise the average person who lumps crazy people into one simple category, ‘crazy,’ is he had a fondness for books, the esoteric, existential kind, and crystals. He had collected crystals and minerals

from every planet he had ever visited. He favored the translucent kinds, the kinds that could pass just enough light to give them a glow, and he arranged them in displays that allowed the light illuminating the cabin to filter through them. There was an occasional shiny, opaque mineral, highly reflective, in a display clutter, arranged so that if you circled it the light coming from the other crystals colored it with hues. The crystals and their placements suggested a spirituality, as if the room was a shrine or a place to meditate and be at peace. There was a sole chair near a window, where Early ate alone, or read, or thought.

Ely Felt uneasy in this room, whereas River seemed to float, her bare feet gliding along the floor, her hands lighting on crystals, lingering as if hearing the call of distant planets.

“It’s okay,” River shared comfort, without clarity on who was to receive this charity.

Simon pushed past Ely with a pack and stopped, looking at Ely. “You okay.”

“Um,” Ely said.

“He feels it, too,” River said. “The ambivalent expectation. The uncertainty. The momentum without influence. The influence of trajectories, pushing. The pull of wanting. The urgency for resolution. The need to label and redefine. The perceived separateness of each piece that defines the wholeness but is not the wholeness in and of itself, except through the unexplored depth where eyes cannot see... Ely. E. L. Y. Early. E. A. R. L. Y. These objects may resist, because they have impetus, but it’s not what you think or what they think, because ‘I’ always changes things, ‘eye’ always changes things, brings a frame of reference that alters the reality function.”

“What?” Ely asked.

“It’s okay,” River said.

“Best leave it at that,” Simon said, and went and began making his campsite.

“You can sleep in Early’s bed,” River said. “Not going to happen,”

Simon said.

River smiled. “Still afraid ghosts, just like before.”

“Before?” Ely asked.

“It was the wind,” Simon said. River seemed pleased.

“Explain the Shepherd?” Ely said.

“River said she saw a ghost, you were injured and your brain grabbed onto that like a life raft in an ocean, and that’s it,” Simon said.

“I am pretty sure she is seeing the same thing I am seeing at the same time that we are seeing it,” Ely said, then sorted what he said, and realized. “I am talking like you!” “We share trajectories. Trauma. Time alone in the wilderness,” River said.

“It’s called Folie à deux,” Simon said, making himself comfortable on the floor. “A French term for shared psychosis.”

A radio on Ely’s belt squawked and Malcom’s voice echoed: “Why haven’t you pushed yet? Is there a problem?”

River took the radio from his belt. “Sorry, I am having one of my moments.” “Well, um, okay, is it over?” Malcom asked.

“I am going to go pilot now,” Ely said, heading up to the flight deck. “He’s going to go pilot now,” River said. “I don’t want to give up the ship, though. I like it here.”

“It’s creepy,” Simon said.

“Change your filters,” River said.

“What?” Simon said.

Ely paused, wanting to hear the explanation.

“If you discover television, and you turn it on and perceive a horror movie, you don’t label the television as evil and throw it out,” River said. “You change the channel. There is informative programming, educational, comedies, romance, but mostly, there is the universe, the static, the neutral, the uninfluenced, and it is we who offer it spin.” Ely withdrew up to the flight deck. Once seated behind the controls, the subtle dread he was experiencing elsewhere in the ship left, perhaps due to the familiarity of the instrument cluster, the soft glow of readouts, and the heavens that panned out around the canopy, and the knowledge that the heavens enshrined the ship. This ship was arsenal. It was a gun. A gun is just a gun, until defined by the man holding the gun. All the stars, the readouts and lights on the consoles, suddenly made him realize that the arrangement of crystals below was a way of making the stars tangible. Early was walking amongst stars, like a ghost, above and separate, touching them and worshipping them. Ely activated the radio and announced they were going.

“Ely, River,” Malcom said. “If there is any evidence that our plan ain’t working out, you push that button and draw in the big boys.”

“It’s a good plan,” Ely said. “Why wouldn’t it work out?”

♪♪ ▶

The flight deck on Early’s ship was not as spacious as the Firefly’s flight deck, and River’s presence on deck, standing next to Ely, looking out the window, emphasized that point. She wasn’t hurting anything, but if he rotated his chair or tried to get up on that side, or needed to flip a switch on that side, he would be touching her. It wasn’t a concern, but it was a thought in his head. He wondered if his thoughts in his head were like objects in space, just something else to navigate.

“Yes,” River said.

“What?” Ely said.

River smiled at Ely’s reflection in the glass, and then her eyes shifted further out.

“Early is going to want his ship back.”

“I thought you guys left him stranded in space?” Ely said.

“Malcom did,” River said.

“Interesting,” Ely said. “Malcom did. Not we did.”

River looked at him. “I would have shot him.”

“Oh,” Ely said. “Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

“You can’t,” River said. “We are one.”

“What?” Ely said.

“They didn’t find you like they found me which is okay because you had your own trajectory and it works out the same, just different math,” River said.

“Ambiguous much?”

Simon entered. “Are you flirting with my sister?” “Yes,” River said.

“No I am not,” Ely said.

“After I saved your life?!” Simon asked.

“He’s a terrible flirt,” River said.

“No I am not. Wait! I am not a terrible flirt, I flirt just fine, but I am not flirting,” Ely said.

“He is pretty easy,” Simon said.

“That’s why I like him,” River said.

“What? You were feigning sleep so you can have some fun with me?” Ely asked. “No,” Simon said. “I really can’t sleep, but I’ve been with some jokers for a moment and they kind of rubbed off on me. This was impromptu joking.” “You’re getting better at it,” River said. “So, what were you talking about?” Simon asked. “Early,” River said.

“I told you that was a nightmare. There’s no way he’s still alive,” Simon said. River became very grave. “The thing about people, average people, in general, they assume bad guys are just stupid, mindless, predictable automatons, that are obstacles that occupy space, but many of them have a mind about things, and preferences, and they learn and they keep coming at you from different directions, sometimes toying with you to determine your abilities so that they can accomplish their goals obliquely through you, while at the same time, there are even smarter bad guys, that put things into play because they’re also testing and searching, and, well, Early is not stupid. The people running him, neither are they.”

“He was a moron,” Simon said. “A sick moron.”

“No, he isn’t,” River said. “He was sick, but he is a genius.”

“River, he thought you were the ship,” Simon said. “He seriously believed you were the ship. That’s not just crazy, that’s moronic.”

“Or, he had evidence that had increased the plausibility that I speaking truth,” River said.

“I am so confused,” Ely said. “Why would he think you were the ship?” “Because I am,” River said.

♪♪▶

“Well... Here I am,” Early said.

