

Damsel in Distress  
A *Firefly* fan fiction by Valerie Mikles

PROLOGUE

*(1 year after Serenity Valley)*

The midmorning sun cast long shadows across the damp, green fields of White Hall. Mold grew up the sides of the low, stone fences that covered the countryside for miles. Fresh rains prompted an early spring and colorful flowers dotted the hillside. The sheep were grazing in the highlands, soon to be herded downhill for shearing. The town of New Glasgow went about its business of producing more wool than food and the city council met again to fruitlessly discuss methods of protecting the sheep from hungry vagrants.

At a small ranch about five miles from town, crouched between a low fence and a shady lean-to meant for picnics, Jayne Cobb's black boots trampled the fresh spring grass. His steely blue eyes scanned the green hills, his stomach twisting in fear. Just beyond the stone fence his adversaries took cover in a barn. They were confident and beginning to encroach on his position. The loose stones of the fence offered little in the way of protection and rising only three feet, kept him uncomfortably stooped.

Jayne cast a sidelong glance at his cousin who, being pixyishly small, found the fence ample cover. Her hazel eyes met his, her determination lending him strength. They were surrounded. Clutching his Mauser automatic pistol, he checked the location of the five men again as they took strategic positions at the doors of the barn. His cousin held a rifle to her chest; it looked almost comical next to her small frame. Her gaze was fixed on the strongest of the five.

"That one," she said, indicating the burly man, next to whom even the 6'4" Jayne seemed dwarfed.

"Shouldn't we take out the Captain?" Jayne asked. He was new to this kind of situation. The Captain with his Cofer revolver—an antique at best—looked like an easy target to start with.

His cousin shook her head, brown locks rustling. "Captain's depending on the strength of that guy right there. We take him out, the rest will retreat."

Jayne nodded, seeing the logic. They both shifted behind the fence to get better aim. Then a glint caught in the corner of Jayne's eye. "Wait," he whispered hoarsely. He squinted at the mountain top, making sure his eyes were not cheating him. The lean-to partially obstructed his view, but there could be no doubt. "There's a sniper up there."

His cousin didn't look, just accepted. For a moment, he worried her trust was misplaced. "Six to two," she said, her lips curling into a smile at the adventure. "Jantis must have been really mad. He sent six men to kill you."

"Kill me? Naw, they came to kill you," Jayne joked, trying to keep his fear from showing. She was playing with him, trying to keep him at ease.

"You pulled the job," she said.

"Your name is on it! If could disappeared right now, these men would kill you and think they got their man." Jayne shifted, uneasily, wishing he could disappear. Still, his cousin's adventurous smile made the whole situation thrilling.

"You'd do that, Jayne?" his cousin asked with mock innocence. "You'd leave me here to take the rap for this?"

“Course not,” Jayne said quickly, getting concerned about the passage of time. Every second that went by, he knew the sniper was maneuvering for a better shot. He shifted the Mauser from his right hand to his left, then back again. He had no shot from this position; and despite his cousin’s confidence, he was getting tenser with each moment.

“Now what do we do?” Jayne asked.

“Take the rifle,” she answered, holding out her weapon to trade.

“What?”

“Jayne, we’ve been sharp shooting since we were kids. You can hit that sniper.”

“What if I miss?”

“You won’t miss,” she said confidently. “We go on three.”

Jayne took the rifle tentatively, handing her his pistol

“One.” Jayne set up his shot.

“Two.” The sniper aimed his weapon.

“Three!” Before he could think, Jayne let off the shot and the sniper fell. His cousin simultaneously took out the large gunman. The two then sprang from behind the fence, weapons at ready, but the other four men were already dashing toward New Glasgow, firing rounds over their shoulders as they went. Within minutes, the gunfire ceased and the farm was quiet.

“Whoa!” Jayne whooped, running a circle around his cousin. She remained cautiously crouched, one ear toward the wind. She approached the dead gunman—the only evidence of the standoff. Jayne picked up the man’s gun—a Callahan, customized somehow. He ran one hand along the barrel, breathing deeply the scent of victory. His cousin’s voice cut the excitement with dreadful calm.

“Jayne, take the shuttle and get yourself out of here. Now.”

Although confused, Jayne complied and headed into the highlands where they had hidden the shuttle. Realizing that his cousin had not followed, he turned back. “You’re not coming?”

“I’ll find another way. Now go!”

Jayne hesitated. “I don’t get it. They’re gone. We win!”

When she didn’t move, he trotted back to her side. Her attention was on everything and nothing at once. Jayne paused and listened, trying to find whatever sound may have her on alert. He pulled her into the barn, the only sure cover he could find.

“What’s going on?” he whispered.

She leaned against the wall of the barn, nearly disappearing into the shadows. “I didn’t tell you this earlier, because I wanted your head clear. He’s killed my family.”

“He – what?—who?—all of them?—who?” Jayne sputtered, unable to complete any thought.

“Jantis,” she said slowly. “Jantis has found all of them. My parents. My siblings. Nieces. Nephews. All of them are dead.”

Jayne saw a tear glisten in his cousin’s eye. His mind was reeling at the thought of his aunt, uncle, and cousins dead. He wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Jantis won’t stop looking for me,” she continued. “If he finds out that you’re connected to this job, he’ll kill you too. And your family. Uncle Frank I wouldn’t mind, but Aunt Judy...”

The two managed a weak chuckle at the joke.

“You have to go.”

Jayne nodded, still trying to process the information. He failed. He offered her the Callahan as a good-bye, but she shook her head.

“Keep it. You’ve earned it. Ditch the Mauser, though. They’ll know you by your piece.”

“You’re going to disappear aren’t you? I’ll never see you again.” His attempt to not be emotional was met with only moderate success.

“It’s a small ‘verse,” she answered with a smile. “You get good enough at tracking, you can find anyone or anything you want.”

“Then I’ll become the best damn tracker this ‘verse has ever seen,” Jayne vowed.

Her attention was gone again, listening for enemies. “Good,” she said, distantly. “That’s a marketable skill. But don’t keep too close tabs. Remember, the goal is to stay alive. Now go!”

Jayne poked his head out of the barn looking for adversaries. The coast was clear. “Where are you going?” he asked her.

“To track down Jantis. Kill him before he kills me.”

“Good luck,” Jayne said with a wink and a smile, taking her cue and accepting this new danger as an adventure. She returned his smile with a mischievous one of her own.

“Who needs luck when you have mad skills like me?”

With that, the two left the barn. Jayne headed for the highlands, his cousin for town.

“Enjoy your gun!” she called.

“If anyone asks, you ain’t part of this story,” he replied, holding the Callahan in the air.

She turned away from him and broke into a run and murmured, “Good man.”

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## CHAPTER 1

*(Six years later... after the show, before the movie.)*

Jayne woke to a powerful ache in his belly, the dream of his cousin fading fast from his memory. His mind wandered to the kitchen, but he didn’t bother to get up. Rations were scarce and the Captain had restricted them all to one daily meal. Jayne had resolved to sleep through his hunger, but the vibrating deck plates had other plans. Serenity’s engine growled with exertion, causing the bowie knife on his bedside table to vibrate. His hand shot out to silence the rattling blade, but instead sent it clamoring to the floor.

Angrily, he rolled onto his back. He was losing his focus, losing his edge. Losing his mind with hunger. The dim light of the room glinted off the arsenal of guns, knives, and other weaponry hanging over his bunk. Vera, his favorite gun, was the centerpiece. Seeing it brought up a brief flash of his cousin—a pain that ached worse than hunger. He suppressed the thought of her quickly and focused on the Callahan, full-bore, auto lock with customized trigger double cartridge thorough gauge. Vera had come with a price. Most of his guns did. Each with a specific talent, they came out for specialized jobs: sharp-shooting, sniping, close-range combat, open-range fights, bar fights, and a few

soft leads so as not to damage spaceships. Most of them were sadly locked down ever since that crazy kid River had gotten a hold of his Rutger 45. Lux, his LeMat revolver, sat quietly in the holster which hung from his bed-post. Being more of a day gun, Lux came with him everywhere.

His stomach rumbled again, causing the vision of the guns to blur. The ship hiccupped. Sleep was useless. Grabbing the revolver and the bowie, Jayne made for the cargo bay. They were transporting a food shipment to a colony on Newhall, the first honest job they'd had in months. Jayne hated honest work. Only on honest jobs was it possible to go hungry while transporting a cargo of food.

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Shepherd Book sat in silent contemplation at the long, wooden table in the dining room. A trail of painted flowers bordered the walls, an attempt by Kaylee, the ship's mechanic, to make the place more cheerful. It was not working now. The stove was cold; there was nothing left to cook. The cabinets were barren, save for half of a protein bar meant to sustain the crew until their arrival on Newhall in three days time. Book had been fasting for ten days now, allowing the rest of the crew a slightly larger ration. With each pang of hunger, he turned his thoughts to God, quoting scripture to himself. He had fasted before, and for longer than this. But this fast was different. There was no guarantee of food at the end. At best, they would get one square meal at Newhall, and then be sent away with their pay.

From the hallways floated the familiar sound of the crew stirring. River was already light-footing through the corridors, in combat boots today, but still oddly quiet. Mal was in the cargo bay, leaning against one of the crates holding their cargo, half asleep with a revolver in hand. Wash had snuck out of the bunk he shared with his wife Zoë, but he had tripped on the stairs on his way up to the bridge. A few minutes later, Book had felt the starboard thrusters make a minor course correction and the ship engine hiccupped. Not long after, Jayne's heavy boots clanked up the ladder from his bunk and he slammed the hatch closed, starting his morning prowl of the ship. Jayne stormed through the kitchen without even seeing Book sitting there. He opened and closed every cabinet, giving one long lingering look to the last remaining protein bar. Then, slamming that cabinet as well, he continued his storm into the cargo bay. Taking this as his cue, Book started boiling water, stirring in nutmeg and cinnamon. This was his approximation of morning tea.

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Captain Malcolm Reynolds heard Jayne coming a mile off, but was too tired to stir. The grating of the floor pressed uncomfortably on his rear and an unjustified protrusion in the crates dug into his back. Three more days. Just three more days of sleeping down here, protecting the cargo from a starving crew. The routine was becoming far too familiar. As Jayne's footfalls approached, he cocked his weapon and aimed it in the general direction of the sound.

“Back to the kitchen, Jayne,” Mal said. He opened his eyes, meeting the frustrated gaze of the burly mercenary staring him down. Jayne’s gun was still holstered, but his gloved hand was at ready.

“Dammit, Mal, they aren’t going to miss ONE nutrition bar!”

“Oh, they surely will,” Mal said standing slowly, gun still pointed at Jayne.

“These are honest people we’re working with and I’d like to work with them again.”

“Don’t make no sense to starve with a cargo hold full of food!”

“Not planning on starving, Jayne. Planning on having a fine breakfast in about five minutes. Soon as we get ourselves to the kitchen.”

Jayne shifted his weight grumpily from one foot to the next, his face already crinkled in defeat. Mal stood his ground. Finally, Jayne broke the face-off with an exasperated sigh and stormed back to the kitchen, muttering “*Ke-wu de lao bao-jun.*”

Sighing, Mal rubbed his eyes holstering his gun. The argument did get shorter every day, but that wasn’t necessarily a good thing. It’s never good when your hired gun loses interest in fighting.

“Won’t last.”

“Gah!” Mal jumped a mile, his gun fumbling to the ready. River Tam was circling the crate, her hand tracing its edges. Her eerie voice disappeared quickly into the walls of the ship. Despite the heavy combat boots she wore, she’d still managed to sneak up on him. Though River was still a youth, Mal always thought she had a worn look about her. The way her dress hung on her body, the way her hair fell limp and stringy around her face. It was like she’d been used up, wrung out, and discarded. But every now and then, he saw that spark in her—the glimmer of life that made him believe she was still a person. For a moment, he wondered if her words were prophetic or merely stating the obvious. On more than one occasion, she seemed to have it both ways.

“To the kitchen, little one” Mal said, reholstering his gun. He motioned for River to walk and he followed. “It’s not nice to sneak up on people. They’re like to shoot ya.”

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Dr. Simon Tam was the last to enter the kitchen. He noticed Kaylee first, lighting up the room with her smile. Kaylee could find the bright side of any situation, calling the tight rations the best diet she’d ever been on. “It’d be so much easier for people to lose weight if they had someone kind enough to point a gun in their face and tell them they can’t eat no more,” she chuckled. Her once round cheeks had become sunken, and her skin was beginning to lose color. Her cheeks were marked with engine grease, saying she’d already been at work this morning. Her hazel eyes shone as she shared a story with River and slowly ate her rations.

River, his sister, seemed concerned about some turn of events in Kaylee’s story, but was enjoying it nonetheless. He was glad that the two got along. Caring for his sister was his life right now. Getting to know Kaylee was a bonus.

He noticed Zoë offer Wash half of her rations, just as she’d done the day before. When Simon had asked her why, she told him “I can handle a little hunger. He’s got to stay focused so he can land this ship.” Shepherd Book was noticeably absent, choosing to fast in solitude. Inara Serra, a companion working aboard Serenity, was also absent,

preferring to stay in her shuttle these days. Simon could imagine that for a woman whose physical appearance was part of her career, malnutrition took a devastating toll.

“Eat up, Doc,” Mal called from his seat at the head of the table. “Eat up ‘fore Jayne takes your share.”

Jayne grunted, having already wolfed down his meal in seven bites or less. Though they looked small, these protein bars were packed with nutritional supplements and the seven bites they were given still had over 1000 calories. Most of the crew ate slowly, trying to garner some satisfaction from that knowledge. To Jayne, it looked small, so it wasn’t enough.

“Good morning, Simon,” Kaylee bubbled as he took the seat next to River. River snuck a peak at him and giggled from underneath her cascade of brown hair.

“Good morning,” he said, reaching for his breakfast and a cup of Shepherd Book’s make-shift tea. “What are you laughing at?”

“Kaylee told a joke,” River said, her voice a sweet melody. It always overjoyed Simon when he saw River lucid and laughing, like a normal girl. “Apples and doctors and good aim.”

“Well don’t spoil the punch line, silly,” Kaylee laughed, punching River lightly on the arm.

“Apples, huh?” Wash interrupted. “I could go for some apples right now.”

“They’ll come,” River said, looking cryptically at the table as if it contained a cipher.

“Can we *not* talk about food we ain’t got?” Jayne bellowed, fidgeting about with his chopsticks waiting for crumbs to drop.

*He’s like a dog*, Simon thought.

“If we had apples, we could make cider,” Zoe added, ignoring Jayne’s frustration. Her eyes met Wash’s and they seemed to disappear into some moment in the past where they were drinking cider together.

“Don’t get too attached to the idea,” Mal said darkly. “Ain’t no apples on Newhall.”

“Maybe next time we find seeds, we could plant an apple tree on the ship. Then we wouldn’t have to wait for port,” Kaylee suggested.

“Do you have any idea how long it takes a tree like that to grow,” Jayne balked.

“Do you?” Kaylee retorted.

“Well,” Jayne stammered. “It—”

“Six to ten years, unless genetically altered or artificially accelerated,” River interrupted.

“That’s it,” Jayne affirmed. “Years.”

Kaylee seemed disappointed, but only briefly.

“Probably starve to death before then,” Jayne muttered.

“So if they don’t have apples, what do they have on Newhall?” Wash asked.

“Nothing,” Mal answered. When he didn’t offer any more insight, Wash turned to Zoë.

“Just settlers,” Zoë clarified. “The first crop failed. That’s why they need this food shipment to get them through their first winter.”

“They got money?” Jayne asked.

“They’re paying us,” Zoë assured him. “But there’s not much place to spend it on Newhall.”

“There’s always a place,” Jayne said quietly, his mind drawing up an image of a nice brothel with beautiful women.

“Ten guesses as to the place he’s thinking of,” Wash jeered.

“You need ten?” Inara’s voice startled everyone. She had not joined them for a meal in days. Simon imagined the color in her face was almost entirely painted on. Her hair was perfectly placed on top of her head. She wore a stunning dress of red and blue brocade.

“Inara!” Mal’s voice was filled with surprise. “To what occasion do we owe the honor of your presence?”

Inara afforded him a brief smile. “Actually, a very nice occasion. I’ve found honey.” From the folds of her robes, she produced a small jar, gleaming gold in the lamplight.

“Well I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” Mal muttered. Anyone that had food left had stopped chewing just to take in the sight of the little jar, its contents worth its weight in gold. “Where did you get that?”

“It was a gift to me from Atherton,” she said.

“Atherton,” Mal repeated. “That must have been before he stabbed me.” Mal was referring to an earlier incident on Persephone where he had inadvertently started a duel with one of Inara’s clients.

“Must have been,” Inara agreed. She had spent the last few days remembering every client who had offered her a permanent home, imagined every buffet table filled with food, and asked herself again and again why she was still here. Then she had remembered the honey. “We’ll get the most out of it by stirring it into the tea.” Inara’s voice trailed off as she looked into the pot of water on the stove. A few spices clung to the edge of the pot, but the water remained clear.

“Think we could get some mead out of it?” Jayne asked, sitting up straighter in his chair.

“Fermenter’s down,” Kaylee said, disappointedly thinking of her inter-engine fermentation system. “Needs yeast to get started.”

“This will do,” Inara said, opening the jar carefully and stirring a spoonful into the still-warm tea pot. The room filled with the sweet smell of honey, and as one the group inhaled. Tension melted, eyes softened, and each looked as though the smell of the honey alone was a four-course meal. Even Book wandered back from whatever spot he was meditating in. Inara felt their eyes on her as she brewed the drink. Book gathered the cups and she ladled the drink as evenly as possible among them. For a moment, they all drank, no one speaking a word. Finally, River summed it up for all of them.

“Thank you.”

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Invigorated by the honey, Jayne decided to do a few sets with the barbell in the cargo bay. He enjoyed a good sweat, but lately hadn’t had much energy to burn off. Book spotted him on the bench press, rambling on about his abbey days and chanting with the other monks. Halfway through his first set, Jayne could already feel his energy waning,

but the moving cleared his mind. After a mere 25 reps, he returned the bar to its rack and just laid on the bench searching for breath.

“So, why chanting?” Jayne panted by way of conversation.

“Many people believe that chanting awakens the spirit to God’s love,” Book began, taking on his lecture tone. Jayne was in no mood for a lecture.

“No, I mean, why chant? Why not some livelier form of music? Something with a little swing in the step. Something you can dance to.”

“A chant, when properly done, can be very lively and more invigorating than any jig you’ve ever danced.”

“I doubt that,” Jayne chortled. “I’ve been a party to some very lively jigs.”

“The chant is a vehicle to communion with God,” Book said.

His voice always seemed so authoritative that Jayne found it hard to argue. “I don’t commune with anyone who’s not paying me,” he said. Then after a moment’s thought added with a leer, “Or I’s paying them.”

“Why is that?” Book asked.

Jayne didn’t seem to hear. His mind had returned to the brothel he’d created earlier. A pretty blonde was winking at him from across the room. A brief flash, then it was gone. “What’s that Shepherd?”

“Why do you keep people at a distance?”

“Ain’t worth it,” Jayne said simply. Despite being tired, he picked up the barbell and started another set. “We got a short time here, Shepherd. We only got a short time in this ‘verse to be happy. Getting close to people just brings heartache. Makes it hard to be happy. Ain’t worth it.”

“Was it ever worth it?” Book asked.

Jayne stopped in mid-rep so suddenly, he nearly dropped the barbell. Book caught it and eased it back onto the rack. Though his lips were silent, Jayne’s response seemed to answer the question with a resounding “yes.” Jayne waited a few moments to catch his breath, and then he met Book’s eyes with as dark a glare as he could muster.

“What the hell kind of question is that?” he spat.

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The engine hiccupped, causing Mal to stumble as he entered the bridge. Wash’s hands gripped the controls as he compensated for the jolt. Kaylee sat on the floor, monkey wrench tapping in her hand, a fresh smudge of grease smeared across her nose. On seeing him, her face didn’t light up, which he took as a bad sign.

“Captain,” she said, meeting his eyes squarely, “we need to cut the engine.”

“Can’t do that, Kaylee. We’re on a schedule.”

“It’s just for an hour or so. We’re not pulling much acceleration from them at this point anyhow.”

“I thought you told me the engine would hold.”

“I thought we was going to a world with a machine shop on it,” she countered. “The flow regulator is down, that’s why the engine keeps kicking. I can’t fix that while it’s running. We shut down for an hour, that way we can be sure we make it off world again once we’re on.”

“Now’s the time, Captain,” Wash interjected. “We have a fair push for coasting and we’re far enough between moons that we’re not going to lose more than ten minutes from the trip.”

The engine kicked again, propelling Mal sideways into a control panel. His arm hit metal, assuring a solid bruise. Wash yanked the controls again, correcting course. Kaylee seemed to have anticipated the jump and had braced herself.

“I can handle ten minutes,” Mal said. “Do what you gotta do.”

Kaylee nodded to Wash who cut the engine. Once the rattle in the deck plates died, Kaylee stood to manage her repairs. She was only half way out the door when the ship rocked violently port. Her head banged against the door frame and a gash opened above her eyebrow. A bewildered look settled on her face. Mal had fallen to the floor and Wash yanked the throttle hard, using correction thrusters to regain control of the ship as it reeled and tossed them about. Finally he controlled the roll sufficiently so that the grav boot could compensate.

“I thought you said the kicks would stop,” Mal said, grabbing Kaylee’s hand and pulling her back into the cockpit. He quickly pulled gauze from a first aid kit and handed it to her.

“That weren’t Serenity, Cap’n.”

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## CHAPTER 2

“Wash? Are we hit?” Mal demanded.

“*Gou shi*,” Wash muttered, his hands flying across the controls. “Let’s see... we are... blind. Yes, definitely blind.”

“Start up the engine,” Mal said quickly. “Let’s come about, figure out what hit us, and get out of the way.”

Wash initiated the engine. It gave a half turn and died.

“Must have tripped the drive,” Kaylee said woozily, holding gauze to the gash on her forehead.

“Well can you fix it?” Mal asked when she didn’t move.

Recognition lit her eyes. “Oh, right.” She scrunched her face with concentration and made her way to the engine room.

“Captain,” Zoë shouted, running up the stairs to the bridge nearly plowing over Kaylee. “Sir, we’ve got an Alliance scout aft port.”

“*Jen dao me*,” Mal muttered.

“Captain, we’re receiving a wave,” Wash said.

Mal reached over and turned on the com, then patiently waited for them to speak first.

“Firefly vessel. Prepare to be boarded for inspection of your cargo.”

Mal sighed. He’d hoped this day would be good. “Zoë, you and Jayne get to the cargo hold, put all our freight in plain view. We’ve got legitimate papers on this one. Nothing to hide.”

“Nothing, sir?”

“Well, nothing that don’t know how to hide themselves.”

Book entered the bridge. “Trouble?” he asked in his deep, soothing voice.

“Alliance scout,” Zoë answered. “Wants to inspect the cargo.”

“Are you sure?” Book asked, sounding surprised.

“I’ve seen hundreds,” Zoë answered, offended but keeping her voice level. “I’d know an Alliance scout a world away.”

“It’s just that this isn’t a typical Alliance greeting,” Book answered appeasingly. “Did they identify themselves?”

Mal and Zoë exchanged a glance. “I didn’t ask,” Mal answered.

“Hold on,” Wash said. Firing the starboard thrusters, he rolled Serenity and the offending vessel came into view. Mal recognized it immediately as an Alliance scout. With a single look, he dismissed Zoë to the task of moving the cargo. As Serenity continued to roll, the ship’s ID came into view- a bluish hybrid of a man and a fish.

“Didn’t I see one of those in a jar on Persephone?” Wash asked, trying to keep the mood light. Book had already taken a seat at the computer and was consulting his resources.

“The Neptune,” Mal read as the name of the ship rolled into view. “Does that mean something to you, Shepherd?”

Book looked up gravely from the screen. “It means they aren’t Alliance.”

“The sure act Alliance,” Wash said.

“And they sure look it,” Mal agreed.

“The Neptune fought in the Unification War. Pretty early on, the crew mutinied. Rather than face a court martial, they turned to piracy.”

“What a great story!” Wash said. “Why haven’t I heard it?”

“The Alliance writes history now. It’s not in their version.”

“I’ll buy that,” Mal mused, then grabbed the com. “Zoë,” he called, “I want you and Jayne to HIDE all the cargo. Hide EVERYTHING of value.”

“Thought we had nothing to hide, sir.” Zoë’s voice spoke to her confusion.

“We do from these folks,” Mal answered. “They ain’t Alliance.”

Switching to broad announcement, he continued, “Everybody, this is the Captain. Hide! Go to your favorite secret place. Lock the door. We have unfriendly company coming on board.”

He hung up the PA. “Wash, keep the ship rolling. We gotta keep them from hitching onto us as long as possible.”

“Think they’ll take kindly to that?” Wash asked.

“Tell ‘em we’re having engine trouble. T’ain’t far from the truth. I know this is difficult, but you’re going to have to make like you’re a bad pilot and can’t get attitude control. Be convincing. We can’t have them fire on us again or we surely will be in trouble. Far as they know, we think they’re Alliance and this is a regular inspection. It’s okay to ask for help.”

Abruptly, Mal made for the cargo bay, leaving Wash to deal with public relations. Again.

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Jayne ripped open the grating of the storage compartment and started stowing the food. Unfriendly company and all he had on him was Lux. He’d have to make every shot count. His arms were sore from weight-lifting earlier, but he pressed through the pain,

hoping that the payoff would be good when they arrived in Newhall. Zoë kept shoving crates toward him faster than he could stow, scraping them loudly against the cargo bay floor. Light shone through the back window; the enemy vessel was attempting to dock.

“We’re full here,” Jayne hollered, coming away from the compartment and replacing the concealing grating. Zoë immediately hopped to the other side of the bay and pulled the grating off of another hatch. Jayne started pushing crates her way. They had barely stowed the first two when Mal came charging down the stairs.

“Close up! There’s no time!” he yelled, tossing each of them a shotgun from the armory. Jayne caught the weapon easily and began pushing the un-stored crates together to make cover. Zoë took position on the catwalk to provide aerial coverage.

“You just gonna let them in, Mal?” he asked incredulously. Mal stood by the door controls.

“I sure as hell ain’t gonna let them blow a hole in my door,” Mal answered. “And don’t shoot unless you’re shot at.”

“But Mal-“ Jayne protested.

“Don’t shoot,” Mal began again, this time finishing the sentence with a warning look. Grudgingly, Jayne pondered his options. He removed Lux from his holster and concealed it behind his back. Then he moved to the opposite side of the cargo bay from Mal, laid the shotgun on the high shelf, and stood in plain sight. Mal wanted to play innocent and lose the cargo quickly—a common plan of his that never quite seemed to work. Jayne was quick enough on the draw, so he would play nonchalant bystander for now.

The ship rocked as the enemy vessel latched on. After a brief hiss of the airlocks, Mal opened the door to the cargo bay. A hefty Asian man stood front and center, flanked by six men. The Asian man wore an old purple Alliance uniform. If he had a weapon, it was concealed. His hands were clasped behind his back as if he were a rich investor surveying his property. The men that accompanied him wore a mixture of Alliance guard uniforms and civilian clothing. If Book was right and they weren’t Alliance, Jayne could tell that they once were.

“Who captains this boat?” the man asked in Chinese.

“I do,” Mal answered.

“You seem to be missing some cargo, Captain.”

“That’s the trouble with food stock. It’s consumable. We’ve been a bit hungry of late.” Mal forced a laugh at his own joke.

“*Jianchu, qiang duo!*” the man ordered his men. Those with purple uniforms, stayed in the cargo bay, collecting the crates in view and pulling them over to their ship, then prodding every panel looking for the hidden compartments. Those in civilian clothes ran into the halls of the ship. Jayne wasn’t liking this situation at all. He had a feeling he would be disarmed and tied up before anyone tried to shoot him. But he couldn’t take twenty men (or even ten) with the pitiful selection of weaponry before him. He glanced up at Zoë, who seemed to have disappeared.

“*Qiang duo?*” Mal repeated, acting surprised. “I thought this was an inspection.”

“The inspection is complete,” the man answered condescendingly. “I have found you a fool, unable to protect your own cargo.”

“Sir, look what I found!” One of the intruders dashed through the cargo bay with an armful of swag, including a very frilly pink and white dress. Kaylee had worn that

dress to a Shindig on Persephone—the same Shindig that resulted in Mal being stabbed by Atherton. Jayne saw Mal bite his lip, anticipating the outcry from Kaylee. Most of the other dresses appeared to be Inara's. The man was dripping blood onto the swag from a head-wound. Jayne smirked, imagining Inara hitting him over the head with one of her pointy shoes. Others ran out after him, carrying pots, pans, and linens. One had even grabbed a few plastic dinosaurs from the cockpit. Those still in the cargo bay had found one of the storage compartments and were busy emptying it out.

“Jie-rui, what is taking so long?” a gruff voice called, entering the cargo bay. The large voice had a stench to match and Jayne smelled the man before he saw him.

“Captain Caddock,” Jie-rui replied, “the cargo was hidden, sir.”

Caddock surveyed Serenity's cargo bay, his eyes squinted, his face wrinkled with battle-weariness. The man seemed familiar, though Jayne couldn't place it. He wore his holster on the left, putting his weapon out of Jayne's sight-line. Caddock's purple blazer had been torn and patched with so many colors it looked like a quilt. Jayne wondered briefly if the patches were stolen from men he'd killed because there was a fair amount of brown mixed in.

“Captain, look at this collection!” A fat man ran through the cargo bay holding three guns from Jayne's collection, including Vera.

“Braddock, Wait!” Caddock called before the fat man crossed the airlock. Braddock nearly tripped over himself as he stopped and switched directions.

“What is it Captain?” Braddock asked, shifting the guns in his hand to maintain balance. Caddock pulled Vera from the stack and squinted at it. If at all possible, the number of lines on his face doubled with concentration.

Jayne's heart flipped with anger. As quietly as possible, he rested his hand on the shotgun.

“I wouldn't be doin' that if I were you,” Caddock said, drawing his gun and pointing it at Jayne. Jayne instantly recognized the Cofer. Though Jayne's shotgun was immediately at ready, he was surprised that Caddock had even noticed him.

“Is this yours?” Caddock asked, his voice raspy.

Jayne kept his shotgun trained on Caddock and didn't answer. Jie-rui drew his weapon as well and pointed it at Jayne. The few still in the cargo bay quickly formed rank and trained their weapons alternately on Mal and Jayne. Mal's hands were in the air as if he were completely innocent.

“Where did you get this?” Caddock asked, annoyed at Jayne's silence.

“I won it,” Jayne lied, his voice and gun steady. “In a poker game.”

“That so?” Caddock said slowly. “Well, it belonged to a friend of mine. I'll be wanting this back.”

Caddock tossed the weapon back at Braddock who crossed the airlock into the Neptune. Jayne's blood began to boil, but with the number of guns on him at the moment, he could not make a move.

\*~\*

Mal watched the interaction of Caddock and Jayne carefully. Jayne had lied and he couldn't figure out why. Of the six men that had come aboard, one remained in the cargo bay with his gun trained on Mal and one was still pillaging the halls of Serenity.

Jie-ruì had a weapon pointed at Jayne, and Caddock milled about the cargo bay, probably trying to decide whether to gut the ship or just blow it up. Mal hadn't seen Zoë since he'd opened the airlock and was getting impatient for her to come to his rescue. Finally the last straggling pillager came through the bay.

"Cap'n, looky what I found!" A short, squeaky man pushed Simon and River into the cargo hold. Mal swore under his breath. The squeaky man continued "Ain't these the fugis from the latest post?"

Mal was so frustrated by this complication that he almost missed the alarm that flashed across Caddock's face.

"Are you crazy?!" Caddock rasped. "Put them back! Back where you found them."

"But, Cap'n," the sailor protested. "There's a mighty hefty reward for this pair." Jayne nodded, knowingly.

"Those have the kiss of death on them," Caddock raved. "Only a fool would try to collect that reward!"

Mal smirked and cast a side-long glance at Jayne who again nodded knowingly.

"And only a fool would harbor them." Caddock's voice dropped three octaves as he turned a steely glare at Mal. "You've got a mighty strong death wish, Captain."

"Only for you," Mal retorted with a defiant smile. At last, he'd seen movement in the catwalk. "Zoë?"

"Certainly wishin' he were dead, sir," she answered, cocking her sawed-off shotgun. As one, the two sprang into action. Mal hurled himself at Simon and River, pushing them to the floor; Zoë launched a makeshift EMP grenade. Caddock, Jie-ruì, and the remaining intruders, were stunned just long enough for Jayne and Mal to arm themselves.

Jayne caught Caddock in the chest, but to no avail. He must have been wearing body armor. Jie-ruì let off a few quick rounds in his direction, but Jayne took cover behind a bulkhead. Mal protected River and Simon with his own body and moved them to the rear of the bay. Zoë shot Jie-ruì in the hand causing him to drop his weapon. She and Jayne managed to hit a few unprotected knee-caps and Mal caught the squeaky one in the neck. The pirates retreated into the airlock and Mal closed the door after them.

"Mal, shouldn't we be getting our goods back?" Jayne asked, adrenaline pumping.

"Not now, Jayne!"

"But Mal," Jayne protested as the final seal closed and Serenity broke free. "They got Vera!"

"They also have backup," Zoe pointed out.

"Kaylee!" Mal yelled into the com. "Tell me we have engines."

"Shiny!" Kaylee answered, her voice shaky.

"Wash—"

"I'm on it!" Wash interrupted. Serenity kicked to life and started to run.

"Think they'll be after us?" Zoë asked.

"Can't see why," Jayne brooded. "They already took everything worth takin'."

With that, he skulked off, shaking his head to get rid of the residual ringing from the EMP.

\*~\*

“Thought you’d hide a little better” Mal said, helping Simon to stand. River stayed on the floor seeming to count the rivets in the deck plate. Simon brushed himself off, not having an answer.

“Are you hurt?” Simon asked, deflecting the recent trauma by acting doctorly.

“Just a little ringing in the ears,” he answered. “Why don’t you and your sister go check on Kaylee and Inara. Zoë!”

“Sir?”

“Go check on that husband of yours. Book should be with him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mal let out a long breath as the others went to their tasks. Every last crate was gone. They’d made off with a few other tools and machinery as well. It looked like his ship had been infested. Violated. *But she’s still flying*, he thought. He went to the command sent a broadcast to the ship.

“Folks, this is your Captain. Clearly we’ve suffered some losses today. I’d like to have a full listing of all that’s missing by this evening. Not much chance of getting back what’s ours, but it’s possible we can make it a curse on those that took it.”

\*~\*

### CHAPTER 3

“They don’t seem to keen on chasing us,” Mal said.

“We got lucky, sir,” Zoë answered by way of explanation.

“Lucky?!” Jayne balked. “Did you miss the part were they made off with Vera?” And the food?” He added the last as an afterthought.

The crew was sitting around an empty kitchen table. The last of their food had been stolen.

“He’s right, sir,” Zoë said gravely. Jayne grunted at the affirmation. “Without the cargo, we’re not going to be welcome at Newhall.”

“What are options?” he looked around the table.

Wash brushed his hands through his thick blonde hair making it stand on end. “Newhall,” he said, frustration lacing his voice.

“Didn’t she just say we weren’t welcome there?” Simon asked, casting an uncertain glance about the table.

“Newhall is the nearest civilized world,” Wash persisted. “So I guess the question is how hungry are you guys?”

Kaylee cringed, her stomach already growling.

“Newhall, then” Mal said.

Wash nodded and headed to the bridge to set the course.

“Shepherd, what do you know about this Caddock fella?” Mal asked.

“Rumors mostly,” Book answered. “He’s a shrewd soldier. Loyal—“

“Except for that whole mutiny bit,” Mal interrupted.

“Loyal to the Alliance, I should say. The alleged mutiny occurred because the former Captain was going to violate orders from the Alliance.”

“So he mutinied in the name of the Alliance,” Zoe clarified.

“He did.”

“Must’ve been crushed to hear about the court-martial, then,” Mal mused.

“So he turns to piracy?” Kaylee interjected.

“I don’t like him,” Mal said gravely. “Turncoat like that ain’t showing loyalty. He wants glory.”

Zoë nodded, understanding. “If he can’t make a name for himself in battle, he’ll do it as a pirate.”

“Well if he’s so famous, how come none of us ever heard of him?” Kaylee asked.

“Book heard of him,” Zoe said.

“Book’s heard of everybody,” Jayne retorted.

“You knew him, Jayne,” Mal said.

“Tried to kill him once,” Jayne deflected. “Don’t make him famous.”

Mal nodded letting it drop. “Well, we’re bound for Newhall. Let’s hope we can talk our way into a handout. If not, start gathering anything that will fetch a price. Colony just starting out surely needs something.”

As the others filed out of the kitchen, Kaylee held back. Mal’s heart broke seeing the fear and hunger in her eyes. She buried her face in her hands, letting a tear of frustration fall. Mal placed a hand on her shoulder and her hazel eyes met his.

“They took everything, Cap’n.”

“Not everything. We’re still alive. Still flying.”

“Still hungry.”

“We’ll make it, little Kaylee,” he said reassuringly.

Kaylee forced a brave smile. “I know... Just wish I knew how.”

As she left the kitchen, Mal was left alone with his doubt. “Wishin’ I knew myself,” he mumbled.

\*~\*

Jayne retreated to the cargo bay and lacking the energy to work out, started spinning the disc weights on the bar. Apparently, his weight set held little value in the black market. Overall, the pirates had taken only three of his guns; the rest had apparently been locked down too securely. For the first time, he was glad that River had broken in and stolen the Rutger that day. Else, all of them may have been taken.

The disc weight made a whirring sound as it spun on the bar. It was hardly loud enough to mask the ringing in his ears from Zoë’s little stunt. Jayne replayed the fight in his head, starting from the moment Caddock first pulled his weapon. He knew he’d made the right move by waiting to fire. Simon and River being present and unarmed had complicated the situation and Mal would not have forgiven him for getting them killed.

Jayne grunted at that thought. Mal hated Simon as much as he did; protecting those two made no sense. Caddock was right—those two had the kiss of death on them. Not that they would kill, but the people after them would kill...and Mal would kill to avenge them. Jayne stopped spinning the disc weight a moment and looked at the back window. It was cold on the other side of that airlock. He had once tried to turn Simon and River in for the reward, but had found it a fool’s errand. When Mal figured it out, he had left Jayne on the wrong side of that airlock as Serenity headed off world. Jayne had faced death a thousand times before, but never so helplessly. What was worse was that Simon and River knew too.

It still didn't make sense to him why Mal was so angry—why Mal felt betrayed. He couldn't fathom why Simon played like it didn't happen. He couldn't understand how he had made it to the wrong side of that airlock; but he would do everything in his power not to wind up there again.