Nothing happened. Nothing happened for a long moment. If it weren’t for the chronometer heads up display in the suit’s visor, he might not have been able to track a moment. There were lots of moments to track, and different ways of tracking. Contrary to popular belief, time doesn’t flow at the same rate at all points in space. People get out of sync with others, especially the further away from galactic center. The most accurate clock on the outer edge of the galaxy will tick faster than the one near the center, regardless of proximity to a black hole. Black holes seriously mess with time. They mess with space, too, pulling it like taffy in large gooey chunks that when you see it with your own eyes, it messes with your head in such a way as that it could make you crazy, or cause you to invent your own esoteric, metaphysical beliefs so you can cope with the absurdity of it, and since Early already had a good sense about him, he was immune to watching the churning of space time. In fact, he found it interesting. He wanted to churn souls the way black holes churned the soup of existence. He tracked multiple end scenarios. In one he vented his air. He was way too vain to be killing himself. In one fantasy, he called his ship back to him. He liked that ending the most, and he could have, because being separated from your ship without a tether was a potential threat, and so it’s nice when you can whistle and your ship come to you like a dog. And he liked dogs. Especially mechanical dogs. His ship was like dog. He whistled. It came alive and disappeared before his eyes.

“Cão wǒ,” Early said. He wasn’t disappointed. He was actually happy. His situation meant Malcom had actually put some thought into fucking with him, when the average man would have just shot him point blank and been done. He returned to his dream of how his ship had collected him and he went and finished his mission. In his version, he was successful. His fantasy was much more elaborate than what reality might have been. He raped Kaylee just because it brought pleasure to make her friends watch. He also raped Wash for the same reason, because, why not? People get so out of sorts when it comes to sex, and it seemed the only one who had any sense about the matter was

River, who simply said, “It doesn’t mean what you think it means...”

Early didn’t know how to hurt River. He so wanted to get into River, which was not a sexual thing, but it had overtones, and he had to wonder if this was what ‘love’ felt like. He wanted to own River, not just her body but the light leaking out of her body. Space dark is not the same as shadow dark. Being in a shadow, or a cave, or in a place where there is no light, that’s something tangibly different than floating in space. The ship that dropped into being right over top of him was not there then there in a manner enough that it might have startled anyone else. He blinked. There was starlight, then there was darkness. A turning darkness, and then a point of light that stretched into a line and then a space as a door opened and a grappling hook shot out to retrieve him. Of course, it was a ship. For a moment he went with a fantasy that the space-time continuum had allowed a door to open so he could simply depart from this reality into another. He had read enough philosophy to know there were stories about doorways to other realms, tunnels with lights at the end of them, and these were places he was interested in, wanted to find them for himself, and sometimes when he was cutting on a man, he would find that they would go to places, as if he had cut them free from their bodies and he would try to get information about these places. There were some artifacts that seemed consistent across the board. He was hired by this one man once who called it ‘your true self,’ but Early knew it was more than just a true self, because self also needed a space, a context, and the ability to navigate that, whether that be feet and hands or words.

Once he was in the new space, and the door was closed, and he was responding to the artificial gravity, and his feet were on the floor, and he was struggling to see because he was ‘center stage’ of blinding lights, he heard the voice. “Take off your suit, Early.” It was a female voice.

“I’d rather leave it on,” Early said. He wanted to spin more humor and had wished they had said, ‘you’re Early,’ so he could say, “I am,” because jokes about arriving early just amused him, especially if he could confuse folks in the process and tease out whether they were listening and understanding on deeper, hidden things.

There was silence. There was no negotiating. There was no coercion. There was only silence and patience. No threats. No jokes.

“Well, here I am,” Early said out loud. “Deal with me.”

Silence. There was a long moment of more fantasies of how he would kill the crew of this ship and take it and maybe threaten to rape the female who had told him to remove his suit and make her undress just to make the threat seem more real. Interestingly, he believed his suit chronometer had changed, meaning moments were flowing at a new rate, but he wasn’t sure if that his superhuman ability to detect changes in the flow of moments, or evidence he was losing his mind. Being suspended in space for as long as he was had brought with it a deep meditative state, and he was feeling rather euphoric. The indicator on his suit that said the carbon dioxide scrubber had scrubbed it’s last bit of carbon from his suit’s air supply, and the O₂ was out, meant he was now going to have to remove his helmet or lose consciousness, and might also explain his euphoria. He wondered if the people choked out felt this way. He removed his helmet and allowed it to clatter to the floor. The air was nice.

“Remove your suit, Early,” came the voice again.

“I don’t think so,” Early said.

There was the sound of rapid decompression. Most people go unconscious right away with a drastic change in pressure, but Early managed to maintain his footing longer than most, having trained for these kinds of moments. Shooting at people in a spaceship could result in accidental venting of atmosphere. Sometimes it was even a preferable tactic to knock out an enemy group, so instead of shooting an

opponent directly, you shoot the window behind the opponent, and people drop. Most people drop quickly. Alliance military, they lasted longer than most. Early was on par with them, but he was not a god, and he did succumb, going to his knees, then his hands, and he remembered the floor coming up to his eyes before the darkness took him. This was another kind of darkness. A darkness he did not like, but the thing called Early, disappeared and so did he, and his sense of liking and not liking, for a moment.

That moment was impossible to track. He woke up in new clothes, in a chair, hands shackled to the armrests, and feet shackled to the chair. He couldn't see into the room because the amount of lights aimed at him.

"This is rather cliché, don't you think?" Early asked. There was silence and a moment and Early broke the silence first, because the moment had outlasted even him.

"Seriously, I am very appreciative for the help, and you clearly know me, which gives you an advantage in this negotiation..."

There was a moment. There was no argument. Early expected an argument. 'This is not a negotiation.' 'Yes, it is. You will have killed me outright, otherwise.' But nothing was going the way he was wanting it to go. A moment of anger rolled through him where he just wanted to gut the entire Firefly crew for annoying him. A moment of calm returned and he wanted to rage against his present enemy, but he was having a difficult time conjuring up ways to torture them when he wasn't sure who they were. The moment went on so long he found himself nodding off to sleep.

"You were paid in advance to do a job in a certain time and you have failed to deliver," came a new voice. It was also feminine. Rather sultry and interesting and it pulled him from the brink of sleep.

"Mother?" Early asked.

Another moment went and again he went to nod off, from sheer boredom, and he was actually exhausted due to the circumstances and insults to him, and this moment was shorter than the last moment.

"We are undecided on whether we should kill you outright, or allow you an additional opportunity to accomplish the mission you were paid to fulfil," came the first voice.

"So, we are negotiating," Early said, a smug look on his face.

Hands came out of the darkness. Blue hands. Blue, feminine hands. One of the hands held a tool Early was not familiar with, and though it was triggered for only a moment, it impressed him a great deal. Sound. Harmonics. You could create objects with sounds. Life was said to have started with a sound, and could definitely end with a sound, usually a gasp, sometimes a rattle. You could move objects with sound. You could destroy objects with sound. Like wine glasses shattering to an opera singer, the device clearly could have ruptured blood vessels, hell, maybe even ruptured the cells themselves, or shattered the DNA lattice embedded in the cells, allowing a death moment to linger before ultimate succumbing, but whatever it was doing, it hurt like nothing he had ever experienced before. The thing that interested him more than the device was the fact the person welding the device was not apparently harmed or even disturbed. After he got his air back, Early smiled, and nodded, "Nice," he said. "You're not the same guys that paid me."