Jayne started spinning the disc weight again, his eyes tracing the trajectory of gunfire, as if watching the battle in slow motion. Caddock had fired twice, both shots hitting the beam that Jayne had hidden behind. A man like that should be a faster shot. Either his weapon was misaligned or he intentionally missed.

Jie-rui was all over the place. A few shots at Zoë, three at Mal. No hits. Something wasn't adding up. Jie-rui's weapon was military issue. Old, but should be functional if well maintained. So why no hits? Even being disoriented from Zoë's grenade, he, Zoë, and Mal had managed to get a few good shots in.

A hollow clang sounded, temporarily overpowering the whirring of the disc weight. Jayne looked up; Mal was coming down the stairs. Jayne mulled over the fight, trying to figure Caddock's strategy.

"Jayne?" Mal interrupted his thoughts.

Jayne grunted in response, not bothering to search for a word to show that he was listening.

"You know, most people lift the barbell for exercise. That's really how it works. You lift." Mal motioned with his hands to demonstrate.

Jayne ignored the sarcasm, but stopped spinning the disc weight. "Mal, I don't think we were just lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"Those men were ready to leave. They got off a half dozen shots, not one connected. They weren't looking to kill, they were looking to leave."

"Been in a lot of gunfights, Jayne. Sometimes none of your shots make it. Don't mean you weren't lookin' to kill."

"Not to put down your heroism, Mal, but you were right there in the middle of the floor. That's a clear shot for any man wanting to take it, but none of 'em did. Don't make no ruttin' sense. Question is did they leave 'cuz they got what they wanted or 'cuz they was spooked."

"Or because Zoë knocked 'em with a grenade," Mal interrupted.

"If Caddock spooks easy, how'd he ever get through a war?"

"You do what you gotta do," Mal answered distantly. "Jayne, how'd you know those men?"

"Remember how I said six men came to assassinate me a few years back? Only two of them got killed."

"You saying those are the men that tried to kill you?"

"Captain and the first mate looked familiar. They don't make guns like that Caddock carries, except by special request. That kind of revolver died before Earth That Was. I'd never forget a gun like that."

Mal pondered that for a moment. "So if they tried to kill you, how come they didn't recognize you?"

"Men like us have no memory for faces. Only for the piece a man carries. Those two are Cofer and Remi. That's how I know 'em. Back in the day, I carried a Mauser Pistol. Changed it to protect my identity."

“Huh,” Mal nodded. “Seems to have worked.”

“Yeah, but now I lost Vera.”

\*~\*

Two days later, Serenity landed on Newhall.

*Not a minute too soon*, Mal thought as the hatch opened and the warm sun fell on his face. Jayne had threatened to go Reaver on him and spoke of intricate plans to kill and eat Simon. Simon for his part had converted the Infirmary into a chemistry lab and attempted to make something edible out of their precious meds. Although he'd failed to produce anything of substance, he had managed to alternately send scents of bananas, peppermint, and acetone through the ships halls.

The planet breeze carried the familiar stench of cow pies, which hopefully meant steak for dinner. Wash had landed them about three miles outside of town, exactly where their papers had told them to land. Despite the scarcity of food from the farms, the paperwork from the bureaucrats had a bountiful harvest and multiple papers had dictated that Serenity land at a location far enough from town so as not to disturb the cattle. The cattle continued to graze undisturbed. In fact, the town seemed undisturbed by Serenity's presence. Port control, which had been sending them waves every 36 hours for the past two weeks, had not even acknowledged their arrival. Mal couldn't rightly understand why a planet with no airport or space port would require a port control center, but he imagined it was peopled entirely with bureaucrats.

“Town's a bit quiet,” Zoë said, breaking his reverie. Neither had stepped off the boat just yet, preferring to get their bearings from a safe vantage point.

“Hm,” Mal agreed. “You'd think the food truck would be cause for parade. Did you tell them we weren't bringing the food?”

“They didn't hear it from me, sir,” Zoë answered.

“Isn't it better to NOT have a parade,” Wash asked from behind the two. “Seeing as we don't have food...”

Zoë didn't respond. She reached for a sawed-off shotgun which was sitting near the airlock. Wash took this as his cue to back off. Jayne didn't. In a loud clatter, he strutted past them all being the first to set foot on the world.

“Let's find some chow,” he said, nose pointed toward town with a singular focus. His knife was ready in his right hand, as if he were willing to slaughter the first steer to cross his path. Realizing that no one had followed, Jayne finally turned and waved them forward. “Come on,” he motioned impatiently with the knife hand. Cautiously, Zoë lowered her weapon and crept off the ship.

\*~\*

Kaylee enjoyed the three mile walk to town. They weren't exactly following a road, just a barbed wire fence at the edge of a pasture. The smells of livestock, fresh grass, and sweet flowers filled her senses with hope. Her stomach knotted in anticipation of food. Only the pasture inside the fence had green grass, and it was trampled at that. The rest of the ground was covered with dusty clay. At the edge of town, at least thirty farmhouses fanned out, each with their own little green pasture. A city wall had been

raised about three and a half feet around a quarter of the city, but the project was abandoned when the government realized that they didn't have enemies outside of town. Everyone on the planet as yet lived in town and fell under government protection. The only tall building of the city was the air traffic control tower, which rose about 15 stories. The clear blue sky reflected in its giant windows. As they came over the last ridge toward town, the peaceful countryside gave way to the loud shouts of civilization.

"*Ai ya, hwai luh,*" Mal swore. "I think we found the parade." He ducked instinctively, motioning the others to do the same. Before them, about a hundred folk formed an impromptu marketplace, handing out rations. Uniformed guards herded people into lines bordered by rope. The line brought the pedestrians to a table where two men collected a yellow ticket and then gave a blue one. Once they received the blue ticket, they were herded through another line and traded the blue ticket for rations from a bright orange crate. Mal recognized the crates as the same standard Alliance issue ones he had been transporting.

"Was someone else on this run?" Zoë asked.

"That doesn't make sense," Mal muttered. "Unless—"

"Mal!" Jayne yelled, darting over a small ridge. Mal rolled his eyes and shushed Jayne. He hadn't noticed Jayne fall behind, but wouldn't be surprised if he'd been distracted by a tasty herd of cattle.

"Mal," Jayne whispered loudly, pointing over the ridge. "It's them, they're here."

Mal crept a little closer to the ridge to see what Jayne was pointing at. He swore again. The familiar blue fish-man gloated from the bow of the Neptune.

"Son of a bitch stole our cargo and sold it as his own," Mal griped.

"Captain?" Zoë asked, anticipating an order.

Mal said nothing for a moment. Zoë could see the wheels in his head turning as he tried to come up with a plan.

"Back to Serenity," he said finally.

"But Captain," Kaylee protested. She cut herself off, embarrassed at her outburst.

"To Serenity," Mal repeated, a little more firmly. "We'll leave this world with what's ours, but we may have to do it quickly. Jayne, Zoë, you're with me. The rest of you back to the boat."

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 4

Kaylee sulked back to Serenity, her illusions of a relaxing walk about town quashed. A hundred feet from men handing out food and she was being asked to walk the other way. Captain going about thieving meant a fast departure, which meant Serenity needed some tuning up. But since the pirates had taken any tool in plain sight, there were a few things that just couldn't be fixed properly. In the two days since they had been robbed, her poor Serenity had Frankensteined itself. The stove in the kitchen was down to one burner; the electrical components of the rest having been sent to other tasks. The oven was completely dismantled, but should anyone need heat, they could just go to the engine room because the cooling system was almost entirely dysfunctional. She'd managed to construct a make-shift radiator by dismantling one of the toilets and running a pipe outside the ship to cool water before running it past the engine. At one point, the

water pump had broken and Jayne had pumped it manually for nearly an hour while she tried to fix it with a twelve inch screwdriver and no wrench. It only helped so much. Water was a terrible coolant for such extreme hot and cold temperatures and the anti-freeze was spread thin. That would be their biggest problem. Being in atmo, they had no way to cool the water and thus the engine would run hot.

Back at Serenity, Kaylee grabbed her last remaining screwdriver, a 12 inch manual slot. She'd been using it as hammer, a wedge, a skewer, and every now and then as a screwdriver. Scanning the dining hall, she looked at the last working burner. If they had food tonight, they'd need it. Besides, there wasn't much she could think of that hadn't already been done.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Book asked, startling her.

She tapped the screwdriver on her hand, trying to look contemplative instead of clueless. "Not unless you can fix the compressor."

"I'm afraid I don't know how those work."

"Then I guess the best we can hope for is that we don't burn up on our way out of atmo." Kaylee threw in a smile trying to turn her statement into a joke.

"That serious?" Book was trying to help her think. She appreciated his effort.

"We may be able to switch on the cooling system and break atmo before it explodes. Then we can switch to the water radiator real quick. That's assuming the radiator didn't melt. I didn't really think about needing to leave the world."

"So maybe we should make sure the radiator is intact."

"It's worth a shot."

\*~\*

The Neptune was covered in a layer of dew having landed just before sunrise. In the middle of a corral, most of the grass around it had been trampled by livestock, forming a ring that was partially covered by the ship. It was much closer to town than the bureaucrats probably liked. Coming down a steep embankment, Mal, Zoë, and Jayne were running out of cover.

"Keep in mind anything we take with us has to get back up this hill," Mal told the others. He was beginning to wish he'd left his coat behind for this one. The Neptune was mostly square and though the back door was wide open, it was uninviting. The blue merman jeered at them from the hull. After a few moments of no one coming in or out, they made a dash for the ship. Waiting outside until they were assured of no voices at the immediate entrance, they crept in slowly.

The area was most certainly a cargo bay, twice the size of Serenity's with crates and frippery strewn about. Within a moment, Zoë could see the organization of it, haphazard as it was. Heavy things were closer to the door, light things farther away. First came a food crate. Zoë wondered if the folks of Newhall were taking kindly to having some of their food stolen. Just beyond that and to the left, Serenity's pots and pans had been tossed carelessly into a box. Mal found a crate with wheels and began stacking the ware more carefully into that crate. To the right lay a few guns. Jayne went over immediately, loading up his belt with as many as he could carry, whether his or not. Swag and linens were to the back. Zoë surveyed the area, her eyes landing on a familiar frilly pink dress. She picked it up, gathering it towards the large hoop at the bottom and

placing it over her shoulder. For a few minutes, the three went around, stocking their wheeled crate with as much as they could.

After his second tour of the cargo bay without having found Vera, Jayne went to the food crate and kicked it angrily. It tipped over, the sound of the falling lid reverberating through the cargo bay.

After a long cringe in silence, Mal hissed, "You think that was loud enough?"

"It's not my fault! The gorram thing is empty!" Jayne retorted. Another long silence passed as they waited to see if anyone had noticed or become concerned enough to check out the noise.

"Damn shame too. We needed the food. Zoë?" Mal asked, ending the silence. Zoë knew everything about these kinds of ships. Before Mal had met her, she had spent three months stowed away on an Alliance scout ship gathering intelligence for the Independents.

"Their kitchen should be up and to the left," Zoë answered, indicating a narrow corridor just opposite the cargo bay entrance.

"Where's the Captain's cabin?" Jayne whispered.

"What?"

"Vera," Jayne said simply. "Vera would be in the Captain's cabin."

"Gorram single-minded *sha gua*," Mal muttered.

"Just past the kitchen. Hallway to the right is crew quarters," Zoë answered. She grabbed the wheeled crate and pulled it behind her, leading the others toward the kitchen.

"May be easier to leave that here," Mal said.

"May not be coming back this way, sir."

"Right," Mal nodded. As Jayne split off, Mal turned to Zoë and said, "Don't know if there's a thing in the 'verse he loves more 'n that gun."

"Money, sir?"

Mal shrugged. "It's a toss-up."

"Let's get us some supper, sir."

\*~\*

Kaylee spread a layer of clay over the radiator pipes on Serenity's roof. Converted from plumbing tasks, they were marred with stress fractures. She used her screwdriver to slather the clay which was baking far too quickly in the hot sun. What she wouldn't give for a cool lemonade with ice cubes clinking in the glass! Clay was caked on her face and hands; she continuously added water to her bucket to keep it from caking as well.

"Afternoon, little lady," a twangy voice called from the ground. She smiled, the quaint greeting reminding her of home. Since their arrival, a few other ships had landed nearby and many of the crewmembers had said hello on their way to town.

"Afternoon!" she said back, walking to the edge of the ship to see who was there. Her smile faded quickly. Two dour-faced purple bellies were looking up at her, their polyester suits ill-suited to the weather or the lifestyle. They didn't seem to notice her uneasiness.

"You Captain of this boat?" the one with the twangy voice asked. His Alliance uniform was unbuttoned at the top and mismatched with a wide-brimmed hat. His friend looked more formal.

“No, sir,” she answered unsteadily and uncertainly, stirring the clay more slowly. “Mechanic?”

She didn’t answer. Backing up, her eyes scanned for her walkie talkie.

“Where you goin’, darlin’?” the man asked, a subtly sinister tone in his voice. In a moment, Kaylee knew why. Two more purple-bellies were on the roof of Serenity with her. Though not impressively large, their uniforms made them all the more intimidating. One of them kicked the walkie talkie off the side of the ship.

Kaylee thought of the layout of the ship and the probable location of the various crew members. Would anyone be near enough to the hull to hear her if she stomped? Maybe River. She looked toward the cockpit. Wash knew she was up here. Was he still in there?

Making a split second decision, Kaylee began running toward the front of the ship. The two men pursued. Her heart pounded from adrenaline and her muscles screamed from malnourishment. Her mouth was parched. The men were gaining on her. As she approached the last few feet, she tossed the bucket of clay forward, but it failed to cross the window. At most, Wash would have heard only a slight thunk. The move had cost her; the men were there. One grabbed her arm, spinning her around. Using his momentum, she stabbed him with the screwdriver and he fell back. Stunned by her own move, the second man easily jumped on her back and knocked her over. She fell on top of the first man, the butt end of the screw driver jabbing her ribs. The second man had her arms. She couldn’t reach the screwdriver.

“Don’t hurt her!” One of the men from the ground yelled. She kicked and screamed, unable to get free. Then, with one astounding blow to the head, her world turned to redness and stars.

\*~\*

Jayne crept through the corridor cautiously, knowing that at any moment a door might open and a crewmember emerge. Though they weighed him down, the guns he had found in the cargo bay were a comfort to him. He could hear three men talking just around a bend not 30 meters away; he assumed it must be a social area. They spoke of money, how they had none, how they needed some, how they wanted lots. It was a conversation Jayne could have easily been a part of, but not on Serenity. The crew of Serenity seemed content to just scrape by most of the time and there was little profit in that.

This ship was very different from Serenity—the ceiling of the corridor was higher, the walls cleaner, shinier, and more perpendicular. The doors were adorned with official looking plates that showed the occupants name and rank in English, Chinese, and Brail. What annoyed him most was that the walls were flat (aside from the Brail) and there was no place to hide. It had the crisp harshness of a government boat. In it, the three men and the conversation about money seemed almost out of place. In it, he in his sweat soaked shirt and muddy boots were out of place.

The door to the Captain’s bunk was locked. Clumsily, Jayne thought, jimmying it with his knife. The room was stately, despite being slightly messy. It was nearly three times the size of his own bunk. Caddock appeared to be a collector of weapons: blades on one wall, projectiles on another, energy weapons on the third, and archaic novelty

weapons on the last. Among the guns was a rack with a dozen Callahans, all customized similar to Vera. Jayne approached it in awe, his hand touching each one. Three of them appeared to have never been used. One had a rusted barrel. Two did not have the double cartridge that Vera had. Furrowing his brow, Jayne considered the shelf again. Vera was not among these.

Concerned, he scanned the room. Clothing was strewn about. Utensils and plates were left, dirty, on a small table. Every weapon was neatly stowed. If his Callahan was here, she was not on display. He started poking through the laundry, at the bed sheets, in the closet, fearing he may have missed Vera in the cargo bay. Or worse, that one of the crew had taken her to town.

Frustrated, Jayne looked for something to kick. He went to the wall and felt along the border with his gloved hands, hoping to find a hidden closet or second door. Contrary to the floor, the walls and all the weapons displayed on them were clean. For a moment, he considered taking one of the other Callahan's, but each time he touched one, he felt only the loss of Vera. He began a more thorough search of the closet, sifting through the neatly pressed and hung coats. Finally, in the folds of a purple Lieutenant's uniform, he felt a familiar silhouette.

He shrugged the coat from the hanger, revealing the bulky Callahan. The scope was knocked out of alignment, but otherwise she was fine. With two hands, he took her, gently disentangling the shoulder strap from the coat hanger. He touched the barrel, checked the firing pin and cartridge. This was his Vera. Shouldering her, he discreetly left the cabin and headed for the kitchen.

The rendezvous was short-lived. Mal and Zoë were still gathering. The Neptune was stocked with mostly fresh food, which was notoriously bulkier, squishier, and harder to transport. Jayne took the rolling crate and agreed to get a head start back to Serenity.

"If the door's blocked, just come back here," Mal told him. "No shooting people."

Grunting, Jayne dragged the rolling crate behind him back toward the cargo bay. It was completely empty, but he heard people congregated outside. He crept quietly, keeping the crate close. Two men were speaking Chinese off the starboard side. Jayne didn't know why they weren't inside, but he didn't care. He sidled port-side and dropped the crate to the ground rather than rolling it down the ramp. The ground, fortunately hardened by constant trampling, allowed him to easily roll the crate around the side of the ship and away from the voices. Sneaking a glance, he saw more people coming down the road from town. The crew was returning. Would he be able to warn Mal? No. The crew was congregating and if he went back in, they'd all be trapped. Best get back to Serenity.

The nearest cover was almost 50 feet away. To make the dash, he'd have to pick up the crate—a move that would leave him unable to draw a weapon. He listened to the people congregated on the opposite side of the ship. The conversation was heavy and focused. They weren't likely to notice the rustling of a few bushes, or to move anytime soon. Shifting some of his guns to the side, he wrestled to pick up the bulky crate. His muscles strained. It might be faster to just pull it behind him and use it for cover. He shifted his weight and took a few steps, but didn't have long to think. A gunshot exploded behind him, and a scream filled his ears.

\*~\*

The Neptune began to rumble, ready for takeoff. The cargo bay was populated and sealed. Zoë led Mal to a maintenance hatch on the far side of the ship, moving quickly to make their escape while still relatively close to the ground. Mal and Zoë crept out of the Neptune as delicately as they could laden with the bulky food supplies. The ground shook and the smell of exhaust filled the air as the Neptune prepared to take off. The sight of the wheeled crate tipped sideways sent them running toward the back of the ship.

“Jayne!” Mal called.

No reply. Jayne was nowhere in sight.

“You see his tracks?” Mal asked Zoë, shielding his eyes. The sun glared and the food they had stolen was heavy and awkward. Kaylee’s pink dress was still draped over Zoë’s shoulder.

Zoë scanned the ground, habitually covering her own tracks as she went. Finally, she saw it. “There, sir.” Jayne’s heavy boot print went around the starboard side of the ship. Cautiously, she and Mal peaked around the corner. No one was there. Carefully, Mal crept out of the cover afforded him by the rear of the ship. A body, too small to be Jayne, lay sprawled in the corral. Zoë walked cautiously toward it, recognizing the opportunistic pirate who had pulled Simon and River from hiding. Blood pooled around a head wound but also across his chest. She had seen enough to tell, this was more than one person’s blood, perhaps more than two. The second source seemed to have pooled awhile on top of the dead man, then it trailed away. The Neptune took off, kicking up dust around the scene and blurring the blood trail. Squinting, through the whirlwind, Zoë studied the path of the second source. “Looks like the blood trail leads back to Serenity, sir.”

Mal nodded, only half hearing. Something in the dust had caught his eye. Inching closer, he finally recognized it.

“Vera,” he whispered softly, picking up the weapon. It was lighter than he thought it would be, and hot from lying in the sun. The blood trail came across and over the Callahan, pooling somewhat, but in a manner unfamiliar to Mal. He wondered what kind of injury would cause Jayne to leave his beloved gun behind.

“Sir, we should go back to Serenity,” Zoë prompted, shifting her load so that she could pull the crate behind her.

Without a word, Mal took the stolen food on one shoulder and Vera on the other and they hurried back to the ship.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 5

Wash waved port control on Newhall yet again, no longer expecting an answer. For a world with such strict policies and demands for having papers and ground clearance, it surprised him that no one had noticed them land. They were probably rejoicing over the food delivery. He wondered if anyone at Newhall would notice them take off. He’d seen the anti-aircraft satellites coming in, but they seemed unconcerned with his landing. He sent the wave again and reclined in his chair. His dinosaurs had been stolen and all that remained on the console was one forlorn looking palm tree. Finally, the comm crackled in response.

“Firefly vessel, what is your purpose?” a woman with a thick Chinese accent cackled. Wash briefly wondered if the comm had been damaged and made a note to tell Kaylee.

“We’re seeking clearance for takeoff,” Wash answered.

“You are not cleared for landing.”

Could they not understand him? Was the transmitter failing as well?

“I’ve already landed; I’m looking to take off.” He spoke slowly and clearly. When there was no response, he tried again in Chinese.

“What is your business here?” the comm crackled.

“We’re looking for food.” It sounded more like a question when he said it, but seeing as they had decided against the charity handout and opted for thievery, he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“You are not permitted to land.”

Wash picked up the palm tree and threw it at the com. “I just want to take off!” he yelled. This was hopeless. He clicked on the sensors and began low-level scans for anti-aircraft, now assured that take-off would not be as smooth as landing.

At that moment, Zoë came bounding onto the bridge. “Problem, baby?”

Wash sighed loudly. “Of course not. Just trying to get a beat on the anti-aircraft so we can make a smooth getaway.”

“I thought we were gonna make a smooth getaway by getting clearance.”

“Should be easy right?” Wash answered, annoyance lacing his voice. Zoë put a hand on his shoulder, a move that always made the world’s problems fade. With a single elegant move, she placed a recovered dinosaur on the console. Of all the things to bring back from the Neptune, she’d chosen this. Wash sighed again resuming a gentle composure. “Won’t be a minute, sweetie,” he said softly.

Then the comm sputtered to life again.

“Firefly vessel, please maintain position for inspection.”

Wash’s eyes widened. “No, no, *tiao gao!* Why do I have to be so obedient to the law?!” A thousand scenarios played through his head simultaneously, all ending badly. Slowly he turned to Zoë and asked “All aboard?”

\*~\*

“Jayne?!” Mal yelled as he ran, heart pounding, to the Infirmary. “Jayne!”

Much as he wanted to kill Jayne most days, he didn’t want someone else killing him. Not while Jayne was on his crew. Clutching Vera, he rounded the last corner and saw a group crowded in the hallway, anxiously looking through the Infirmary windows.

“He’s here, Captain,” Book assured, trying to slow Mal down before he plowed them all over. “He’s fine.”

Pushing past the group, Mal saw a form laying on the table, the doctor hunched over, carefully sewing. But the person on the table was not Jayne.

“Huh,” Mal said, surprised, pushing his way into the Infirmary. A frail woman lay on the table, pale as ice, dark brown hair matted with blood. Her neck was slit but the doctor was seeing to that. Jayne sat in a chair beside the bed; a tube snaked from his arm, giving blood to the woman. Jayne’s attention was singularly on her, his free hand

grasping hers. Mal realized that the trail of blood he'd followed back to Serenity was not Jayne's but hers.

"Jayne," Mal said, his voice a question, seeking explanation.

Jayne's eyes rose slowly. Recognition spread across his face. He shook his head, dropped the girl's hand, and started fiddling with the needle in his arm. When Simon swatted his hand for that, Jayne started fiddling with the tube instead. "Uh, yeah?" he stammered.

"What happened back there?" Mal prompted.

Jayne was quiet for a moment, looking like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Pirates," he finally offered.

Mal waited, but Jayne didn't volunteer any more information. "You dropped your gun," Mal said, holding Vera out to him.

Jayne looked uneasy. "Oh, uh, thanks," he said. Jayne stood and reached for the gun—a move that both Mal and Simon recognized immediately as a mistake.

"Jayne, no!" Simon warned, but it was too late. Mal rushed forward to catch Jayne as he passed out.

"Brace his arm," Simon instructed.

Falling to his knees under the weight, Mal struggled to keep Jayne's arm from curling and the needle from snapping off. Simon rushed around the table to remove the IV from Jayne's arm and working together, the two lowered him to the floor.

"Who is she?" Mal demanded as Simon resumed sewing.

Simon shook his head. "I'm not sure."

At that moment, the girl sputtered to life. Arms flailing, she tried to sit, gasped in air, and sent spurts of blood from her neck wound. Mal jumped back in surprise, but Simon remained completely composed, easing her back down to the table.

"Calm down," Simon soothed. "Calm down, you're safe." She stopped struggling, but her eyes darted about distrustfully.

"Safe," Mal mocked with a chuckle, angry at the lack of answers.

"Captain, we all aboard?" Zoë's voice sounded over the com. "Newhall got word of our illegal landing and wants to question us."

Who the girl was ceased to matter; Mal turned to her. "You okay with leaving this world?" he asked. All he got was a confused look. "I'm not trying to kidnap you, but I got the evil bureaucrats dropping by and I need to leave world in a bit of a hurry. If you don't want to go, I can drop you off the back of the boat—"

"Captain, no!" Simon protested.

"I'll pay her fare," Jayne volunteered from the floor, pushing himself to sitting.

Mal was so stunned, he couldn't speak.

"No kidnapping. Just go," Jayne assured. "I'll cover her."

Still taken aback, Mal considered the girl again. Her eyes were wide with fear; her breathing was heavy. Finally, he walked to the com. "Wash, let's leave the world."

There was no response. Serenity remained silent and still. Finally, Wash answered. "Yeah, Captain, about that." His voice held that light-hearted, but doomed tone.

"What's the problem, Wash?"

"We can't find Kaylee. She's not answering her walkie talkie. Zoë's gone to look for her, but no word yet."

Mal scanned the group outside the Infirmary. Book, Inara, River, no Kaylee. He darted out the door. "Any of you seen Kaylee?"

"She was working topside," Book volunteered, concern clouding his eyes.

"Go see if she's there. Inara, you go check the engine room. River, check her bunk." The three ran to their assignments; Mal returned to the Infirmary. "Doc, you done here?"

Simon was taping a bandage over the wound, but was otherwise finished.

"Start at the back of the ship and work forward. Check every crawl space Kaylee might be in."

Simon ran off.

"Jayne, I want you to start at the front."

Jayne looked a little startled at being addressed. Mal was annoyed. This girl was like a drug to him. "What?" Jayne stammered.

"We're looking for Kaylee!" Mal exploded. "Big smile, greasy face, green jump suit. Start at the front of the ship and work backward."

Jayne stood up slowly, cautiously, perhaps remembering his last attempt to stand. This time he didn't pass out. He relaxed his grip to release the girl's hand, but instead of letting go, she jerked him closer to her.

"Neptune!" the girl whispered, hoarsely. Jayne furrowed his brow, not understanding. He squatted so that he could be at eyelevel with the girl, subtly peeling her fingers from his hand. The two seemed to have a conversation with their eyes, Jayne soothing, the girl intense.

The name caught Mal's attention. He considered her again, wondering how much of what she said he should take seriously. With only the one data point, statistics were spotty at best.

"What about the Neptune?" Mal asked.

"Caddock has her," the girl said. "On the Neptune."

"Just what make's you say that?"

"Grease on the face," the girl said, brushing her cheek with her hand to demonstrate. "No smile. Teddy bear on..." The girl touched her thigh, unable to complete the sentence.

"*Hwun dan* stole my mechanic," Mal seethed angrily as the realization set in. "Jayne, get a head count, make sure everyone's on board!" he yelled, running to the cockpit.

Zoë caught up with him on the way. "It's Caddock, sir," she said.

"I know!" He stopped short when he saw her carrying a bloody screwdriver. His voice caught in his throat, afraid to speak. Finally he choked, "Kaylee?"

"No, sir," Zoë said, looking at the screwdriver. "Seems she got one of the assailants, though. Book is saying last rights over him now."

"Tell him we're out of time. Neptune's got a half hour head start and we got bureaucrats on the way. This is no time for a funeral."

\*~\*

Wash hated fast departures, missing crewmembers, high speed chases, and anti-aircraft weaponry. Job stress. He hoped that Kaylee was buried in some crawl space

unable to hear him, but feared something worse. He could already see the Port Authorities riding over the horizon in a hover mule. The bright yellow vehicle lumbered along slowly, probably bound by a perversely slow speed limit intended for city driving. He could see the four men inside, two with dark navy law enforcement uniforms, one in a dark suit, and the driver in a bright red uniform that matched the company logo on the side of the mule. Less than a mile away and in plain sight. So much for a covert getaway.

Sensors showed two anti-aircraft satellites overhead with no noticeable gap. Since he'd been watching, the two had shot across the sky. The one that had started overhead was nearly setting, but essentially had the western sky covered. The second had come over the horizon and now had the entire town of Newhall in safe range. He imagined a new one would appear on the horizon within the next half hour to complete the circle. Wash would have to come up with some fancy flying in atmo to avoid them without clearance. He needed to talk to Kaylee.

"Wash," Mal shouted running onto the bridge followed shortly by Zoë, "we're leaving."

Wash didn't move at first, still considering alternate escape plans. Then he saw Zoë holding a bloody screw driver and jumped to his feet. "Whoa!"

"It's not Kaylee's," Zoë assured him, though he didn't feel particularly assured.

Mal circled the room once like a caged tiger. "Wash, why are we still here?"

"Oh, right," Wash sat down, then pointed out the window. The mule had arrived and the man in the dark suit was speaking to the two law enforcement officers about something. They were examining Serenity's markings while the dark-suited man checked against papers he held on a clipboard.

"I was thinking maybe we could survive the bureaucrats, and leave without being shot down," Wash explained, indicating his tracking of the anti-aircraft satellites.

"I got no time for bureaucrats," Mal seethed. "That *hwun dan* Caddock kidnapped Kaylee and we need to track him before he disappears in the Black."

"Do you think that's likely?" Wash asked, immediately regretting his pessimistic words. His eyes wandered over the console, trying to figure out what he could do with Serenity in her current state of disrepair. The Port Authorities knocked on the hull of Serenity. He received a wave from the control tower, informing him that he should open the door.

"Time to leave, baby," Zoë said softly, putting an encouraging hand on his shoulder. He placed his hand on hers and then engaged Serenity's engine. The deck rattled with exertion; Serenity lifted off the ground. Out the window, he could see the driver of the mule back off and the three law men running after it.

Serenity shot northward as it took to the sky. Wash was hoping to stay low in atmo long enough to make a polar exit. He didn't make it very far. Ground fire rocked the vessel forcing him higher into the sky. An alarm sounded; the engine was overheating. He throttled back, just long enough for the anti-aircraft satellite to take aim and fire off a round. The right engine choked and the ship rolled twice before Wash could right it again. His shoulders protested at the bruising as the world's gravity fought the ship's. He dropped a few thousand feet trying to orient himself with relation to the town, probable location of ground fire, and the one satellite that he could still see. For all of Kaylee's miracles, she couldn't make the ship invisible, but she could at least have kept the engines cool. Another shot exploded off the side of the ship, rocking the walls. He

pressed northward, eyes peeled for new antagonists. The world was becoming inescapably small.

“Captain,” Book’s voice crackled over the com, breaking Wash’s concentration. He looked over, noticing that Zoë had strapped herself into the co-pilot seat. He hoped she had managed to do that before the roll. Mal reached around him grabbing the com.

“Sorry about the bumpy ride, Shepherd, but we’re in the middle of a situation here.”

“I know, Captain. Fly west and stay low.”

Mal looked at Wash.

“West is covered by a second satellite.”

“I know you’re trying to be helpful, Shepherd, but there’s just more unfriendly fire over there,” Mal pointed out.

“There’s a hatch there,” Book insisted. “Like White Hall. We can hide until sunset.”

“We leave the world at sunset, Shepherd, we leave a blazing trail in atmo. That don’t strike me as safe.”

Wash wasn’t listening. The White Hall hatch was a familiar hiding spot to him. He rocked Serenity sideways, shifting from northward to westward. He’d have to cross under guard of both satellites and the ground patrol. He dropped until Serenity nearly skimmed the grass of the cow pastures, trying to stay below radar.

“Wash, where we goin’?” Mal asked him.

“The hatch. Do you know how far it is?”

Mal looked confused for a moment, but relayed the question.

“It hit’s the terminator at 4:15 Newhall time,” Book’s voice cracked over the speakers. Wash did a quick calculation and increased speed again. The engine protested.

“I never heard of a hatch on White Hall,” Mal said, hoping for an explanation, but Wash wasn’t listening anymore. Jaw set, he dodged houses, barns, and animals, staying low and heading west. The northward push had helped him out as far as getting there faster, but the engine was running hot. The fact that the world was traveling west beneath him was not helping. Another fifteen minutes, he estimated. Having a land-based destination certainly helped avoid enemy fire, but he’d have to pull up soon or risk leaving a blazing trail in the earth right to their hiding spot. At the far reaches of his mind, he could hear Mal speaking.

“Wash, what is this place?”

A herd of cattle appeared as if from nowhere. Wash took it as good a time as any to break higher into the sky. The move caused Mal to stumble backwards, catching himself on the door. Wash steadied the ship again.

“You know what, I’ll ask at dinner.” With that, Mal headed out of the cockpit maintaining a grip on the stairs with both hands as he went. Zoë stayed strapped in to her seat, smiling in admiration. Wash kept flying toward the hatch.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 6

The halls of Serenity burned, unable to cool efficiently in the hatch. Book hardly noticed the heat of the stove over that which radiated from the engine room. He chopped

vegetables to add to the chicken stir-fry; River helped by boiling water for pasta and Simon set the table. All were quiet, withdrawn into their own thoughts. Though desperate for food, Book was plagued with a new emptiness that it could not fill. Kaylee was gone. He felt responsible, having talked to her just before she went topside. He should have gone with her; he should have been more insistent on helping her. The image of the dead attacker was burned in his memory—a pudgy man in an outdated, purple Alliance uniform thrown flat on his back with a 12 inch screwdriver puncturing his abdomen. The blood had pooled around his body, and then flowed over the side of the ship. Streaks of dry clay were spattered over the hull toward the helm. Kaylee must have cried for help, but none of them heard. As Book had prayed over the fallen assailant, he felt remorseful over the loss of life, and guilty because he was grateful it was not Kaylee who had died. He worried about what danger she might be facing now. He worried about her response to killing a man, even though it was self-defense. He should have stayed outside to talk to her while she fixed the ship.

“You didn’t know,” River said quietly, bringing him back to the present.

Book looked at her, his eyes deep with sorrow. The chicken was burning and he stirred quickly to keep it from searing to the bottom of the pan. He added the chopped vegetables to the mix and kept his hands moving, his mind on the task at hand. River was right, he could not have known.

The three were silent again. Simon, having carefully laid chopsticks beside each bowl and filled the mismatched cups with lukewarm water, sat at the table and waited. He stared reflectively into space. River stirred the pasta to keep it from sticking. She glanced occasionally at the two men, wishing they would worry more quietly. She was worried enough about her friend.

The meal was not the joyful celebration that they had all envisioned that morning. They were hiding out in the dark, burning up from engine heat, hoping they would be able to move again despite their kidnapped mechanic. They were consumed with guilt at not being there to help Kaylee and with fear for where she might be. They were confused by the new stranger lying in the Infirmary. Jayne had not left her side yet, and would not join them for dinner. Wash stayed at the helm, waiting for the hatch to open, so Zoë took their meal there. The table seemed empty and joyless, eating a chore to be dealt with. After Book had served the meal, he prayed out loud, not caring if the Captain respected it or not. The only words that were spoken were the occasional “Please pass the salt” and “May I have more water.” The Captain did not sit at the table to eat; at first, he held his bowl and leaned against the wall. Then he carried his food to the engine room, mumbling something about checking the radiator. Book looked around the table at Inara, River, and Simon. All stared quietly into their food, eating hungrily, but not happily. With Kaylee gone, a light had gone out.

\*~\*

Kaylee picked half-heartedly at the protein bar Braddox had shoved into her hand. Her fingers were still caked with clay and blood. Her body trembled from the horrors of the afternoon. Fear crept in, but she held it at bay with a single thought: *Captain will come for me*. She thought of Serenity and of the flowers she’d painted on the walls. She thought of its warmth. The Neptune was a cold, sterile place crewed by far too many

angry, frustrated men. Like the crew of *Serenity*, her first meal in days did not bring her the satisfaction she had hoped for. Braddock had gotten rid of his wide-brimmed hat and his voice was somewhat less twangy than before. He seemed angry about giving her food, angry at having to escort her around, and angry at having to button up his uniform for the Captain.

Captain Caddock was an altogether frightening man, with a lingering aftertaste attributed as much to his foul smell as his sour manner. Above all, she knew that he hated women. Her kidnappers had brought her to the side of the ship and dumped her on the ground, waiting for Caddock before taking her on board. As soon as Caddock had seen her, he had pointed his gun at Braddock and rasped, "No women!" Kaylee cringed at the memory, at the gun, at the realization of why she was there. The *Neptune* was broken; the mechanic had died, and they needed a new one. Although Caddock had seen the logic in this, he had glowered at her until she shrank against the back of the ship.

Shortly thereafter, another member of Caddock's crew came over the hill, pushing a woman in front of him, claiming a nice bounty on her head. Caddock shot the man in the head; the woman he brought got caught by a knife as the man fell and she went down too. Kaylee wondered if the previous mechanic of the *Neptune* had died of natural causes or been shot by Caddock in a fit of anger. Before bringing her on board, Caddock issued the threat: "You keep my ship running, I keep you living. *Dong ma?*"

Kaylee understood. Braddock brought her to the *Neptune*'s engine room. Compared to *Serenity*, this ship was running fine. The twin engines sang with the sweet harmony of well-oiled and well-maintained machines. An older, war-torn woman slouched in the corner giving great attention to a familiar-looking pile of tools that she had fanned out on the floor. Kaylee's tools.

"Saskia," Braddock grunted. The woman stood up, pushing her thick, black braid over her shoulder. She wore civilian clothing that fit her body loosely, concealing her figure. "I got us a new mechanic."

Saskia eyed Kaylee, annoyed. "Yeah. And."

"You get to baby sit," Braddock jeered, then walked off purposefully. Saskia didn't seem happy about the assignment, but didn't object.

"You got a name, girl?"

"Kaylee." She choked on the word, her mouth parched, her tongue swollen. It was the first word Kaylee had spoken since coming onto the ship. It was swallowed by the cold, unfeeling room.

"You can fix this thing, Kaylee?"

Kaylee nodded.