"We are not," said voice 2, coming close enough he could see her silhouette.

"But you come in pairs, which probably creeps a lot of people out," Early said.

"Were you both homeschooled?"

"Interesting," voice 1 said. "Why do you ask?" "Maybe it's just the lights, but you move in an awkward sort of way," Early said. "So did your friends. They moved weird, spooky weird, which was

nice, could be an act to scare the people you encounter. You could be autistic. I spent some time with autistic kids, and they have a strangeness about them that mirrors people who were homeschooled, and you both have that quality in droves. Which, interestingly, arouses me, and I am not usually a sexual person, just for the sake of sex, but seriously, you two are turning me on, got me rambling, and though I am usually philosophical in my ramblings, I am not usually a flibbertigibbet, and that just makes me think there is something here to explore... I am curious about something else. Would you answer a serious question?"

"Ask," voice 2 said.

"My question require a preface. After I accepted this job, I was doing some research, tracking my prey, trying to predict behaviors... Well, just being a good bounty hunter and all, you know, and I found some disturbing evidence that where ever River went, people died. Enough people died that I seriously debated returning your money, because I figured you might just kill me, too. Now, this is what sticks with me, more precisely, people died in a peculiar way, like they were liquefied from the inside out, and now that I have experienced your nice little gadget there, I am thinking you're killing all the people that encountered River, but that is just odd, because what's the purpose in doing that? Oh, that's my question. Why are you killing people who encountered River? Wait! River has met a lot people, so it's not just people she has met, but specific people she has met. You've been tracking her just as I and... Oh. So, why are you killing the people you interview?"

"River has a way of knowing things," voice 2 said.

"Yeah, she does," Early agreed. "Almost makes you want to believe in psychics.

So, if you are going to be consistent with your protocols, you have to kill me." "River has not encountered us," voice 1 said. "We're curious as to what will happen if we supply you another ship and an opportunity to complete your mission." "How did you find me?" Early asked.

"We have a way of knowing things," voice 2 said.

"OMG, do you realize how sexy your voice is? I haven't seen your face, and you could be quite hideous, so I have learned not to just assume a female is sexy because all female voices are sexy, but not all faces are something to look at... Gāisī de what have you done to my brain?! Did you drug me?"

"The thing about gods, they always fall in love with their creations," voice 1 said. "We didn't create River, they did. They created her to find us. We don't want to be found. You're not privy to the depths of this war and we don't want to educate you. Your vessel couldn't contain all the information and remain functioning. And so, let us be very clear. We're going to let you go. Conditionally. You promise to bring us River." "I will bring you River," Early said. He wanted to ask an impossible question.

"Are you..."

And the moment was over. He woke up on a scout ship that was not his, but very similar. It could have been stamped out perfectly like a 3-d printer and it came with all his possessions, or at least facsimiles of them, because he knew this wasn't his ship, even though it was clearly his ship. He was so disturbed by the idea that it was his ship and not his ship that he almost wanted to blow it up and go buy another ship. And then he laughed. He laid down on the floor and laughed and laughed as if he had just had the most humorous epiphany in the entire universe, of his entire life, and it didn't matter that the joke was on him, because that was funny, too. This spell lasted a moment. Even after the moment had long past, he could revisit that moment as if it were just now, and not a moment ago. Moment upon moment, layer upon layer, fantasies within fantasies, he waited within a moment, a trap within a trap, ever curious about the random feel to reality when clearly there was a synchronicity that defied

rationality.

Chapter fourteen

“What do you think of Ely?” Malcom asked.

“What do you want to know?” Zoe asked.

Malcom shrugged. He was fairly relaxed in the pilot’s chair. Zoe was leaning against the wall, staring silently out into space, something she had been doing for a spell, as if she were searching for something.

“Well, I like him. I don’t usually take to folks, and so, I just thought I’d ask you your opinion,” Malcom said.

“He is very likeable,” Zoe agreed.

“Yeah,” Malcom agreed. “And that bothers me. There is usually something wrong with people who are likeable.”

“Kaylee is likeable,” Zoe pointed out.

Malcom nodded. “Kaylee’s Kaylee,” he said. “Ely isn’t Kaylee.”

“He is not,” Zoe agreed. “I get the sense he is just a traveler. He’s seen some hard times, but he has coped and is trying to respond with kindness.”

“Yeah, but that’s usually not the way folks turn,” Malcom said.

“Nope. Most folks become bitter and want to seek revenge,” Zoe said. “Yep,” Malcom said. “The thought has crossed my mind to do some vengeance.” “No pay in that,” Zoe said.

“Yeah. Unless someone pays you for that,” Malcom said. “But mostly, no pay in that.”

“You have someone particular in mind?” Zoe asked.

“Lots of particular someone’s in mind, but mostly, I would just rather not, as there should be enough space to be separate from the disagreeable folks, but I still find myself thinking about killing someone particular,” Malcom said.

“I think that is only natural,” Zoe said.

“You have someone particular in mind?” Malcom asked.

“At the moment, you for prying,” Zoe said.

“Ahh,” Malcom said, nodding. “Thanks for demonstrating restraint.”

“It’s natural to pry,” Zoe said after a moment. “I know you care. And I know you would make it better if you could but you can’t.”

“I can’t,” Malcom said.

An automated alert from Roco station identified their transponder and a flight path in was allotted. Malcom had already sent a cryptic message saying they had been instructed to bring some merchandise, and Roco had changed their tune about shooting them out of the sky and were being much more hospitable. He told his ship’s computer to accept the flight plan, and it adjusted accordingly. He was happy they hadn’t been boarded by Alliance and that they could arrive without complication with reduced risks.

“You know,” Malcom said. “This is the longest we’ve gone talking about something without talking about something.” “I am feeling better,” Zoe said.

“Might speed things up if we killed some folks,” Malcom said.

“I’d rather not,” Zoe said.

“Yeah?” Malcom asked.

“I aiming for a new path, Mal. I have decided I don’t want to be closed off, or bitter, or lonely, and I am pretty sure Wash would agree with this plan, and so, I am going to actively choose to pursue love.”

“Oh, you want to be an ambassador?” Malcom asked.

Zoe laughed. “Fuck you.”

“Exactly,” Malcom asked. “Can I afford you?” “You have gotten off cheap so far,” Zoe said.

“Am I hearing this right?”

Zoe and Malcom turned to see Inara standing in the doorway.

“It’s just fun talk,” Malcom said.

“No, you really owe me,” Zoe said.