"Fix it, then," Saskia said curtly, waving her hand at the tools. Kaylee walked over, slowly, as if being asked to peer into a grave. She knew the tools would not help at the moment. A high-pitched whir over the normal turn of the engine told her that the compressor belt was slipping every few turns, so efficiency was down. All they needed was a new belt. She thought about performing an exhaustive diagnostic to stall the repair and give Captain Reynolds time to catch up, but Caddock's threat echoed in her ears.

"Got any spare parts?" Kaylee asked, not wanting to be too specific about what was needed in case she felt brave later.

Saskia led her to a large, but mostly empty supply closet. Although it did not contain the needed belt, there were enough spare parts to completely restore *Serenity*'s

cooling system. Her heart caught in her throat at the thought. She had mentioned to Book that they needed to re-engage the cooling system, then switch to the radiator in space. What if they used up all the coolant flying in atmo? What if they burned up before they even got to the Black? What if—

“Something wrong?” Saskia asked impatiently, causing Kaylee to jump.

“Oh! Um. It’s not here,” Kaylee explained.

“What’s not here?”

“The belt. One of your belts is slipping. We need a belt.” Thinking quickly, she added, “We’ll probably lose a whole engine if we don’t get one soon. Thing sounds about ready to snap.”

Her mind reeled. She was feeling brave. She figured she could through a few kinks into the work to slowly kill one of the engines over the next few days. Saskia, for her part, didn’t seem to care one way or the other. She walked to a com-box on the wall, so flat it was nearly invisible.

“Captain, we need to commandeer ourselves a belt before we lose an engine.”

There was no answer. Kaylee looked expectantly at Saskia who resumed her slouch in the corner behind the tools.

“That’s it?” Kaylee asked.

“We changed course. What more do you want?”

Kaylee’s brow furrowed, disappointed. She hadn’t even felt the course change. Everything on this ship was quieter. Having nothing better to do, she gathered a few tools, pried open the panels that housed the engine, and took a look inside. She’d never seen the engine of an Alliance scout ship before. Although she knew easily how to fix it, she’d have to learn a little more before she could perform her subtle sabotage.

\*~\*

Wash relished the food his wife brought to him, almost as much as he relished his wife. Hungry as they both were, she ate slowly and gracefully. A few wild tendrils of brown hair escaped her ponytail framing her face. Her lips were sweeter than Inara’s honey. He sat in the pilot’s seat; she leaned against the control board, facing him. As he finished eating, he reached out to touch her. His hand stroked her torso from hip to breast then back again. Perhaps it was because that part of her body was within easy reach. Perhaps because of how the tan leather vest flattered her figure.

She was updating him on their adventure in the pirate ship and the strange girl Jayne had brought on board. As Wash listened, he caught only a few details, but heard loud and clear the suspicion in Zoë’s voice. He noticed the uneasiness in her eyes; he noticed the way she had stopped eating her food and started picking at it. He wanted to ask if she was alright, but instead it came out “Are you going to finish that?”

With a disgruntled sigh, she handed him the half eaten plate—noodles and chunks of chicken. *Must have been a bone fide chef aboard the Neptune!* He was a little concerned. Zoë seemed more disappointed that she couldn’t finish the meal than that she was given the plate to him.

“You ok, sweetie?” he asked, glad it came out this time.

“Been too long without food,” she said dismissively. Wash let it drop. Zoë began pacing about the cockpit. “I feel trapped in this place. We’re squeezed in so tight, we can’t come about. No way to back out. Just waiting for this door to open.”

Wash finished the last of her food and placed both plates on the floor. “We’re not trapped,” Wash assured her. “We can get out whenever we want!”

Zoë did not seem convinced. She picked up a plastic dinosaur from the console and started tapping it against her hand as she continued to pace.

“What’s this damn thing doing here, anyway?” Zoë asked. Her volume was rising, which Wash knew was a bad thing. As she crossed the room again, he grabbed her wrist, rescued the toy dinosaur from strangulation, and looked her square in the eye.

“Listen, Zoë, my love, my sweet, we’re not trapped. It’s okay in here. I know where we are!”

“So where the hell are we?” Mal interrupted, coming up the stairs. Zoë took two steps back from Wash, quickly regaining her composure. Wash was momentarily disappointed at Zoë’s cover-up.

“We’re in a hatch, similar to the White Hall hatch,” Wash answered.

“I knew that much. What’s the White Hall hatch?”

“The White Hall hatch was built by a bunch of pilots, such as yours truly, who were tired of dodging anti-aircraft missiles. There’s always a hole in the defenses. The hatch is meant to give people a place to hide until they can take advantage of that hole.

Zoë raised an eyebrow. “You built a hatch?”

“Well, I commissioned it,” Wash conceded. “. . .or I agreed with ten other guys that it was a good idea. But I was right there in the planning stages.”

Zoë smiled, giving Wash all the encouragement he needed. “So being in the Newhall hatch probably means that there’s a very active smuggling community routed through here and that the locals get pretty trigger happy about shooting them down.”

Mal and Zoë pondered this a moment, so Wash continued. “It also means the defenses have a hole that we can slip through.”

“When?” Mal asked.

“Another half hour, I think. The door will open automatically.”

“Not soon enough,” Zoë muttered, looking uneasily into the darkness of the closed hatch, arms wrapped around her body.

“Zoë, you okay?” Mal asked.

“Fine, sir,” she said, her eyes not leaving the window.

“Any food left, Captain?” Wash asked, deflecting attention from his wife.

“Pasta’s about polished off, but Shepherd’s making soup. Somewhat easier on the stomach.” He directed the last bit to Zoë. She ignored him, preoccupied with thoughts deeper than her own hunger.

Suddenly, the proximity alarm screamed, causing all three to jump. Wash silenced the alarm immediately, and tried to make out what had triggered it. He considered shining Serenity’s outboard lights, but didn’t want to risk revealing their position. Infrared sensors were near useless with the heat that Serenity was radiating. Realizing that fact, Wash lamented that they would be a shining beacon to any other ship using infrared. He decided to flip on a small light and finally, they could make out another ship in the hatch behind them.

“Who is that?” Mal asked, impatiently. “Is that the Newhall police?”

“You think they tracked us here?” Zoë had gone rigid to full war-mode.

“If they had tracked us, they would have been here awhile ago,” Wash assured, not wanting to panic.

“Unless they were driving the speed limit,” Mal countered. “See if you can see who they are.”

“They might not like that,” Wash said.

“Yeah, well I don’t like not knowing who I’m in the foxhole with.”

Compliantly, Wash panned the track light to get a better look at the ship that now blocked them into the hatch. Within a few seconds, the track light exploded, taken out by a silenced gun.

“They really don’t want us knowing who they are,” Zoë said.

“It’s a smuggler’s hatch,” Wash pointed out. “People who use it don’t like it known that they use it.”

Zoë looked at him sharply. “You think we should just assume they’re nice people who like to shoot at track lights on other people’s ships.”

“Yes,” Wash said forcefully. “We are here to hide. So are they. I’d say it was pretty kind of them to ONLY shoot out the track light.”

Mal and Zoë weren’t convinced. With the loss of the track light, they could no longer make out the outline of the ship. Another alarm sounded, but Wash quickly silenced it.

“Another ship?” Mal asked.

Wash shrugged. With no visual, there was no way to tell. “I’m sure it’s fine,” he said, mustering his confidence. “They’re just lining up for departure.” He’d been in the White Hall hatch before. He kept telling himself that this was no different. Only it was. On White Hall, because he’d been part of the planning, he was intimately familiar with the defense system. From what he’d seen of the system here, the position and timing of this hatch made no sense. This area of the sky should have been completely covered. But he trusted Book. The Shepherd seemed to know all sorts of things a Shepherd had no right knowing. His knowledge of the White Hall hatch, while surprising, was not unusual. If Book said the doors would open at sunset, there must be a brief window of opportunity. He only hoped that Serenity didn’t stall and leave them blocking the other ships. If a ship would shoot out his track light, they were already suspicious, and probably wouldn’t hesitate to plow the road if he showed a moment’s pause.

Frustrated by the lack of answers, Mal grabbed a flashlight and headed toward the rear of the ship, planning to look out the back window. Zoë had resumed her stare out the front window, only now she was slightly crouched, ready to move at a moment’s notice, looking as though she were being hunted. Wash ran a check on Serenity, willing the engine temperature to drop. He wished he could talk to Kaylee and find out what she’d been planning for their take-off. Without her, it seemed almost certain they’d burn up before they ever broke atmo.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 7

Mal encountered Book and Simon in the kitchen, each nursing a cup of soup.

“Looking for something, Captain?” Book asked, pointing to the flashlight Mal carried.

“Just want to see who’s behind us,” Mal answered curtly, continuing his walk through. He stopped suddenly at the door, a thought hitting him. “Shepherd, what do you know about this hatch?”

Book shrugged. “Nothing, really. Just what the girl said.”

“The girl?”

“Well, yes,” Book said exchanging a look with Simon. “She’s the one who told us to come here.”

A new alarm sounded in Mal’s head. He set off quickly, this time headed for the Infirmary. Fearing for the safety of his patient, Simon rushed after him. In the Infirmary, they found the girl lying on her side, watching Jayne as he realigned the finder scope on Vera. Mal was momentarily relieved to see Jayne’s attention on the gun, as if life was normal and he hadn’t forsaken Vera for the girl. Jayne’s face was animated, telling her about Caddock’s weapon collection and comparing it to his own. The girl listened as if it were a bedtime story. When he noticed Mal and Simon, Jayne stopped talking; the girl rolled onto her back to see the new visitors. Though lying flat, she seemed to grow taller, letting Mal know she wasn’t afraid of him.

“What is this place?” Mal asked her, pointedly.

She didn’t answer, but cast a sidelong glance at Jayne, who laid Vera down and scooted his chair closer to her.

“Does it matter?” Jayne asked.

“It matters!”

“It’s a safe place,” the girl wheezed as she spoke. That phrase alone seemed to knock the wind out of her.

“How do you know it? Are you a smuggler?”

The girl closed her eyes, looking as though she were trying to catch her breath. Mal knew she was stalling, so he persisted.

“Do you use it often? Is this place a trap?”

She didn’t answer. Mal got impatient as his head filled with conspiracy theories.

“You work for law enforcement don’t you? You’re with the Alliance!” Then a new conspiracy arose. “How did you know Kaylee was on the Neptune? Why did Caddock try to kill you?”

“Damn it, Mal! Back off!” Jayne roared, standing to his feet. “She can barely talk as it is!”

Mal scowled at the girl, not believing it for a second. The girl, for her part, seemed in no rush to defend herself. Her breathing slowed and she leveled her gaze at Mal.

“Can you take me to Stolte?”

“Stolte!” Mal yelled. “I can’t take you anywhere till I get my mechanic back.”

The girl nodded. “I can help.”

“How’s that?” Mal asked, intrigued. Given the delays, the Neptune would have almost a two hour head start and Mal didn’t even know what direction they were going.

“I have a contact,” she began, then clutched her chest and began gasping. Simon rushed over, forcing his hand under hers to trace the source of the pain. Jayne helped roll

her sideways, grabbing a plastic bowl for her as she coughed up blood. Mal ignored the scene, new conspiracy theories forming in his head.

“You’re contact wouldn’t happen to be on the Neptune, would it?” he said coldly.

“I’ll introduce you,” she spoke, through the blood. Simon grabbed a hypodermic needle from the medicine cabinet and injected it in the girl’s neck. She stayed on her side, eyes closed, gasping for breath.

“What did you give her, Doctor?”

“Just a muscle relaxant,” he answered. “She won’t be able to speak for another hour and hopefully she won’t choke on her stitches either.”

Mal pursed his lips, frustrated at having come across more questions than answers. Jayne was wiping blood from the girl’s mouth, adopting the roll of care giver. Simon applied antiseptic and a new bandage to the girl’s throat.

Wary, Mal paced the Infirmary, keeping his distance. It was bad enough having one stranger on board, but this girl had turned Jayne into a stranger as well. Already, Jayne had left his favorite gun lying in the dirt and volunteered to give money for this girl’s passage. “Who are you, girl?” he demanded, quietly, not expecting an answer.

As Mal turned to leave, Jayne spoke up. His eyes never leaving the girl, he said “Elle. Her name is Elle.”

\*~\*

Inara sifted through the items Mal and Zoë had brought back from the Neptune. While she understood that they were mostly concerned with food and essentials, she managed to find a few of her clothes in the large rolling crate. She picked up Kaylee’s dress, her heart catching in her throat. She remembered when Kaylee wore it on Persephone. Though Inara had been frustrated by Kaylee and Mal crashing the Shindig, Inara smiled at the memory. Kaylee had looked adorable covered with ruffles and ribbon, her face finally clean and plastered with a smile. Now, the dress was covered with dust and smudged with grass and grease from being handled. Some of the lace had ripped and the skirt had been punctured by Zoë’s shotgun as she had carried it back.

“She’s alright,” Mal said softly, entering the cargo bay.

Inara turned to face him, not letting go of the dress—of the memory. “I know,” Inara said unconvincingly. Mal’s hands remained diplomatically at his side, and though she longed for him to touch her, she kept her distance as well. Inara dropped her eyes and looked at the dress, pretending to examine the damage. “Kaylee can take care of herself. I would never leave her alone on Serenity if I didn’t believe that.”

Mal let the awkward silence hang in the air a moment as Inara fiddled with the dress.

“Did you tell her? ‘Bout you leavin’?”

“I will,” Inara assured him. The conversation was cold, professional. Why? Why always, when he opened a door did she slam it in his face? Was it really a door to begin with or had she imagined it? He was waiting for her to say more. “How’s our new passenger?”

“Good,” he nodded. “Doc’s sewn her up good as new.”

“Jayne seems very attached to her.”

“He does. Don’t rightly know why.”

“She looks familiar to me,” Inara volunteered. “I’m not sure from where. Do you know her name?”

“Elle,” Mal answered. “You think she’s a whore, too?”

“I didn’t say that,” Inara retorted, angry at Mal’s insistence in calling her a whore. “I know people that aren’t *companions*, Mal.”

“Just doesn’t seem to be the type to run in your circle. Smuggler. Friend of Jayne.”

“You’re sure she’s Jayne’s friend?”

“He knew her name.”

“He knew? Or he volunteered and she failed to object?”

“Well, he,” Mal stuttered, turning over the idea in his head. “You’re suggesting that she doesn’t know him? That she’s just going along with it?”

“What would you do if you woke up on a strange ship?”

“I’d probably keep my mouth shut and try to stay alive.” Mal made a note to question the girl without Jayne present. The two seemed to have a rapport, being able to communicate without speaking. But he’d been around enough skillful women in his day to take that fact with a grain of salt. Mal reviewed the words she had spoken. “She said something about Stolte. She wanted to go there.”

“Stolte?” Inara repeated. “Isn’t that a privately owned planet?”

“It is. That’s why we ain’t goin’. She didn’t seem too heartbroken over that. Says she has a contact that can help us locate the Neptune.”

“She seems eager to help out,” Inara said.

“She does,” Mal agreed. “But I ain’t one to turn down help when it’s offered. I also don’t like not knowin’ who’s offering it.”

“I have contacts of my own. I can ask about Stolte,” Inara suggested.

Mal nodded his approval. “Good.” Having accomplished his mission, he looked for an excuse to exit. “May want to strap yourself into something. We’re not gonna be here much longer.”

\*~\*

After Mal and Simon had left the kitchen, Book went to the bridge. Wash was reclined in his chair, chewing on his thumbnail; Zoë alternately paced and stared out the window, like a caged animal. Every few seconds, Wash would press a few buttons, screw his face in concern, and then resume chewing the next finger in line.

“You present the appearance of a man with a problem,” Book said to Wash.

“Just a little Russian roulette,” Wash answered. “Except instead of one round in, we’re playing with one round out.”

“How do you mean? I thought we were safe here.”

“Oh we’re safe while we’re sitting. But as soon as that hatch opens and I start the engine, there’s a hundred ways for us to die.” Wash wasn’t usually so verbally pessimistic, but he had yet to think of a way for them to live through this. What if the engine choked and they couldn’t move at all, and then the ship behind them plowed them out of the way. What if the engine ran hot and they exploded before they broke atmo? What if they survived leaving the world and something broke while they were in space? With no mechanic, they could easily be on the drift and dead in a moments notice. And

that was assuming that this hatch was as safe as he'd tried to convince the Captain and Zoë it was. They may still be tagged by a new satellite or hit by ground fire.

"Is there any way we could remove a few more rounds from our revolver?"

Wash thought a moment, but he was weary of thinking. "I need more time to figure out what Kaylee was doing before she was taken."

"When I spoke to her, she was planning to fix the radiator."

Wash checked the engine temperature again. It was still running hot. The gorrām water-based cooling system left much to be desired on world. But should fortune strike and they make it to the Black... "Let's hope she finished."

Book murmured his agreement, then took residence in the co-pilot's seat. Zoë had not spoken a word since he'd arrived, being more concerned with what was outside her cage than in. Wash thought of the possibility of puddle jumping—finding a new hiding spot on world—rather than trying to leave. In the aft camera, he saw a weak beam of light cast shadows in the hatch behind them. He assumed Mal was pointing a flashlight out the rear window, trying to get them killed just a little faster. Having gnawed off all the fingernails on his left hand, Wash switched to his right. Zoë walked over and pulled his hand from his mouth.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, baby," she said. Both Wash and Book were surprised at her sudden change in mood, though not unpleasantly so.

"Sorry, sweetie," he said, not letting go of her hand. "I know you hate it when I bite my nails. I'm just worried about bursting into flames when the engine overheats. If we had more than a half-hour to live, you know I wouldn't be doing this."

Zoë wrapped both arms around his shoulders, pressed her cheek against his, and sweetly replied, "Baby, if you keep biting your nails, you won't have to worry about bursting into flames because you know I'll kill you first."

Both smiled at the joke; Book's mind whirred as he tried to remember the conversation he'd had with Kaylee.

"Did Kaylee tell you," he began, but stopped himself, uncertain of where to go.

Wash immediately sat upright, springing Zoë off his shoulders. "Tell me what?" he asked with urgent interest.

Book searched his memory for the conversation with Kaylee, fighting clouds of sorrow and guilt over her disappearance. He could hardly see past the man on Serenity's hull with a screwdriver jammed into his gut. But he persisted. "She didn't intend to use the radiator until we left the world," Book said slowly.

Wash nodded, impatiently. "Well what did she plan to use?"

"I don't know. She mentioned using Serenity's cooling system."

Wash slouched back in his chair, dejected. "That system's busted. If we use that, we'll explode even faster."

"Kaylee seemed to think we could use it to break atmo, then switch over."

Zoë and Wash exchanged a glance, each weighing the idea.

"It wouldn't have to last long," Zoë said.

"Ten minutes would do," Wash agreed.

A moment later, the hatch rumbled to life. The latch on the outer door released and it began to slowly open. The ground shook as the ships behind them engaged engines, prepared for a quick escape.

"Time's up," Wash said, calmly, hands on the throttle ready to engage.

“Let’s go, Shepherd!” Zoë commanded, darting for the engine room. “This is no time to burst into flames!”

\*~\*

River’s face remained glued to Serenity’s side window during take-off, her eyes intent and studious. Serenity shot into the sky, leaving a burning trail for the ships behind. As the hatch emptied, the sky filled with the blazes of engine trails, like fireworks on U-day. Newhall’s defenses were down and the bats were flying out with the setting sun. River watched the flow of clouds over Serenity’s engines forming a collimated jet. She felt the hull of Serenity deform in response to the change in pressure. The air was turbulent today. Her mind ran Bernoulli’s equations as she calculated a more efficient design for flying through atmo. As the engine rumbled and the ship fought gravity, River could almost see the temperature and density parameters changing as if they too were suspended in the air.

Then came her favorite part. In a heartbeat, Serenity crossed the last barrier of atmosphere into the Black. The molecules here were not gravitationally bound and the density too low to diffuse sunlight. The glow of the planet faded; her eyes adjusted to the darkness and then stars appeared.

Serenity took the change in stride, quieting down for the journey. Mal had not declared their destination as yet, but River knew it would change anyway. She could not see the next place clearly. Another vision plagued her. It would come out of her mind if she drew it. She looked into the Black once more. Their trajectory was wrong; they should be going 30 degrees to the left and 5 degrees below the solar plane. A fire flashed in her mind, people screaming, one man hanged. Who was it? River rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and shut her eyes tightly, trying simultaneously to remove the image and to bring it into focus. She traced the proper trajectory on the hull with her finger, then went in search of paper.

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## CHAPTER 8

As soon as they hit the Black, Mal ordered Elle to the bridge. Simon complained that she needed rest, but Mal argued that they needed a course more. For Kaylee’s sake, Simon relented and Jayne escorted Elle to the bridge. The bridge was full—Wash at the helm, Zoë at his side, Simon at ready with his med-kit, Jayne helping Elle into the co-pilot’s chair. Inara had outfitted Elle a blue and gold robe which covered her hospital gown. At some point, Jayne had washed the dried blood out of her hair. She easily adopted the appearance of a well-bred individual, despite the bandage on her neck.

“You said you had a few contacts,” Mal opened, waving his hand at the console.

She nodded and held out a piece of paper. Mal took the paper and read it, then handed it to Wash. Wash issued a few commands and opened hail.

“That’s it?” Mal asked, a little put out. “You have *one* contact.”

“One very good contact. Whenever you’re flying blind, he’s the one who can direct you.”

Mal raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “Mr. Universe?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard of him. It would explain your oft disorientation.”

At that moment, the screen buzzed. A tanned man with dark, curly hair appeared on the screen. Wash completed the vid connection.

“Misty!” he greeted. Then on seeing Wash, he furrowed his bushy brow and said “You’re not Misty.”

“I’m over here,” Elle said, redirecting the vid stream to her terminal.

“Misty?” Mal mouthed at her, doubt still on his face.

“I go by many names,” she told him, then directed her attention to the screen.

“Misty, there you are!” Mr. Universe said. “I heard you were dead!”

“I expect a man in your position hears that often.”

“As a matter of fact, I got word that you died on at least three separate worlds since Monday.”

“It’s been a busy week.”

“You always do manage to have a knight in shining armor waiting to rescue you.”

“I do,” Elle said, with a relaxed smile.

“Hey, check out my damsel in distress!” he said excitedly, panning the screen to a blonde robot. Elle laughed at the sight. Mal grew impatient.

Mr. Universe bubbled, “She was just so beautiful I couldn’t pass her up. We’re engaged!”

“She is beautiful,” Elle said patiently.

“My own Lenore!”

“Lenore?” Elle repeated. “Very poetic.”

Mal began gesturing for Elle to speed along the conversation. Mr. Universe had run over to his Lenore and was arranging her on the couch.

“Speaking of damsels in distress, my latest knights are looking for one of their own. I was hoping you could help them out.”

“Any friend of Misty’s is a friend of mine. What can I do?”

“We’re looking for a ship called the Neptune.”

“Ah, Caddock’s little bucket of bolts. I hear he’s been black marked.”

“Not by me. Do you have any idea where he is?”

“Last trace of him is leaving Newhall. But you just left there, so that’s not what you’re looking for is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Elle looked momentarily disappointed. Her voice cracked and she instinctively touched her throat.

“He’s been running a lot quieter than usual since his wife left him. When you see him, don’t bring it up. I’ve caught quite a few waves of him shouting “No women!” It’s hilarious. I’m making a little song and video. I’m surprised he took on a damsel at all.”

“She’s a mechanic,” Jayne interrupted. He’d been considering Caddock’s motives for awhile now and had come to a conclusion. “She’s sharp, too. Probably convinced him that he’s in want of some mechanical parts.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Mr. Universe said, brightening up again. “Now that is easy to trace. There are only a few rim worlds where you can get parts for a 10-year-old Alliance scout ship.”

Mr. Universe paused, consulting his various computer screens.

“Are you going to tell me where those are or do I have to guess?” Elle asked. Despite the lightness of her tone, her voice was getting weaker.

Mr. Universe hummed thoughtfully. “I wish you would guess. It’s always more fun when you do.”

Elle waited. She took her breaths carefully and more intentionally as though trying not to cough.

“And the winners are...” Mr. Universe issued a drum roll on his console. “Boros and... Greenleaf! Both have junkyards of stocked with Alliance ships.”

Elle turned to Mal, triumphant. Mal considered the choices, unhappily.

“Greenleaf is closest,” Wash said quickly.

“But both have very strong Alliance presence,” Zoë countered. “I don’t think he’d go to either if he had a choice.”

“You know, I did intercept a signal a few days ago,” Mr. Universe continued, his hands flying across various interfaces. “Here it is! Three Hills is auctioning off a few repossessed ships. There are one or two Alliance scouts in the line up.”

“Three Hills,” Mal repeated, liking the sound of that.

“I can send you the feed,” Mr. Universe volunteered. As the feed came through vid, the crew crowded around to watch. It was a standard advertisement, though clearly not Alliance authorized. Mal got the sense that this signal was not meant for a shadier crowd.

“Where did you get this?” Mal insisted.

Mr. Universe only smiled. “Can’t stop the signal, friend of Misty.”

Despite the cryptic reply of this stranger, Mal suddenly felt like he had a few options. If Jayne was right and Caddock was trying to fix his ship, then Three Hills made the most sense. Alliance presence was weak; a reliable source of goods was available. Serenity could make it there by tomorrow evening, if nothing broke. Mal ordered Wash to change course. Simon ordered Elle back to the Infirmary so that he could find the source of that persistent cough that seemed to bust the stitches. Elle, still short a few pints of blood, leaned heavily on Jayne for support.

As they departed, Mal called after them, “Nice thinkin’, Jayne. Figurin’ out what Caddock was up to.”

“That’s what you pay me for,” Jayne said with a smile.

\*~\*

“Saskia!” Caddock bellowed, charging into the engine room smelling of rotted fish. Kaylee jumped away from the engine, dropping a canister of compressed air. She wanted to hide behind Saskia, or go to the far side of the engine, or place an extremely large object between herself and Caddock. The man frightened her to the point where she couldn’t move or speak.

Saskia didn’t seem nearly so frightened; she stood lazily (or perhaps defiantly). When she pulled herself to her full height, Saskia was nearly an inch taller than Caddock and stood with Amazonian confidence. If Kaylee hadn’t known better, she’d have thought that Saskia was in charge and that Caddock was nothing more than an annoying flea. Saskia waited patiently for Caddock to speak again.

“What’s this about... what IS this about?” Caddock sputtered.

Saskia kept her voice level and almost threatening. "I told you. Now that we know what's wrong, we have to fix it. Three Hills was part of the plan from the beginning."

"You're telling me we're running slow and it can't be fixed!"

"Ask her," Saskia answered, motioning to Kaylee. If it were possible, Kaylee froze even more than she already was. Caddock shot her an evil glare and circled her like a lion. Kaylee couldn't speak, fearing that one wrong word could get a bullet to the brainpan. Caddock stopped his circle an inch from her face.

"You say it can't be fixed..."

Kaylee closed her eyes, trying to convince herself that she was just smelling an unbathed man, not a dead one.

"CAN be fixed," Kaylee corrected. "Just not with the parts we have here."

"Show me."

"If I show you while the engine's runnin' it'll burn your face right off," Kaylee retorted, wishing she had the courage to demonstrate. Caddock didn't seem impressed.

"You can hear it," Kaylee added quickly. "That whirring sound." Kaylee began rapidly explaining it as though she'd already talked herself into a hole. Using various hand motions and props, she demonstrated how the belt worked and why they needed a new one. She worried that Caddock might not be able to hear through the thick tangle of matted hair that covered his ears. He did seem to be listening, though, and Kaylee took that as a plus. When she finished, Caddock was silent, looking like he was still trying to catch up with those last few words.

"So that's it, is it?" he growled. "We need a few parts."

Kaylee nodded. "For this particular problem, yes. I don't know about the rest of the ship."

Caddock nodded thoughtfully and Kaylee nearly sighed in relief. Suddenly Caddock was in her face, forcing her backwards, his gun drawn.

"If this is a trick, girl... all's I need is a reason."

With that, Caddock holstered his weapon and left the room, leaving the smell of decay behind. Kaylee was frozen again by that last threat. Saskia slouched into the corner, not noticing Kaylee's apparent inability to move.

"It's nothing personal," Saskia said. "He just hates women right now. Because of his wife. He won't kill you 'less you give him a reason."

Kaylee reconsidered her plans to slowly sabotage the Neptune's engines. She didn't want to die before Mal had a chance to rescue her! But still, the thought of the Captain stirred a memory. She'd once overheard Mal say "If someone tries to kill you, you try to kill them right back." Mal hadn't known she was listening, but the words gave her strength. She decided she would not only sabotage the engine, but make sure that if someone tried to kill her, she wouldn't be caught helpless. Kaylee felt her hands begin to shake and knew she wasn't cut out for bravery. But she mustered her strength and rested surely on the knowledge that the others would come for her... eventually.

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## CHAPTER 9

Book walked carefully through the halls of Serenity, balancing a tray with the last plate of cold noodles and two sloshing cups of vegetable soup. While fresh food was nice, its tendency to spoil quickly had put a moratorium on any thought of rationing.

Jayne had not shown up for dinner and Book wanted to know why. As he rounded the corner, he could see movement through the Infirmary window. Elle rummaged through drawers and cabinets moving about the room. A blue and gold robe hung open over her hospital gown. Both drooped loosely on her body and Book could not decide if she were malnourished or merely petite.

Suddenly the girl stopped and met his inquisitive gaze with a steely one of her own. She did not seem frightened or concerned about being caught rummaging. Rather, she appeared annoyed, her look prompting him to give reason for his presence. Book's eyes dropped and he realized he had stopped walking. The girl didn't wait for him to move again, but resumed her searching, standing on tip-toe to probe the top shelf. From there, she retrieved a white tube and returned to the bed. She then squeezed a clear gel from the tube and rubbed it on a large scrape on her leg.

"Hello," Book said, finally walking through the doorway. She gave a curt nod to him, then started tending to other scrapes on her arms and legs. It looked as though she had been dragged behind a horse.

As he searched for a place to set the tray down, Book noticed Jayne passed out on a table on the side of the room. Somewhat alarmed, he sidled over. Jayne seemed to be breathing normally, but Book's suspicion of the girl peaked.

He looked to her again. With a slight cock of the head and rising of the eyebrows, she managed a silent, *What?* Even without a voice, Book sensed her perturbation.

"I thought you might like something to eat," Book said politely. "The doctor thought you could handle some soup."

Nodding, Elle put the white tube back in the cabinet, washed her hands in the sink, and accepted the cup from Book. Returning to the bed, she sat cross-legged in the middle, cradling the cup in such a manner as to warm her fingers. Her back hunched over and she appeared exhausted from the recent movement. Every breath was intentional and pulsed as if from a ventilator. Finally she managed a long inhale and smelled the soup. Book was concerned she might not have the energy to eat.

"How are you feeling?" Book asked, trying to clear a spot on the counter so he could set down the tray.

She tilted her head side to side and shrugged. Finally, she brought the cup of soup to her lips. She let the liquid briefly touch the tip of her tongue, but did not take more than a preliminary taste.

"You can speak," Book prompted.

She didn't answer. Suspicion built in her eyes, but she suppressed it and tapped the bandage on her throat. The motion caused her to wince and she went back to smelling the soup.

"Did he fall asleep?" Book asked, indicating Jayne. Elle's gaze followed his, but she offered no sign of explanation. Book went over and shook Jayne's shoulder. This elicited little more than a swat from Jayne. "Jayne?" Book persisted, shaking his shoulder again.

"What?" Jayne mumbled, sounding a bit perturbed himself.

“I thought you might like something to eat,” Book said, now confident that Jayne was okay. Groggily, Jayne sat up and accepted the plate of cold noodles.

“None for her?” Jayne asked, considering the girl before he started eating.

“The doctor thought it best for her to stick to soup for now.”

Jayne exchanged a glance with Elle who nodded slightly. Having the approval he sought, he began to eat hungrily.

“I thought perhaps we could put you in a room for the night,” Book said to Elle. “It would be more comfortable than staying here.”

The girl looked at Jayne again. There was no fear or uncertainty in the look, just steely suspicion as if she were debating buying a gold watch from a known swindler.

“Yeah,” Jayne answered for her, shoveling the last of the noodles into his mouth. “A room is a good idea.” Jayne traded the plate and chopsticks for a cup of soup and slurped loudly. The girl set her still-full cup on a nearby rolling tray and hugged her knees together.

“Cold?” Jayne asked her.

“I could warm it up again,” Book offered, but realized that that’s not what Jayne had meant. Jayne pulled a blanket from the storage cabinet and wrapped it around Elle. *She was cold*, Book thought. He was surprised by Jayne’s attentiveness, but also found it refreshing.

“You gotta drink some of that. It’ll warm you right up” Jayne told her softly, rubbing her arms to warm her. She smiled and let out a silent laugh as if Jayne had asked her to do swallow a dagger. Nevertheless, she accepted the cup when Jayne handed it to her and started sipping slowly.

Gathering his dishes, Jayne asked her, “You want to stay here with the Shepherd while I make you a room?”

Elle gave no hint of a response.

Jayne turned to Book, “You mind, preach?”

Book was startled at Jayne’s helpfulness, but agreed quickly. “Of course. And I can take those dishes,” he added hurriedly before Jayne could run off with the tray as well.

Jayne paused only briefly before setting the tray on the counter and hurrying off. Elle watched him go.

“He seems to care for you very much,” Book said. Elle seemed to concentrate intently on a few molecules of air hovering between herself and the soup mug. For the first time, Book noticed fine lines on her face belying an age higher than his original estimate. Deciding that conversation was useless, Book mulled over a few stories he could tell to fill the void and perhaps evoke a response. He was startled when Elle’s still, small voice broke the silence.

“Is that unusual?” she whispered. Her hazel eyes stared intently into his; her chest heaved with intentional breaths.

Book did nothing to hide his surprise as he responded, “Very.”

She accepted the answer as one accepts news of a friend’s death. Her eyes fell back to the cup, a hint of sadness appearing with a tear.

\*~\*

Kaylee was exhausted, having spent most of her day on trivial maintenance of the Neptune. Just by replacing light-bulbs and lubing the doors with WD-40, Kaylee had managed to see most of the ship. Saskia trailed her the entire time. In truth, she appreciated Saskia's company, because most of the rest of the crew leered at her like a piece of meat—the way Jayne looked at most women. She shuddered to think of a crew full of Jaynes. No wonder Saskia seemed so hardened.

Despite the abundance of empty quarters, Saskia had insisted that Kaylee sleep on her couch. “You think those men can't get past a ruttin' lock,” she had said. Kaylee was disappointed, hoping to be alone so that she could send a signal to Serenity. She prayed once more that her precious Serenity had made it off world and was now on a daring mission to rescue her.

Saskia's bunk was clean and filled with memories. One wall was lined with medals and purple hearts, all dating from before the Unification War. Over the bed was the portrait of a soldier, clean shaven, in dress uniform with a flag in the backdrop. Kaylee wondered who he was. When Saskia opened the closet to find a blanket, Kaylee saw a neatly pressed purple uniform hanging on the door—old Alliance. It looked as though it hadn't been worn in awhile, but it did appear well used.

“When did you stop wearin' it?” Kaylee asked. Saskia didn't seem to catch on to her meaning, so she clarified. “The uniform. I see a lot of the crew still wears 'em. Why don't you?”

Saskia began unfolding the blankets on the couch, preparing a bed. “Before the war, when the Alliance was just forming and Unification was still just a buzz word the politicians tossed around, there was a first skirmish. The Alliance figured most of the independent planets would see reason quickly. They sent us to Boros to “convince” the local government to join the Alliance. Caddock was first mate then. Our Captain didn't much like the tactics that the Alliance was suggesting, so Caddock led the crew in a mutiny. He took us into battle and we won Boros for the Alliance. We were headed home when we got word that the Alliance was none-too-thrilled about our mutiny and was planning to court-martial us all on arrival. Caddock suggested we head out into the Black and make our way here, so that's what we did. I took off my uniform that day—the day we turned our backs on the Alliance. A lot of the others that still wear it are longin' for home. Longin' for the Alliance to recognize our victory on Boros. Or they just forgot why they put it on every day.”

Saskia's bitter words hung in the air as she found and locked down all of her weapons. Kaylee had never seen so many guns outside of an arsenal. Saskia turned out the lights and Kaylee laid tensely on the couch. She saw the man she had killed and the man Caddock had killed. Caddock's threats echoed in her ears. She could hear Serenity crying to her through the darkness, the engine screaming from overheating. Her eyes welled with tears as the Neptune hummed softly beneath her. She heard the first click of the Neptune's engine and her fear began to grow. The whir of the belt had changed as it got one step closer to snapping. Her plan was in motion and there was no turning back.

She listened to the chink-chink of the Neptune's engines through the darkness. Within ten minutes, Saskia's breathing had settled quickly into the steady rhythm of sleep. Quietly, she crept out of bed, unlocked the door, and headed for the engine room. The crew of the Neptune didn't seem to wander through there too often, and she needed to tell Serenity where she was.

\*~\*

The room seemed to glow yellowy-orange because of the aged paint on the wall. After tucking Elle in under five blankets, Jayne sat in the corner and just watched her as he'd done most of the day. Jayne felt exhaustion pulling at his eyelids, but didn't want to sleep for fear this was a dream.

"Jayne, why do you act differently around me?" Elle asked.

"Who says I act different?"

"Everybody."

"Everybody? You only talked to three people today!" He was deflecting the question and she knew it.

"Why, Jayne?"

"Because," Jayne answered. He couldn't help but admit that a part of him had awakened since Elle arrived. "Because you're my cousin, Elle. I thought you were dead, but now... here you are."

Jayne scooted closer to the bed and took her hand. It was freezing! She let the silence linger a moment.

"Do you remember why we split ways, Jayne?"

Jayne rubbed the sleep from his eyes, replaying the day. Knowing Elle was alive, he could safely remember the whole story of White Hall, not just the revised version from which he had deleted Elle.

"Jantis," Jayne answered. "It wasn't safe."

"Do you think it's safe now Jayne? Jantis is still out there! Now this whole crew can connect me to you to him."

"Come on, coz, it's not like I gave them your real name! Elle is safe. No one in the 'verse is trying to kill her and no one wants her for more 'n 300 credits!"

A tense silence hung in the air for a few moments. Finally, Elle laughed.

"300 credits," she mused. "That's got to be one of my least successful aliases of all times."

Jayne chuckled as well. Elle had been alternately close and distant all day—taking his hand at some point and pulling away at others. He could understand that she hated looking helpless in front of strangers. Now he saw that she still feared for his safety—feared Jantis. He wanted to assure her that she'd be safe here. But if her experiences in the 'verse had anywhere rivaled his own, she would never believe him. People weren't to be trusted.

"Fine," Jayne said, smile still on his face. "From now on, I don't know you. Just saw your picture on the cortex and thought I might pick up a reward."

Elle smiled and the two fell quiet. Jayne shifted against the wall, trying to get comfortable. His mind fell to the adventures of the past—of the two of them as kids, shooting liquor bottles and pretending they were on a heist.