“That’s the God honest truth,” Malcom said. “And you’re debt is hereby forgiven,” Zoe said. Malcom almost teared up.

“God, have we ever changed,” Inara said.

“We’re family,” Zoe said.

Jayne entered. “They’re not shooting at us,” he said. The mood of the room clearly changed. “What? Did I do something?”

“No, Jayne,” Zoe said. “We were just talking about how we’re all family.” “We are? No we’re not. I expect to be paid,” Jayne said.

“You got some gold didn’t you?” Malcom asked.

“Oh, that’s just a bonus, for retirement, I still expect to get paid,” Jayne said.

“Room and board, sounds like pay to me,” Malcom said.

Zoe pointed to one of the ‘bridges’ that extended away from the station. A ship was connected to it. “Looks like the beat us.” “I expected them to,” Malcom said.

“How did they get a pass?” Jayne asked.

“I am sure Early has a reputation and they were passed on that,” Malcom said.

“That make sense,” Jayne said.

Firefly slowed, turned, and a bridge came out to mate with their main hatch. The connection was audible through the ship.

“Alright, let’s go do this. Inara, stay on the bridge and keep us ready for a quick departure,” Malcom said.

“I am confused. Are you guys being friendly again?” Jayne asked.

“Come on, Jayne,” Zoe said, leading the way.

“No, really, I’d like some consistency around her,” Jayne said, following her.

Malcom and Inara touched hands in passing, and then went in different directions. She took the helm and he followed his crew.

♪♪ ▶

Roco station was not just an outlier, but a drop point to supply the push further from the core. Every world came with its own problematic variables, and so some worlds needed supplements, and some needed metal, and some needed tech, and some needed people. Even with terraforming, it could take over a thousand years before a world could sustain a colony without needing supplies, but once that world made that turn, they could in turn become suppliers. Roco was a midpoint between a dozen colonies, and several supplier worlds, and it was outside the gravity well of a system because it was easier to contain things. So there was the station itself, and then there was storage containers that drifted

near the station. The containers had transponders and beacons and were laid out in a grid, in layers, and drones collected them and shifted them, and there were sentry drones and armed ships that deterred pirates from flying up and stealing containers, not to mention several Alliance ships

Zoe remained hidden, as Malcom and Jayne proceeded down the ramp to the open space that led to the narrow of the Bridge. They were met by seven people. One stood forward, while the others were spaced out as if they expected trouble. Malcom raised his hands in a friendly 'I surrender' way, as to suggest he wasn't a threat.

"Thought there were three of you," said the man. "Where's the Doctor?" "He went and got himself shot and killed," Jayne said.

"He was trying to protect his sister," Malcom said.

"That's unfortunate," the man said. "I would like to see his body." "The rabbits kept him," Malcom said.

"Said they were going to eat him," Jayne said. "Can you believe that?!"

"Tāmāde tūzǐ," the man said. "Very well, drop your weapons and walk towards the bridge."

"Now, we're just dropping this load and going on our merry way," Malcom said.

"We could just shoot you where you stand," the man said.

"You could," Malcom agreed. "We're clearly outnumbered here, and at this range, unless you just suck at shooting folks, you're probably going to kill us. But I promise you this, if it comes to shooting folks, I will kill you before I am dead, so let's try and be civil."

The door leading from the bridge opened and the man turned, not expecting that, and as he was drawing his weapon, Malcom and Jayne were also drawing, and there were shots fired in the craziness, even Zoe came out of hiding to fire her rifle. Early shot and hit a window, cracking it, not slowing his stride, and there was just enough loss of air to diminish the sound of gunfire, even as everyone was falling unconscious to the deck, where as he went straight to the hole and put putty over it to stop further loss of air. It was clear there were alarms sounding along with the blinking emergency lights, and the sound increased as the life support replenished the air supply. Early went straight way to Malcom, bound his hands behind his back, injected him with something that woke him enough to get him on his feet, and then they were moving back towards the door and the bridge to the station proper. At the top of the bridge, there were dead people, probably the people that had been waiting for Malcom and Jayne. More people were coming, and Early shot two of them before the remainder of the group fell back, and he dragged Malcom the other way, where another group was coming, and he shot some of them, and then dragged Malcom into a room and sealed them in, putting an electronic device on the door which overrode the mechanism and locked it good.

Early shoved Malcom towards the wall.

"I thought I killed you," Malcom said, recovering enough of his wits to be surprised.

"If only you had, maybe we wouldn't be back in this dance," Early said, pulling what looked like tape from his bag.

"Yeah, well, untie my hands and I'll finish what I started," Malcom said.

"Seriously, in what universe would that be right?" Early said.

Early taped off a section on the floor, put an electronic device on it, and then withdrew a nice distance away. The tape flared, like magnesium in water, and when it was done, there was no more tape. Early went and kicked at the floor and the floor fell through. He took Malcom and shoved him towards the hole. Malcom fell to the next level, and Early was right behind him. He had planned this pretty good and hadn't expected anyone to be in the room, but there was an operative there, and no

sooner than Early had landed on his feet, he was having a sword thrust at him, and if he wasn't wearing a suit, his arm might have been severed off when he used that to deflect, and roll into the opponent so he was now grappling. There were even some words exchanged, which sounded like familiar banter, with Early saying 'long time no see, brother.' 'your blocks have improved, but your tactics are predictable.' Each of them got in some knees and some jabs, but no disparaging labels were exchanged, but it was difficult thing to follow, and when it was over, Early was out cold, and the operative was lifting Malcom by the arm and shoving him towards the door. "I told you, if I ever saw you again, I would kill you," Malcom said.

"And I promised you, you would never see me again," the operative said. "Sorry I broke my promise. Feel free to break yours."

"Sorry, but I like to keep my word," Malcom said.

"Well, do it later, then," the operative said. "This way."

"Wait," Malcom said, and the operative waited. "Do you got a firearm?" "You know how hard it is to get a firearm onto Roco?" the operative asked. "Well, if you can't kill Early because he's family, let me use your sword," Malcom said. "He's not family," the operative said, and pushed Malcom out the door, leading him easily. "How come my feet aren't going the way I want them to?" Malcom asked.

"Early doped you," the operative said. "Compliance drug. You should be back to resisting in a few minutes."

"My mind's resisting," Malcom said.

"That's a good sign," the operative said.

The operative took him down a bridge to an awaiting ship and shoved Malcom directly into the hands of Niska, who greeted Malcom with great affection, like a long lost friend, and Malcom cursed, even as Niska was thanking 'Early.' And then there was some confusion as the operative killed one of Niska's men, taking his weapon, and shooting the other men, and then suddenly Niska was out cold. The operative left Malcom and Niska laying on the floor together, proceeded into the Niska ship where after a moment there was the sound weapon's fire. A moment later, one last shot. A moment later the operative emerged from the ship dragged Niska onto the ship, tied his hands and feet, then he came down and brought Malcom on board, setting him in a chair. The operative closed the airlock to the bridge, then the ship, tied Malcom to the chair, just to be sure, then disappeared into the ship. A moment later there was clear indication that the ship was being powered away.