"Are you going to sit there and stare at me all night?" Elle asked, breaking his reverie. Jayne honestly hadn't thought about leaving her alone. The thought of leaving her now brought a swell of emotion that he swallowed as best he could.

“It’s just that... I’ve been trying to keep track... You fell off the map. I thought you were dead. Coz, I’ve dreamed you back to life so many times. I just... don’t want to wake up and find you gone again.”

Even as he said it, Jayne felt it was too much. His cousin had always been dear to him, but he’d never said it out loud, even to her. He watched her reaction to see if he’d creeped her out, but her eyes were soft and warm.

“Well, if you’re gonna stay all night, then get off that floor and get up here and keep me warm.”

Relieved by her light-hearted response, Jayne hefted himself off the floor.

“You have five blankets, how are you cold?” he teased. Tentatively, he got under the covers; he shivered as she pressed her ice-cold toes against his shins. It had been a long time since Jayne had laid next to a woman he wasn’t paying for. He thought back a ways...

“Do you remember that time on Greenleaf, we landed in the middle of winter,” he chuckled nostalgically.

He felt Elle shiver as she laughed along. “It was so cold.”

Jayne smiled warmly and continued the memory. “We was expectin’ summer, so all’s we had were a ground cloth and a light blanket.”

Both laughed. That was the last time Jayne had huddled next to Elle for warmth and the memory made him more comfortable now.

“So Jayne, how come there’s a statue of you on Canton?”

Jayne guffawed, almost embarrassed that she knew of the statue, but delighted just the same.

“You saw that?!”

“Learned the song by heart.”

Settling into story-telling mode, Jayne grinned broadly. How was he gonna spin this one...

\*~\*

Kaylee made it to the engine room without encountering any of the Neptune crew, though the ship was far from silent. Just past crew quarters, she had snuck past a lounge where several of the men shouted and jeered as if watching a sporting match. The smell of mead hung in the air around them. Focused on whatever event was taking place in their circle, they had not even noticed her passing.

The engine room looked surprisingly sparse. All of Kaylee’s tools had apparently been moved or locked away for the evening, leaving her more defenseless than she had intended. Still, this was meant to be simple. Tell Serenity where she was and get back to Saskia’s bunk before anyone noticed. Every sound made her jump, even the expected chinking of the engine. Forcing herself to remain calm, she went to the console and tried to figure out where the Neptune was heading. Three Hills, Saskia had said. Kaylee wished she’d paid more attention to geography. The Neptune appeared to be running zig-zags, but even with one engine running slow, it could still get to Three Hills before Serenity. Especially since Serenity didn’t yet know where to go.

Kaylee checked permissions, trying to figure out how to encrypt a wave and also what message to send. Though a genius mechanic, she was not a cryptographer and was

losing precious time trying. She considered sending a non-coded message, but quickly rejected the idea.

Thwack! A knock on the wall behind her was quickly absorbed by the room. Kaylee jumped in fear, seeing a tall, burly man stagger through the door. He smelled of alcohol, and struck Kaylee as more of an angry drunk than a blithering one.

“Is this an authorized repair?” the man taunted, blocking the doorway—Kaylee’s only avenue of escape. Kaylee backed up, trying to put the engine core between herself and the intruder. Her hand touched the panel over the exhaust, nearly burning her finger tips. She wished for a tool. Any tool. A screwdriver, a hammer, a putty knife, compressed air.

“I asked you a question, *biao!*” the man said angrily, grabbing Kaylee by the front of her shirt and throwing her across the room. Kaylee hit the wall with so much force, she saw stars. The man was on top of her in a heartbeat, a blow catching the corner of her eye as she tried to wriggle free. With all the force she could muster, Kaylee punched his nose, and then clawed at his eyes. Kneeing him in the gut, she was able to roll free and started to run. The man tackled her at the ankles and she pitched forward. His elbow came down hard on her head and he ripped the front of her jumpsuit open. Did she dare scream? Or would that just call more of the gang to rape her?

Kaylee scratched his face again, and ripped at his bleeding nose, but he got hold of her arms. He had her pinned, and the blood of his face dripped on to hers. Kaylee inched her way back towards the engine; the man inched with her, his fists pounding her body mercilessly. Her lungs screamed for oxygen under his weight and the world phased in and out.

“NO!!!” her mind screamed. Blood filled her nose and mouth, her blood or his she couldn’t tell. She choked and tried to roll, clawing, biting, and kicking to get free.

“Kersetz, get off her!” a voice screamed through the red and the black. The beating stopped momentarily, but Kaylee continued to kick and struggle until she was free. She crawled to the back corner of the room, hiding behind the engine, trying to get her bearings and clear the blood from her lungs. Forcing herself to work through the burning, she pried open the exhaust hatch with bloodied fingers, and prepared to direct the fiery fumes at whoever threatened her next. Though she couldn’t see around the engine, she listened intently.

“Go back to your bunk, Kersetz,” her rescuer commanded. It was Saskia!

“You can’t order me around, *chi,*” Kersetz retorted angrily, a twinge in his voice speaking to a broken nose. Kaylee heard the familiar click of a cocking gun, then a long silence. Peaking around, she saw that Saskia was armed and Kersetz was not.

“Go back to your bunk,” Saskia repeated slowly, her voice a deadly threat. Kersetz spat on Saskia’s boot, a mixture of blood and saliva, and then staggered out of the room, falling against the wall for support. Saskia lowered her gun and walked toward Kaylee who scurried back to the opened exhaust panel.

“All’s they need is a reason,” Saskia scolded. “I could kill you now, *sha gua.*”

Kaylee’s hands tightened around the blistering exhaust pipe. “And I could leave you dead in the water,” Kaylee countered as threateningly as she could.

Saskia approached slowly, then squatted until she was eyelevel with Kaylee. The world was spinning and Kaylee’s face and body throbbed. Carefully, Saskia took Kaylee

by the wrist and removed her red, blistered hands from the exhaust pipe, then replaced the panel. Liberated from her weapon, Kaylee fell to the floor and shook.

“How do you live here?” Kaylee whispered as Saskia carried her to the Infirmary.

“Welcome to my hell,” Saskia replied.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 10

The next morning, the halls of Serenity came calmly to life. River, barefoot today, was curled up in the cockpit, using the known speed and trajectory of Serenity to estimate that of a comet heading out of the solar system. Book was engaged in his morning scripture meditation, taking extra time today to pray for Kaylee. Jayne had left Elle's bunk early so as to change clothes before breakfast. Mal caught him in the corridor. Having waited all night to talk to Jayne without Elle present, Mal would not lose his opportunity. Despite Inara's suspicion that Elle didn't really know Jayne, Jayne's actions said that he knew Elle and Mal wanted to know from where.

“Jayne!” he called as Jayne kicked open the door to his bunk. Jayne looked relaxed, as if every morning he had a social chat with Mal. The look of innocence only further agitated Mal.

“Yeah, Mal?”

“Tell me about Elle. How do you know her?”

“I don't,” Jayne said quickly. “Saw her face on the cortex is all. She's worth 300 credits if we turn her in.” Jayne grinned at the mention of money. Despite this sounding exactly like something Jayne would do, Mal didn't believe him. Jayne would not leave his favorite gun for 300 credits.

“What did I tell you about lying to my face?” Mal threatened.

“Throw me out the airlock if you want. It's all the truth you get.”

“Caddock tried to kill her,” Mal began, searching for an argument. He couldn't yet find one between the shrouded facts and fog of lies. “Caddock tried to kill you, too. I need to know what trouble I'm up against here. Tell me who she is.”

The two entered a long face-off. Mal hated it because Jayne seemed to have the upper hand. The lie was practiced and consistent with Jayne's character and Mal couldn't deny that it made more sense than Jayne wanting to rescue some damsel in distress.

“She's just some girl, Mal,” Jayne said in cool. “Check the cortex. Elle. 300 credits. There she was, layin' there dyin' on a world. That's the truth that'll keep us alive. You start suspecting more 'n that, you get both me and her killed. Then you get yourself killed just for conjuring it.”

Mal sensed that Jayne wanted him to guess the truth, safe or not. But then, Jayne was not always as smart as Mal gave him credit for. He had to ask. “So there is a different version of the truth?”

“Equally as valid as the one I told,” Jayne confirmed.

“So it's just another lie?” This was getting confusing and infuriating.

“But no one kills you for knowing this one,” Jayne pointed out. “I tell you another one, Caddock might kill you. But he already don't like you, so that's no surprise. Elle might kill you.”

“Why would she kill me over something you said?” Mal asked, defensively.

“I’m the one this truth is meant to protect.”

Leaving those smug words hanging in the air, Jayne climbed into his bunk. Though Jayne seemed to be acting more like his normal self, yesterday’s lapse had opened a whole can of worms that Mal knew he’d have to deal with eventually. Mal hated worms, lies, and people who tried to kill him. He wanted the truth and some remote part of him wished he had a volcano so as to get it.

\*~\*

When Mal entered the dining room, Elle was up and cooking breakfast. She wore the same blue and gold robe as the day before. Her hair fell in soft brown curls around her face. Although she wore no make-up, Mal could tell she had the soft hands of the well-moneyed. The scent of cinnamon and strawberries filled the room. Mal watched, amazed, at the bit of magic she seemed to be performing about the last remaining burner of the stove, creating some kind of sauce for their bread. He wondered where she’d gotten the strawberries, knowing he’d brought none from the Neptune.

“Are you gonna ask me what’s on your head or just stare at me?” Elle asked, breaking the silence.

Mal was surprised at how smooth her voice seemed today compared to yesterday. The bandage was off her neck and a long scar was visible. Jayne denying that he knew her had thrown him for a loop. And given the invitation to ask, he would not start with strawberries. “How do you know Jayne?”

“I don’t,” she said simply, never taking her eyes from the pot. The answer surprised him and ran contrary to the theory he and Inara had come up with. If she didn’t know Jayne, she should still be playing along like she did to stay safe. Unless she felt safe enough for truth... which also didn’t make sense. But then Jayne had hinted that this denial was some kind of safety precaution. Still, that was twice he’d been lied to this morning and Mal didn’t like it.

“The look on your face when you saw Jayne says different.”

“I was on Canton a few weeks back,” she answered. “Saw his statue. I don’t know him.”

She seemed to have an answer for everything. Mal felt his blood begin to boil. “He seems to know you. He treats you different than other women. Hell, he left Vera behind so he could carry you. He knows you.”

“That’s his mistake. I’m not complaining. It saved my life.” Elle did not seem to notice the frustration she was causing. Her attention was almost entirely on the food. When she removed the strawberry sauce from the heat, she looked up and met his burning eyes.

“You don’t believe me do you?” she asked.

“Not as such.”

“I was much better at lying before my throat was slit. Can’t seem to focus now.” Was this a joke to her?

“Jayne says you’re just a stray. He saw you and wanted to cash in.”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“Are either of you going to tell me the truth?”

“That is the truth!” Elle stated firmly. She began opening and draining a can of fruit, resuming her relaxed manner. “Besides, I don’t trust you.”

“Why not?” Mal asked in mock defensiveness.

Elle put down the fruit can, preparing to tick points off on her finger. “First, some guy with a statue in mudder-ville kidnaps me. Second, he brings me to a ship harboring Alliance fugitives – a man wanted for KIDNAPPING no less—and this fugi tries to tell me I’m safe. Third, *you* go trying to kill me by deliberately breaking atmo while being pursued by the Newhall authorities... Not inspiring trust.”

“Hey, that last one was not a deliberate attempt to kill just you. That wouldn’t gotten us all dead.”

“Not inspiring confidence either,” Elle scoffed. “Then you tell me you won’t take me anywhere until we track down this Caddock, who might I remind you, is responsible for the whole throat-slitting thing!”

“You asked to go to Stolte! I’d be shot out of the sky before I reached orbit!” Mal couldn’t believe he was being reprimanded on his own boat! But with each passing moment, Mal became more convinced that she and Jayne shared a very dangerous history that would eventually come to haunt him.

“Point is, I’d take it as a kindness if, when you get caught, you tell folks I’m just a stray with no attachment to your crew.” The scolding over, she shrugged her shoulder and resumed draining the fruit. Mal was surprised when she quietly continued. “It’s not guaranteed to keep you alive, but it’s ... it’s pretty safe.”

“Now who’s not inspiring confidence,” Mal retorted.

\*~\*

Mal entered Inara’s shuttle without knocking. The red tapestries draped around the room made it feel like he was leaving the ship entirely and entering a posh world. Inara had given up scolding him for now. Today she wore a teal top and a gold and white skirt. Mal was pretty sure he’d never seen Inara wear the same clothes twice. Given the size of the shuttle, he had to wonder if they were vacuum sealed somewhere or if she just burned them after use. Inara sat on the bed, one leg folded under, mending the pink ruffles of Kaylee’s dress. Mal could see damp spots where Inara had carefully removed the grease and grass stains.

Mal took a seat on the red couch in Inara’s lounge area and watched her slow, meticulous work. He had never seen Inara engage in such a “commoners” task; for some reason it fascinated him. He thought of Serenity with her gone. Part of him knew it was safer for her and better for her. Part of him would give up the to sky chase her to the ends of the ‘verse. If ever she called, he would answer. Then they would exchange hurtful words and decide they were better off apart... but still, he would answer. He knew that the only reason they weren’t fighting now was because neither had spoken.

“I think Elle knows Jayne,” Mal said finally, breaking the silence. After all, it had been Inara that had suggested the contrary.

“Oh, I’m sure they’re quite close now,” Inara said coldly. She had seen Jayne sneaking out of Elle’s room earlier that morning. She could tell by Jayne’s walk that the two hadn’t had sex, but she knew from experience that Elle could still exert extreme

control over Jayne. From Jayne's behavior, it was clear that Elle was dear to him. All Elle had to do was play off of that weakness.

"They both deny knowing each other now," Mal continued, despite Inara's cryptic response.

Inara stopped mending and looked at Mal. "That doesn't mean they know each other."

She was about to explain when the shuttle console chirped at her. Inara set the dress aside, and pulled back a heavy curtain revealing the cockpit of the shuttle. Someone had sent her a wave. Mal came up behind her, but she shooed him back so she could listen privately.

"Inara, delighted to hear from you," a clean looking black man said. "I was a bit surprised by your request, but I have information on Andre Stolte. Must say he doesn't seem your type. In fact, he died three months ago. I believe you met his wife last time you were here."

Inara's mind raced as the Stolte couple flashed on the screen, their pictures taken at various social events on the core planets.

"I don't believe it," Inara murmured.

"Don't believe what?" Mal asked, coming to look over her shoulder again. This time, Inara didn't shoo him away. "Hey, ain't that Elle?"

"Yes, but—" Inara stopped, trying to process. "That's Nia Stolte. Elle is Nia Stolte. THE Nia Stolte!"

"Who's Nia Stolte?" Mal asked, unimpressed.

"She's the wife of a philanthropist, or was—now she's widowed. They developed that moon, Stolte, for full range crops and now they ship food to the rim planets!"

"This Nia, where'd she come from?"

"I don't know," Inara said, searching her memory of core planet society. "She just came out of the Black three years ago and married Andre. Most of the ladies I spoke to called her a gold-digger."

"Was she?"

"She's actually done a lot to expand the charity programs of Stolte. I suppose when her husband died, she inherited the moon."

Mal turned this new information over in his mind. Something was beginning to make sense, but it sure made all the other things fall into terrible confusion.

"Does it say how her husband died?" Mal asked.

Inara checked the rest of the message, then searched the cortex for obituaries. "It just says natural causes."

"So her husband dies of natural causes and she winds up on Newhall with a slit throat?"

"You think they were murdered?" Inara asked, surprised, but more confused.

"A smuggler always has enemies," Mal answered. "Elle knew about the hatch. If nothing else, we know she's a smuggler."

"Nia Stolte is a respected philanthropist. You're suggesting that a petty smuggler—Elle—became Nia Stolte."

"You may be right about her not being Jayne's Elle," Mal said gravely. "Even so, a powerful woman like Stolte knowing about a smugglers hatch and surrounded by

death... we may be dealing with something more dangerous than a pair of liars on this boat.”

\*~\*

The Neptune’s doctor had apparently lost interest in treating patients. The Infirmary was large, having three beds, spacious countertops, and advanced diagnostic equipment. Though bright fluorescent lights shone from an office area, the rest of the room was dim when Kaylee awoke. Saskia had mercifully doped her so she could sleep through the pain. As the horrors of the night before came back, Kaylee’s head began to throb. She dared no move. Her hands felt goopy underneath several layers of gauze. Saskia came over and held a cool compress against her face. Kaylee wished she could pass out again. In the reflection of the office window, she could see her beaten and purple face. She could feel the bruises all over her body and shuddered at the memory of her torn jumpsuit. The Neptune engines hiccupped and Kaylee smiled. Saskia misread it as a wince and cooed soothingly.

“Saskia!” Caddock yelled, storming into the Infirmary. Kaylee began to understand Saskia’s blasé response to Caddock’s blustering about. “Why is my mechanic not in the engine room?”

Kaylee yelped as Saskia unwrapped the gauze on her hands. Gently, Saskia cleansed the burns, applied an antibiotic, and rewrapped the wound. While she did this, Saskia did not speak to Caddock. Rather she let the wounds speak for her.

“Who did this?” Caddock seethed.

“Kersetz,” Saskia answered, moving from the burns to other wounds on Kaylee’s body.

“Drunken *sha gua*,” Caddock swore. “I’ll kill him.”

“You can’t, sir,” Saskia said matter-of-factly. “We need him on Three Hills.”

“What for?” Caddock raved, waving his gun in the air.

“Sir, we’ve been black marked. That means we’re going to have a hard time finding any crew that we don’t kidnap. It means we can’t afford to lose the crew we got.”

Caddock paced like an angry child, trying to get his way. Finally, he settled next to Kaylee, pressing the barrel of the gun against her temple. Kaylee winced.

“Is she gonna be able to fix my ship?” Caddock asked, cocking the trigger.

Kaylee nodded furiously. Saskia put her hand on the barrel and lowered Caddock’s gun.

“Of course, she will, sir,” Saskia said evenly. “Now go run your little ship and try not to kill anybody today.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 11

That afternoon, Book prepared macaroni and cheese with three types of cheeses. Despite the lack of a cooler, the cheeses were holding up remarkably well on Serenity. Elle had sauntered in to watch him cook, having spent most of the morning independent from Jayne. Book wanted to engage Elle in a conversation, but River wandered in shortly after and perched at the head of the table. River stared intently, in fact quite rudely, at

Elle; Elle cast the occasional side-long glance and mischievous smile. Book watched the interaction, intrigued. The night before, he'd become very familiar with Elle's ability to speak without talking. But Elle seemed to be giving River even less visual clues than she'd given him. Granted, River could be very intuitive, but how would Elle know that?

Simon came in next, taking the seat between River and Elle, ending the stare-off. Jayne arrived and sat next to Elle, but the two hardly exchanged more than a cordial glance. Shortly after, Jayne stood up again to help Book set the table.

Zoë and Wash came in discussing the latest wave from Mr. Universe. Wash had been seeking regular updates on the happenings of Three Hills, from the underground auction to the current Alliance presence. Eager for news of the outside world, Wash had used any number of excuses to contact Mr. Universe and Zoë found that to be risky. Despite that, she appreciated the most recent post which warned of two Alliance cruisers in the area.