After a spell, the operative returned, offered Malcom something to drink, and then sat next to him.

"I appreciate the rescue and all, but I would be more grateful if you would untie me," Malcom said.

"Sorry, Mal. I can't let you kill Niska, and I don't want you to kill me, yet, either," the operative said.

"You sound like that's a sure thing," Malcom said.

"I want you to keep your promise," the operative said. "That, and since I can't kill you, should it come to that, I will have to forfeit."

"Well, that ain't right, but if you want to go ahead and throw yourself on your sword, I won't stop you," Malcom said. "Seriously, I am tied up, I won't stop you."

The operative seemed amused. He sighed. Niska started coming around and to keep him quiet, he got up and put some tape on his mouth, and then put an electronic device on the tape and informed Niska he needed to behave or his face would be blown off his neck. He returned to his chair next to

Mal.

“Technically, Mal, you have already killed me,” the operative said. “In the old days, I knew who I was. I knew who the enemy was. Then you showed me something. In my process of trying to figure out who the enemy is, I discovered more things.

Convoluting things. Things that don't make any sense. And just when I think I have gone as far as I can, that I am about to discover truth, and the source, I simply discover that I arrived at another level of intrigue. I am tired, Mal. If you kill me, well, you'd be doing me a favor.”

“Untie me,” Mal said.

“Not yet,” the operative said. “Do you believe in aliens?”

Mal laughed. “You're not one of those are you? Seriously. Humans have pushed out through what, half the galaxy, and there has never been even the remotest evidence of aliens. We haven't even found an alien bacteria.”

“That alone should bother you. Doesn't that bother you?” the operative asked.

“No. And, don't think that by drawing me into some hypothetical, existential debate, you're going to soften my inclinations towards you,” Malcom said.

“Not trying to change you, Mal,” the operative said. “But considers dogs.” “I like dogs. Especially roasted over a fire with a spicy mango sauce,” Mal said.

“You know how many breeds of dogs there are?” the operative asked. “I guess you're going to tell me,” Malcom said.

“One thousand, nine hundred and forty,” the operative informed.

“Interesting,” Malcom said.

“Yeah, especially when you read that when we left origin, there was only three hundred forty, and if you believe the myths, or the history of it, all dogs came from one source, a wolf,” the operative said.

“Is this going somewhere, because I am startin to think I'd rather you just shoot me,” Malcom said.

“I am not going to shoot you, Mal. I love you,” the operative said.

“I definitely would prefer you shoot me,” Malcom said.

“Mal, you freed me, I am in your debt,” the operative said.

“Let me go,” Malcom said.

“I am also in someone else's debt,” the operative said. “Dogs. Breeds. Races. We don't use 'breeds' to describe all the varieties of humans, we call them races, but do you know how many races there are?”

“Just one, the human race,” Malcom said.

“I like that, philosophically. I even agree. When we left origin, there was about four major races, with minor variations, and due to the acceptance of our philosophical acceptance of their just being one race, there was a blending of races, and so as a species goes, we're fairly complex,” the operative said. “Mal, planets change people. Different planets, different environments, different genes are activated or inactivated, and so there are planets with greater atmospheric pressure, or lesser, or greater gravity, or lesser, and if you are born on a planet, you adapt, and your offspring adapts, and some colonies on smaller planets or moons, after one generation, they can't leave those planets to go live on normal core planets, and so, they aren't even going become tourists without some serious medical intervention, but they could spread to other worlds like theirs...”

“They're still human, and most those with lesser gravity build artificial gravity into their homes

so that they can maintain their health,” Malcom said. “You would think, but lots of folks like living off the grid,” the operator said.

“You’re a Browncoat, Mal. You like being off the grid, but it comes with a price. Humanity left origin in every direction they could fly. When we encounter aliens, Mal, it won’t be aliens, it will be us.”

“That’s interesting,” Malcom said.

The operative leaned in. “The Reavers are just one example of what humanity can become. There are going to be others, Mal, others who have been so separated from the core humanity that they won’t be recognizable as humans, physically, culturally, and there is rumors that we are in a war with another race of humans right now, a competition with others that aren’t others, and that just the biological side of this war.”

“You have serious lost it,” Malcom said. “I mean, I thought you were crazy before, but now that I know you are Early’s brother, because that explains that crazy, which begs the question can someone who is psychotic have have a deeper psychotic break that makes them crazier than they crazy they were?”

“Mal, there are aliens out there, creatures that are not us but are us, and, there are Artificial Intelligence, sentient machines, some of them are even moving around amongst us,” the operative said. “You think the Alliance is running things, but they are just one layer. There are several cabals, families that have been running things since before we left origin, and they have lost control of their own bodies, and they are warring between their own faction, and the war between the Alliance and the Independents, that was just a distraction from a greater reality and conflict that is going on.”

“I’ll try and make your death painless,” Malcom said.

The operative eased back into his chair. “I don’t expect you to believe me, Mal. Hell, I didn’t believe you prior to... No, I didn’t want to believe. I didn’t want know. Kind of a role reversal here. Irony. I have seen something that I can’t unsee. River has seen something she can’t unsee. They will come for her.”

“You promised me you were done with her,” Malcom said.

“I am. The Alliance is. But that’s just what I am trying to explain to you. There are more players and factions in this, and she has been exposed to another layer. A layer you and I aren’t privy to, and we’re not even invited to play, but we will be used, that’s a fact,” the operative said. He stood up. “Excuse me. I got to go land the ship. This will be over for you soon enough. Thank you for listening to me, Mal.”

“Well, no need to thank me, you got me kind of tied up, here,” Malcom said.

“I do love you, Mal,” the operative said.

“I am really opposed to hearing that while you got me tied up,” Malcom said.

“I promise, if I can keep you alive, I will,” the operative said.

He returned to the flight deck to pilot the ship.

Chapter fifteen

At the designated point, Ely sent the transponder code and request to enter Roco space.

There was confusion. "Please identify yourself."

Using text, Ely responded 'Jubal Early,' and pushed the ship ident again. "You're not welcome in this space, and you will be fired upon unless you identify," came Roco's return.

"That's odd," Ely said. "I really thought this would work." "Go in anyway," River said.

"There will be local fighters, and Alliance ships," Ely said.

"Yep," River said. "You're an ace pilot, and Early's ship is combat ready." "Talk about synchronicity," Simon said.

"I am going to suit up. I am going to want you to come up close enough to the station that I can get on Roco," River said.

"With just a suit?!" Simon said. "That's impossible." "Early has gear, it's not impossible," River said.

"I will get you close," Ely said.

"No," Simon said. "Serenity's crew is capable. This is just one of those times we failed to help."

"Don't be afraid," River said. "I got this. I got you."

"I don't like you in harm's way and I don't like being in situation where we have to kill folks and I don't like not being able to be helpful, just waiting to patch up loose ends," Simon snapped.

"I know. But that's what you do best," River said. "Now, let me go make some loose ends or you'll be out of a job."

♪♪ ▶

The door to the maintenance bay snapped shut the moment the air pressure outside dropped, and emergency life support system kicked in, increasing the O2 and pressure to compensate for the sudden drop. Kaylee's ears popped. She rushed to the com and found Inara on the bridge.

"I'm alright. The door shut, though," Inara said.

"I show outside pressure is sufficient, you can override. Meet you up at the airlock?" Kaylee said.

Kaylee emerged first, and Inara heard her cry of concern. She rushed to Zoe, turned her over. Inara hit her with the equivalent of an epi-pen, and Zoe aroused. As Zoe was coming around, Inara hit Jane with one.

"Where's Mal?" Inara asked.

Jayne got up as if waking from a bad dream.

"Easy!" Inara said.

Jayne took inventory of himself, stood. "I am okay. I am okay."

Inara went back to Zoe, who was being helped to her feet by Kaylee. They all startled to sound of a weapon being discharged. They turned to see Jayne walking to the next 'bad guy' where he discharged his weapon again. "Jayne!" Zoe said. "They're unconscious."

"They were shooting at us," Jayne said. "They might wake up and continue shooting at us."

"Tie them up," Zoe said.

"Bullets are more certain," Jayne said.

"Tie them!" Zoe said. "Let's get these crates off our ship. Come on." "What about Mal?"

Inara said.

“First things first, these crates off, then activate the transponder, because things are going south,” Zoe said.

♪♪ ▶

Command center for Roco went to full alert when the pressure dropped on one of their bridges. One of the Alliance ships recognized their alert status changing, and steered closer to Roco. The other Alliance cruiser went up in alert and a squadron of pilots were launched, standard procedure, in case whatever was going on on Roco was a distraction so that pirates could steal crates. Sure enough, even as the fighters were being launched, an unidentified craft entered the area.

“Commander, a ship identifying as belonging to Jubal Early as entered our space,” a tech said.

“I am confused. I thought Early was already attached to Roco,” the midshipman said.

“Transponder is identifying as Early,” the tech said.

“Hail that pilot, have him heave to,” the midshipman said, turning to page the Captain of the peculiarity.

The tech tried but was unsuccessful at raising the craft. The midshipman requested that some of the fighters be directed to investigate and intimidate the new ship into compliance.

♪♪ ▶

“I am in the airlock,” River said.

“River,” Ely said. “I am going to drop you at an entry point. I need you trust me on your momentum and vector, and you go when I tell you, because I am going to be turning on a coin toss, and will provide you cover till you’re in...”

“Understood,” River said.

Up on the deck, Simon was holding onto the armrest. “That doesn’t sound good,” he said.

“Flying in space ain’t like flying in atmo,” Ely said. “I can’t just bank and veer off into a new direction.

He was flying directly at the station as if he were going to collide. Roco station swiveled weapons to shoot, but nothing fired. Several fighters had diverted to intercept them. At a certain point, Simon seemed worried, even held on, and then Ely spun the ship and powered hard in the opposite direction. In the hold, the antigravity off, River landed against the door. When she heard ‘now’ she popped the door open and continued towards the station, carrying the momentum she had before leaving the ship. The ship seemed to be falling away from her, but in truth it was merely slowing while she was continuing forwards. With the precision of arrow shot from a bow, she hit the airlock of a retracted bridge as square as if Ely had meant to hit it. Using an electronic assist, she entered the first of three doors before she was in the receiving end of the bridge. Three consecutive inner doors, closer together due to the bridge being contracted, led her into the contracted bridge itself, and then three more doors led to a corridor. She was removing her helmet even as she came out into the corridor and the first approaching guard was hit in the head by the helmet that she tossed. He went out cold, and she caught the helmet when it bounced back, and the next guy had fired, but hit the helmet, capable of taking a bullet, or a meteor, but by then, she had been grappling range, and had broken his arm, and used his own hand to fire the weapon at the third guard, and her feet were coming in the air to kick the fourth guard, and she might have hurt the fifth guard, but he had turned to run away. The man whose arm was broken went to his knees, whimpering.

“Are we done?” River asked.

“Yes, Mam,” he said.

“Sorry about your arm,” River said, taking his weapon. She also took a weapon from the first guy she shot.

She orientated, and what seemed like a random decision, turned and proceeded down the corridor, turning right. As she came around the corner, Early was coming out a room. He cursed in Cantonese, but then said, ‘this is right.’ The blood splatter from the headshot painted the door that had closed behind him. As his body hit the door, it reopened, revealing the room behind him and the hole in the ceiling, then closed, streaking the splatter into lines. She walked over Early, opened the door, jumped up, grabbed the upper deck, and swung herself up. She was just on her feet when the whole room shook, and she knew for a fact, the station had been impacted by something. She heard the unmistakable sound of people trying to over-power a door that was blocked by tech. She quickly got out of her suit, to reveal she was wearing little underneath it. She took some line from her suit, pushed it to the floor below, and used the line to make it look like her legs were tied, and her wrists were tied, and then went to remove the override lock, which allowed the door to immediately snap open. The men confronted with the sight of half-naked female, tied, and crying.

“OMG, they cut a hole through the floor and they were going rape me...”

“There on level 7,” someone said, redirecting his men, and then began untying River. “It’s okay, mam. I got you. I got her, go...” He was alone with River, flirting a little, and suddenly found himself tied up, and then she continued on her way for Serenity. She was blocked by the guards from entering the bridge.

“Sorry, mam, but we’re investigating...”

Probably because she was half naked, they allowed her to approach closer than they might have otherwise, and consequently, they were fairly quickly dispatched, with a few punches, an elbow, and a foot. There were two guards on the bridge itself, and you would have thought they had never seen a naked girl before, because they lowered their weapons, and might have flirted if she hadn’t knocked them out. She wandered out into the bridge proper, where Zoe, Inara, Kaylee, and Jayne had their hands up and were being briefly interrogated, and when guards that were investigating turned to see a naked girl approaching, they gave Zoe time to steal a firearm and put it up to the chief guard’s temple.

“Have your men drop their weapons,” Zoe said. “And close their eyes. Jayne, give her your jacket.”

“I’m not parting with my jacket,” Jayne said.

“Jayne!” Zoe snapped.

“She’s a gown ass adult. If she wants to walk around half naked, then she ought to be allowed...” Jayne stopped protesting when Inara pointed a weapon at him. “Happy to give her my jacket...” He slipped off and was helping her in it. “Now be careful, there is a grenade in the left pocket, and there’s a...”

“I know your jacket supply,” River said.

“How do you... Never mind,” Jayne said.

“Where are you clothes?” Zoe asked.

“They don’t fit in the suit,” River said.

“Where’s your suit?” Inara asked.

“I left it with Early,” River said.

“Where is that son of a bitch?” Jayne said.

“He’s dead,” River said.

“Did you see Mal?” Inara said.

“I did not, but we should leave,” River said.

“Not without Mal,” Inara said.

“They’re here, we need to go,” River said. “Now...”

♪♪▶

“Did you turn on those transponders?” Simon asked.

“The moment we came into Roco space,” Ely said, aiming for the field of container pods. A darkened ship was there, apparently powered down, perhaps being stowed. “Haven’t seen a black-op ship like that since back in training. Nice piece of treasure that would make...”

“You’re just going to talk all casual like we’re sightseeing?” Simon asked. “Would you prefer I be all panicky and yelling?” Ely asked. A containment pod exploded under the fire from the fighters chasing them.

Early’s ship, flipped on its axis, and shifted between two containers on their level, but also fired a wing rocket and went up several levels deeper into the lawyers of containers laid out in a grid point system that became a lattice work cube. He returned fire on a sentry and suddenly all the sentry’s became active. Simon gave a start when something sounded close.

“Don’t worry,” Ely said. “They’re not likely to penetrate the armor of this ship with one hit.” He thought about it. “Of course, if they hit a window, we’re likely screwed. You want to go put on a suit?”

“I think I am going to be sick,” Simon said.

“Don’t look at the rows of pods, look straight ahead, or go to the back,” Ely said.

“In fact, just go sit down, I got this. Oh! That’s new.”

The ship that had dropped out of ‘Light,’ meaning returning to normal space speeds passed over the container field, blocking out a massive amount of stars and looking up as it pass brought a sense of darkness and dread and then the lights of stars popping back in declared the boundaries. Ely powered up towards the ship, firing forward rockets and spun around to try and orientate at it.

“You’re going towards it?!” Simon said.

“They’re not shooting at us,” Ely said.

The ship began firing at them. Ely curved them back into the container field, passing the fighters that were chasing them. One of the fighters took a hit and blew up, taking out several containers, spilling the contents. As they headed down, another Alliance ship arrive, a super cruiser, one of the biggest, and better illuminated, as the Alliance was proud of their ships, and so it had running lights that shone back on its own hull, where the new ship didn’t. The new ship wasn’t cloaked, but it wasn’t boasting or highlighting itself. One of the Alliance ships on station was engaging it, and losing.

A new squadron of ships launched from the new Alliance ship. Ely brought them to a stop, spun them, and started back towards Roco station. Ely punched up his mic.

“River you’re about to have serious company.” No response.

“Why isn’t she answering?” Simon asked.

“I don’t know,” Ely said.

Both the new Alliance ship, and the unidentified ship, which has the suggestion of being an Alliance design, had dispatched shuttles, with fighter escorts towards Roco station. A third ship arrived, again, Alliance in appearance, and it began to fire on Roco station. Suddenly the space around Roco was all alight with the amount of fire being exchanged from multiple vessels. Roco station suddenly got into it, their weapons systems apparently working after all. Even with all the firing, the shuttles arrived at Roco

and latched on, making their own entry points, burning into the hall.

“Firefly, if you can hear me, you need to get out of there,” Ely said into the mic.

Chapter sixteen

Malcom was separated from Niska by the presence of the operative between them. There were others present, all females, and though they seemed demure, in a very Japanese sort of way, where they polite, shy, eager to serve, it seemed evident to Malcom they were capable of killing. They were at the edge of a Zen rock garden, and a man who was up on a rock meditating finally descended in dramatic way, and approached bowing to each of them.

“Ah, my friend, must Malcom be tied?” the man asked.

“For his own safety,” the operative said.

“Ahh, of course,” the man said. He motioned for the operative to withdraw. He withdrew, leaving Malcom and Niska standing side by side. “Mr. Malcom Reynolds.

You’re even more famous than you were during the war. How is it being a celebrity?”

“Who are you?” Malcom asked.

“You don’t recognize me? Kim Li, a member of Parliament, first tier, brought on by the coalition of Zecata?” Li asked.

“I am sorry, I don’t follow politics,” Malcom said.

“I am not sure I believe you, but I was a bit before your time,” Li said. “How old do you suppose I am?”

“I don’t know, fifty?” Malcom asked.

“I am two hundred and twenty years old, three days ago,” Li said.

“You look good for your age,” Malcom said.

“I am blessed,” he said, bowing to Malcom. He turned to one his girls and accepted a sword. He removed it from the sheath and handed the sheath back, examining the blade. “Do you believe in a higher power, Mr. Reynolds?” “Yes, Sir, I do,” Malcom said.

Li pointed the sword at Malcom. “That’s nice to hear. We’re probably going to need some help before this has all played itself out,” Li said, and a quick motioned with the sword, and Niska went to his knees. A line of blood formed on his neck, and then he collapsed forward, and bled out on the ground.

Li accepted a cloth and cleaned the blade. He returned it to the sheath, handed it to his servant, and then bowed to her. She bowed and withdrew. He dropped the towel on the pooling blood.

“Untie Malcom,” he said to another. She bowed to Li, then to Malcom, and removed his restraints.

Malcom rubbed his wrists.

“So many things wrong with this Verse,” Li said, studying Malcom. “People get things backwards. These women don’t serve me. I serve them. Do you know where you are, Mal?”

“I do not,” Malcom said.

“You are standing on the furthest planet from the core. You could not go further without leaving this galaxy. Of course, no ship in the entire galaxy could transverse the distance between here and Andromeda. You couldn’t carry enough fuel, for starters,” Li said. “But we built a colony ship. A big ship. Powered by solar sails. And we’re driving it up to the speed of light even now, pushing it with lasers. This planet we’re on, it’s basically a planet size transmitter, every quarter, we transmit a burst of radio wave energy and hit their sail and drive them a little closer to the speed of light, and maybe, maybe, if everything goes just right, in a little over two million years, our package will arrive. We have sent several. I personally would have liked to have had River on one of them, as the only way to speak with ships at distance in real time is with telepathy. That, and she would have given them a survivor’s edge. And they need that. We need that.” “I don’t understand,” Malcom said.

“You think Alliance won the war, Mr. Reynolds,” Li said.

“Well, the Independents didn’t win the war,” Malcom said.

“No one won the war. Maybe if we had unified as a species sooner, we could have won and guaranteed our place, but we lost Earth, and we may lose this galaxy before it’s all done, and the small arks carrying humans to Andromeda, maybe they will arrive and give humanity another foothold, but most likely, even they will be changed and they won’t be anything like us. Change is coming, Malcom. It’s not going to be anything like it was,” Li said.

“Everything has it’s season,” Malcom said.

“True enough,” Li said. “But one season is just not enough.” “Sometimes, it’s all you got,” Malcom said.

“I like you Mr. Reynolds,” Li said.

“I am pleased to hear that. And if it’s all the same with you, I’d like to be getting back to my ship,” Malcom said.

“Would you like a job, Mr. Reynolds?” Li asked.

“Such as?”

“Niska’s absence has created a vacancy,” Li said.

“Oh, no, I think I will just stick to what I know best,” Malcom said. “I like making my own way.”

“I could use a personal transport, for special cargo,” Li said.

“I am weary of hurting your feelings, and appreciate your generosity, but quite frankly, I am not sure it’s safe flying for you,” Malcom said.

“Fair enough,” Li said. “My friend will take you back to your ship. I will give you ways to contact me if you change your mind.”

Li bowed to Malcom. Malcom bowed and started to retreat.

“And, Mr. Reynolds,” Li said. “I like River, but there isn’t a place in this galaxy where she will be safe. She may have a way of knowing things, but so do they. There will be a couple more opportunities to head out into the deep, if she wants. Hell, I could make room for you and your people, if you ever just want to get away from it all.” “That’s mighty tempting, but that colony stuff is hard work. I have hard enough time planning for this week, much less 2 million years from now. I’d rather just keep doing what I am doing,” Malcom said.

“Have a good life, Mr. Reynolds,” Li said.

♪♪▶

There were two ships, on a dry lake bed. One was a Firefly. The other was Early’s. “I think we should change the name of Early’s ship,” Ely said. “I don’t know, maybe Ely’s ship.”

“How about Patience,” Kaylee said. “Serenity’s sister?”

“How about we stop trying to avoid the elephant and acknowledge he ain’t coming back,” Jayne said.

“He will be back,” Inara said.

“Yeah, well, how long should we wait?” Jayne said. “Cause I am tired of waiting.”

“Got somewhere to be?” Zoe asked.

“Anywhere would be better than here,” Jayne said, kicking at dirt. “I got a wood for some more tree huggers.”

“Do you want to be buried under this lake bed?” Zoe said.

“What? I am not allowed to talk about sex?” Jayne asked.

“You can talk, just talk respectful like,” Zoe said.

The sound of thunder drew their eyes to the sky. Kaylee, who was in her chair, holding her umbrella, stood. As they stared, Jayne’s hand lighted on his firearm.

“That’s Niska’s ship,” Kaylee said. Jayne cursed.

“It’s slowing,” Zoe said.

Sure enough, the engines were spooling down, and changing pitch, and the ship was rotating around, clearly aiming to land, as opposed to completing a strafing run. A door opened and ramp lowered and the man who descended before the ramp was even solidly still was Malcom. Inara ran to him. They spent a moment and then joined the others. Niska’s ship powered up, and returned to the sky.

“Niska?” Zoe asked.

“He’s dead,” Malcom said.

“Who’s piloting?” Kaylee asked.

“No one of consequence,” Malcom said. “In fact, I didn’t even learn his name. So, sorry, we didn’t get paid.”

“Oh, I think we’re going to get paid,” Zoe said.

They explained that there was such a huge fight going on at Roco station, that they had time to steal some containers and they acquired some products that might go for a pretty penny at any one of a dozen start up worlds.

“And we got two ships,” Jayne said. “We could set up shop and maybe double our business. Might even take some time cleaning up some of those rabbit pellets before someone else comes in and takes that claim.” “That might be profitable,” Malcom agreed.

Jayne seemed confused. “You’re agreeing with me?”

“Times a changing,” Malcom said. “We go back, take as much refined ore as we can find between our two ships, go back to hippy world and get some unmarked supplements, and I recon we could maybe make enough to get a third ship? Now that Niska’s dead, there’s going to be some squabbling for territory and people are going to need some supplies while powers that be sort that mess out. Unless you guys want to settle down, make a base, start a charter service.”

“I’d rather fly,” River said.

“In other words, we’re going to go get into more trouble,” Simon said.

“To the best of our ability,” Malcom said. “Ely, River, Simon, you take that one. The rest, with me. Meet you at the rabbit hole.”

“We haven’t come up with name for her yet,” River said.

“Charity,” Inara said.

The ship properly christened, they went back to work. But not before Ely buried his viewer.

“You sure?” Malcom asked.

“I carried them as far as I could,” Ely said. “It’s time to let go.”

They all stood there, then turned and went to their ships, and the ships left.

Author's note.

I read speculative information on the internet, always a reliable source, that the "Hands of Blue" folks might not be human, more specifically argued that they might be androids. That interests me. It is clear, using only evidence from the series that Joss was trying to focus on humans, not aliens, and not alien human interaction, because human to human interaction is complicated enough, we really don't need to throw in aliens to add suspense or drama. That said, I find it interesting that 'nothing' is said about the absence of life in the Universe, because that is meaningful, too. Scary meaningful, but then, how many times do we not talk about what is staring us right in the face, and if we did maybe we could emphasize how sacred we should treat the life we know, and be making efforts to spread life, all life, to as many worlds as we can safely touch. Based on evidence from the series, it is clear that Joss was trying to stick close to the science of things, and that humans would clearly be affected by living on other planets. That's awesome! Even if we colonized Mars, it is very clear that the first people born and raised on Mars would not be going to Earth. Ever. They would be human, but they would be changed. They might be taller, due to less gravity. Who knows how the environment would change them. Everything affects us, and our genes respond to environmental demands, and over time, we would change. We would still be human, but we could be so radically different even only after a few generations, that we could be quite unusually different.

One of the complaints about Star Trek is that the aliens are so human like. In a galaxy populated by humans, with each planet having its own environmental peculiarities, we could have very different looking humans competing for the same resources, and depending on successful your initial colony was, this might lead to some very interesting interaction patterns.

Add to that, there is a spiritual component to Firefly. It seems to me to be a better blending of Western and Eastern philosophies, but then you have the anomaly of River, who is clearly telepathic, and I am thinking the Stargate program where the US government was making psychic spies, they call it remote viewing, fuels this darker, secretive black operations, and so there is this opportunity to explore the layers of society by peeling back all the level of control that we think we see to find out what is really going on below the surface. There is so much more to the Firefly Universe than what we got to tap into. I would totally vote yes on a second series, and fire the lot who closed it down. There is one thing that the powers that be continuously do, and that is they hold the viewing public in contempt, thinking we can't handle or won't buy smart stuff, or even existential stuff. The last episode of Firefly was super existential, and I wonder how much of that played into its demise, the same way that the pilot episode of Star Trek nearly killed the series because it was considered too 'cerebral.'

I want more. I want more smart stuff. Funny smart. This show has been gone a moment, but it's still being talked about. That's meaningful, too. Maybe this small fanfiction will add to the lore and the myths of this thing as continue to move away from that moment, because I am still not ready to let it go. Again, thank you Joss. Thank you Summer, Nathan, Sean, Morena, Jewel, Adam, Alan, Ron, Gina, and Chiwetel, and everyone else involved in this...

And thank you, you. For reading, sharing this moment, even if we disagree or are separated by time and space, which I am holding out to being an illusion in its own right.