As the macaroni cooked, Book set out blocks of cheese, fresh basil, and sliced tomato on the table for the crew to munch on. Simon carefully maneuvered the ingredients onto his plate and constructed a small sandwich on his fork. Not waiting for the plate to be passed, Jayne reached across the table, picked up a few blocks of cheese and popped them in his mouth.

"This ain't some fancy restaurant, Doc," Jayne mocked, chewing with his mouth open. Without a doubt, the old Jayne had returned.

Simon ignored the comment, maintaining his more dignified eating style. The appetizer was disrupted as Mal charged into the room, Inara following in as dignified a manner as she could.

"You own a planet!" Mal cried.

The room fell silent except for Jayne's chewing and the tapping of the engine. Jayne took another piece of cheese from the plate and tipped his chair back, watching the situation unfold with a bemused grin.

"A moon, yes" Elle said evenly, meeting Mal's gaze. Book's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He could tell that Mal hadn't thought of where he wanted the conversation to go beyond this point.

"Is this another lie?"

"It's an irrelevant truth?" Elle answered, forking a tomato onto her plate.

"The truth is never irrelevant," Book interrupted. Elle looked at him and then around the room at the others, all seeming to want an explanation.

"I share what's relevant and what will keep you alive," Elle said sternly. "Fine. I own a moon. That is not going to help you find your mechanic, so why must you know it."

"I just want to know who you are," Mal said.

"I'm Elle."

"No. I don't believe you are."

Elle scrunched her face in disgust. "First I tell you I'm not Elle and you say I am. Then I say to you that I am and you say I'm not. If you aren't going to believe me, then don't ask."

The room fell silent again. Most of the crew stared at Elle, but Jayne picked disinterestedly at his fingernail. He hadn't known about the "planet-owner" alias, but wasn't surprised. He knew from her other aliases that after they had parted ways, Elle,

like him, had gone in search of money. Mal fumed, having lost his handle on the conversation. Catching on, Zoë picked up with a different puzzle.

“Mr. Universe said Caddock’s been black marked,” Zoë said. “What does that mean?”

“Caddock has been flagged among both white and black market circles. He has not been able to buy, sell, or trade anything in over three months. I imagine that’s why he stole your cargo.”

“I thought he stole it because he was a pirate?” Wash joked. “You know, plundering and pillaging...”

“Even a pirate seeks coin or something to trade. Every credit that passes through that ship is marked as counterfeit. And if you stole any coin from their ship, I suggest you think twice before spending it.” When she said the last, she looked directly at Jayne.

“But, that’s not possible,” Simon said, his brow furrowed. “You can’t control what they take or try to trade. You can’t mark a coin like a credit.”

“You can’t,” Elle said simply.

“Just supposing you could,” Book said slowly, “why would you?”

“If you cross the wrong man, you’re never forgiven. Unfortunately, Caddock is not the type of man to finish a job he starts.”

“Or start a job he claims to have finished,” Mal said, thinking of his lost coin Newhall.

“Consequently, he’s always sought cash up front. That doesn’t work for him anymore. I imagine being black marked, he’s also having a hard time cycling in new crew.”

“So he kidnapped a mechanic,” Simon murmured, understanding.

“He’s going to get to Three Hills and find his fresh coin is useless,” Zoë reasoned. “They’ll probably stalk the auction hall and steal what they want.”

“That’s where we should meet ‘em, then,” Mal agreed, exchanging a look with Zoë.

Book had become so engrossed in the conversation that he burned their dinner. Quickly, he removed the food from the stove and brought it to the table. Having a few new answers to chew on, Mal took his place at the head of the table and they began passing around the burnt macaroni and cheese, eating solemnly.

“There is a job,” Elle said, breaking the silence. “Once your mechanic is back. I have a job if you want it. A run to Osiris.”

Mal mulled over the offer as he shoveled the macaroni and cheese into his mouth. Finally, his interest peaked. “What kind of payment do you offer?”

Elle smiled, arrogantly.

\*~\*

When Simon entered the Infirmary, he found both River and Elle sitting on the side bed, leaning against the wall. Both were silent, but seemed to be holding each other’s rapt attention. River looked well, sitting cross-legged on the bed. The fresh food had done her well, and the color was returning to her face. Elle looked paler than she had this morning, but her face was alive. Neither acknowledged his entrance at first. Then,

suddenly, River jumped to her knees and covered her mouth in alarm. Elle laughed weakly.

“What’s going on?” Simon asked, wondering if there had been a joke at his expense.

“A job,” River sang, alighting from the bed. “A terrible adventure. It’s clear now, where we go next.” With that, she danced out of the room.

Still confused, Simon turned to Elle. He determined that he had liked her better before she could speak—before she could lie. The Captain didn’t believe she was Jayne’s Elle and he was starting to agree. Seeing Elle with River, he suddenly had an idea of how she was so convincing.

“Are you a reader?” Simon asked, sharply.

Elle laughed at him, then winced. For the first time, Simon knew why people feared River: they felt exposed.

“No,” Elle assured him. Simon still didn’t relax. “I’ve been around my fair share. I can tell by her face that I’m getting through to her, but I don’t hear her. And right now, it’s easier than talking.”

Simon was still wary, but having no ability to change or control the situation, he let it drop. Besides, something else she said had caught his interest. “Just where is it that you come across all these readers?”

Elle didn’t answer. She just curled her feet onto the bed under her robe. Her face hardened as she sensed his distrust. Finally she spoke. “I just came for pain killers, Doc. But I’m not in much pain anymore.”

With that, she stood to leave, but Simon wasn’t done.

“You and Jayne share a pretty rare blood type,” Simon said. Despite all of Mal’s theories about Elle not being related to Jayne, this fact still bothered Simon. “That’s pretty lucky.”

“We shared a lot,” she answered, stopping with one hand on the door frame. Though not direct, it was the first time Simon had heard her admit aloud at the possibility of her and Jayne having a common history. For a moment, the coldness on her face melted.

“So you do know Jayne?” Simon wanted to confirm.

“Knew,” she corrected. “I knew Jayne... the man he was. Long time ago. I knew him before he liked girls... before he liked guns.”

Simon laughed at the thought of an adolescent ape-Jayne chasing girls with a gun. Elle retreated into the memory for a moment, but quickly masked it. She turned a disapproving look on Simon, the coldness returning.

“You don’t like Jayne, do you?”

Simon stopped laughing, giving cautious thought to the question. Carefully, he replied. “We’ve had our differences. When Jayne looks at me, he sees a reward he hasn’t cashed in just yet. When I look at him, I see... a crass, brainless, man-ape with a gun.”

As soon as he said it, Simon regretted it. He’d had enough foot-in-mouth experiences with Kaylee to recognize Elle’s reaction; only instead of disappointment, he saw hostility. Within seconds, Elle had Simon in a choke-hold, a syringe pressed at his neck.

“Make a move, Doc, and I swear I will inject into you whatever poison this may be. *Dong ma?*”

Simon froze, forcing his muscles to stay relaxed. The needle had already broken skin and found a vein. Hitting the vein must have been a lucky shot and he feared what would happen if she yanked the needle out too quickly... or if she decided to inject its contents into him.

“Don’t you ever call Jayne brainless. Not while I’m in earshot. Not where I might hear about it. He may not be skilled in the sciences or whatever rich folk teach their kids these days. But he knows his trade. For the last two days, he’s recounted to me Caddock’s entire arsenal—from blades to guns, which are rusted and which are well maintained. Over a hundred weapons. He can read between the lines of a gunfight down to the motivation of the individuals involved and find the weaknesses. Does that sound like a brainless ape with a gun, Doc? Or does that sound like a man who knows his trade?”

Simon didn’t dare answer with the needle still in his neck. Suddenly, with the same swiftness as before, Elle removed the needle from Simon’s neck and shoved him across the room. Simon’s hand flew immediately to the puncture, more from fear than pain. He was surprised to find clean prick and only a few drops of blood. Elle tossed the syringe at him with a smirk. It contained only saline. He was relieved at first and at first wondered if she knew how innocuous the saline was. The skill with which she had handled the syringe suggested that she did.

“He’s not dumb, Doc. He’s specialized. Just like you,” she growled and then stalked out of the Infirmary. In the halls, he heard her still grumbling, “Let’s see you pick up a gun and try to do his job.”

Still shocked by the suddenness of the attack and the abruptness of its end, Simon stood in the Infirmary, syringe in hand, long after Elle left. His neck wasn’t even bruised by the incident. She had steady hands and good aim. Simon knew that even he couldn’t pull off a move like that.

He thought about her words, convinced for the first time that she really did know and care for Jayne. Or was this an elaborate twist in the lie?

“Specialized,” Simon repeated, sanitizing the needle and putting the syringe away. “Right. Very, very, very specialized.”

\*~\*

River drew slowly, intentionally, careful with every detail. Simon watched, amazed, as she colored in their childhood home. Her attention to detail went down to a rust stain, a missing shingle, and a kink in the chain of the porch swing. River hadn’t spoken much of home since Simon had told her they couldn’t return. He wondered what had prompted this sketch.

Although she had been fairly lucid recently, she was often ill. Simon wondered if it was because of the fresh food. Fresh food, even cleaned, could retain unpredictable maladies from its world of origin. All they knew of this food was that it came from the Neptune. When he had asked, she said simply “Sympathy is a great affliction; the infection troubles the mind.”

Confused, he had responded “Do you have a headache?” She simply gave that look she always did when he failed to understand her. As if what she perceived should be obvious to him.

River was putting the final touches on the house. The lattice on the side was broken from the time he had snuck out. The week before his entrance exam to medical school, his father had literally confined him to his room to study. River had quizzed him, hardly needing the textbook as reference. That was the year before she had entered the Academy. Just past ten, River informed Simon that they needed one last adventure. A band of renegades was forming down the street preparing to seize control of the town and declare martial law. It was imperative that they assist with the triage and, if possible, take control of the planet. Eager for one more game before leaving home, Simon and River opened his bedroom window and began climbing. River had made it to the ground with her typical grace, but the lattice had broken while Simon was still three feet in the air. His ankle had turned when he fell, but unwilling to admit defeat, he and River fled away from the house, laughing as they went. Although his parents had never mentioned it, he was sure they knew.

Simon smiled at the memory. River stopped coloring and met his eyes briefly. She picked up the pencil and quickly sketched the two of them as kids running away from the house. She erased it just as quickly like a fleeting memory.

“I remember breaking that lattice,” Simon said warmly.

“It’s still broken.”

“Is it?” Simon asked, wondering if she really knew. “That doesn’t sound like our parents.”

“They like to remember us,” River answered, pausing to consider the completed picture.

Simon’s heart broke for home. As River stood up to rummage around the kitchen, Simon picked up the picture. He admired River’s talent, but mostly longed for the home he couldn’t return to.

River sat down at the table again looking more distraught than before. She snatched the paper from Simon, picked up a pencil, and began rapidly sketching and erasing things over the house. The colors became more smudged with each erasure. Simon wanted to stop her, to calm her, to save the picture. She drew an Alliance flag, then erased it. A broken window. Erase. A pair of nooses on the front porch.

“River,” Simon said tentatively.

River threw the pencil, grabbed a match, and lit the paper on fire.

“River what are you doing?!” Simon’s chair tipped backwards as he jumped to his feet. He gripped River’s hands as she prepared to light another match. While he struggled with her, he also tried to get water to douse the flames.

“It’s burning!” she yelled, tormented. “It’s burning!”

She dropped to her knees as Simon tossed water over the table. The picture was reduced to char. River was still screaming.

“It’s burning!”

Simon knelt down and tried to calm her.

“No!” she yelled, Simon was unsure at whom. “It’s burning,” she whimpered. Then she threw up on him.

\*~\*

Mal found Elle staring into the cargo bay, her feet dangling over the edge of the catwalk. Jayne and Book were below, taking turns lifting weights. Mal leaned on the top rail and looked over at Elle. She seemed emotionally spent and Mal wondered what she'd been up to.

"Have you come to ask me that same question, Captain?" Elle sighed.

"Figure that somewhere mixed in the lies, I'll find the truth of you. Or perhaps I should just take you to the edge of a volcano."

"Death threats don't affect me, Captain. I'm already dead." Bitterness laced her voice, but she still spoke with authority and purpose. He saw a hint of sadness in her eyes as she watched Jayne and Book. Mal recognized it as the look of a woman who was denying her heart for the sake of a greater good.

"You don't look dead to me," he offered.

Elle rolled her eyes in frustration. "A man slashed my throat and left me in the middle of nowhere. Statistically speaking, I'm dead."

"Everyone knows statistics are the worst kind of lying."

"Why do you persist?" she wailed, dropping her head against the railing

"I just want to know who can awaken a change like that in Jayne."

Elle shook her head. "You're not seeing a soul awaken, Captain. You're seeing a ghost—the ghost of the man Jayne once was. The ghost of a man long dead. And the girl Jayne sees when he looks at me? She died long ago. Long before anyone ever slit my throat."

"Then I seem to be transporting a pair of dead folk."

"There's nothing left in this 'verse," she murmured.

"Jayne's got you," Mal countered. "To him, that's something. Something worth a hell of a lot more than he had before."

"He's chasing a dream."

"He loves that dream."

"Love ain't enough."

*Sure it is*, Mal thought, but didn't say it out loud.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 12

In the pre-dawn hours, Serenity landed on Three Hills through a torrent of rain. The landing pad filled with exhaust and steam from the engines. As Mal opened the doors, he saw an old friend, Leslie Maxwell, who had founded a college in the town. Maxwell was an average height man who had gained a small gut since Mal had last seen him. His tailored suit glinted in the lights that illuminated the landing pad. Maxwell's hands were folded, his index fingers steepled and touching his lip. This was an old "all clear" sign the two held, so Mal let his trigger hand relax.

"Max!" Mal called, adopting a jovial air as he stepped off Serenity. "It's raining here!"

"What do you expect, Mal? It's the rainy season." Maxwell's voice was a deep base.

Mal wore a wide-brimmed hat which only succeeded in keeping the water out of his eyes. His coat weathered the storm faithfully. Maxwell stepped back, making space under the awning for Mal to stand.

“Just been awhile since I been caught in the rain. Any chance of it letting up?” Mal asked.

“Today?” Maxwell chortled. “Let me educate you on how we predict weather during the rainy season. Look over there. Do you see that sky scraper?”

Mal looked, but the rain fell in sheets so thick, he could barely see ten feet in front of him. “No”

“That means it’s raining. If you could see it, that would mean it’s going to rain very, very soon.”

“No kidding,” Mal chuckled. “What do you do with all that water?”

“What any good business man does. Bottle it up and sell it to the tourists. I hear you’ve run into trouble, old friend.”

“Nothin’ serious,” Mal dismissed. “I’m looking for a ship called the Neptune. Have they landed here?”

“Just last night. They’ve stayed locked down pretty tight. Probably waiting for the rain to let up.” Maxwell laughed again. “Your ship looks a little beat.”

“Well it happens when you’re short a mechanic. If you could lend me some of your services, I’d be happy to repay you.”

“Now Mal,” Maxwell chided. “You know I can’t be bothered to wait until you come into money and remember me. Why don’t you take a few land jobs until your luck changes.”

“Land jobs,” Mal scoffed as if the very suggestion was demeaning.

Suddenly, Maxwell’s posture went from casual to rigid at the sight of something over Mal’s shoulder. Mal’s hand went immediately to his gun. He turned quickly and saw Elle emerging from the ship, decked out in a red and gold dress that she must have borrowed from Inara. Her hair was pinned neatly on top of her head and a few curls framed her face. Inara and Jayne followed her off the ship, joining Maxwell and Mal under the awning, making it more than a little crowded.

“Les!” Elle said pretentiously, as if at a social gala.

“Chelsea!” Maxwell stammered, surprised. “It’s good to see you alive!”

“Yes, the rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated, especially of late. Would you do me a favor and refuel this boat.”

“Of course, madam.” Maxwell bowed nervously.

“And stock her with food,” Elle added as if she were Santa Claus bestowing gifts on all the good boys and girls. “And advance each of the crew a hundred credits for their kindness to me.”

“You weren’t kidding about that whole charity thing,” Mal muttered to Inara. “But just one question: who is Chelsea?”

“I don’t know,” Inara whispered back.

Mal sidled toward Elle as Max hurried about to complete the task. “This is mighty kind of you, but it’s not going to affect my decision on the Osiris job.”

“It doesn’t have to. You saved my life, Captain Reynolds. I can’t put a price on that.”

“Well, then. Thank you much.”

Maxwell gave several orders, making specific stipulations about account numbers and having the highest quality mechanics on the job. All the while, he cast uncertain glances at the four of them and Mal found it unsettling.

“Does something feel off to you?” Jayne asked, coming up between them. “With Max I mean. Something seems off.”

“I picked up on that as well.”

“He’s been threatened on account of me,” Elle whispered.

“How’s that? You’ve been dead all week,” Mal joshed.

“Now I’m not,” Elle pointed out. Her eyes shifted warily about the scene and she whispered “I should go.”

“Wait!” Jayne cried intensely. Elle waited, but Jayne didn’t go on.

“I’ll find a shuttle and meet you in the air,” she assured him, touching his cheek gently. “It’s not safe here.”

And just like that, she vanished into the rain. Jayne searched the faces of the bustling ground crew for hers, but it was like searching for a dream in a silverware drawer.

\*~\*

After sunrise, a thick mist hung in the air. Although the locals walked through with no umbrellas, Kaylee was convinced that the sky was still spitting on her. Caddock’s hatred of the rain seemed to surpass his hatred of women and of waiting. But eventually, Caddock had conceded that the rain would not relent. Kaylee was grateful to have extra time to recover. It had also given her time on the ground to crack open the engine and see how the Neptune really worked. Her kink in the engines had managed to delay their arrival by several hours, but her failure to get word to Serenity had eaten up all of her hope.

Braddox pushed her through the streets of Three Hills, seeming to target her bruised shoulder specifically. Kaylee winced with every step. Though self-conscious about her bruised face and bandaged hands, Kaylee held her head high, hoping someone would get concerned and call the authorities. Unfortunately, the people of Three Hills seemed reclusive, ducking their heads and crossing the street as Braddox plowed the sidewalk. Saskia trailed behind the two, a sawed-off shot gun concealed underneath her maroon rain jacket.

Three blocks later, they turned into a brightly lit auto repair store. Kaylee shot Braddox a confused look, fearing he expected her to find the necessary parts here. Spaceship engines and automobile engines were completely different beasts. Braddox paid no attention, but led them to the back, through a door that said “Authorized personnel only.” On the other side was a giant warehouse. An intimidating bouncer kindly requested their weapons and deposited them in a rotating safe. Braddox showed the guard an ident card and they were allowed to pass.

Through the security point, the whole warehouse was cement gray and lined with steel shelves. Because this was clearly not the reputable end of the business, Kaylee presumed it to be a chop shop or salvage yard. She led Braddox and Saskia past the first few rows, trying to get a sense of the layout. One could easily get lost in here. The back

wall seemed to be half-windows, through which Kaylee could see the sky had opened up again.

“Whole ships would be out there,” Saskia said, pointing out the window. Her skin being bruised as it was, Kaylee had no interest in being pelted by rain.

“There’s a chance we may find what we’re looking for in here,” she suggested hopefully.

Braddox considered the rain against a wander through the aisles and decided they should stay inside. Kaylee led them along, pointing at things that might be useful, things that would be necessary later, and things they needed right now. Braddox took quick notes, not touching any of the items. Kaylee looked longingly at the supplies and wished she were here on behalf of Serenity.

Serenity! Kaylee’s heart cried at the very thought of her family on Serenity. She pointed half-heartedly at a compressor coil, remembering the pain it had once caused her not to have one. At the last aisle, Kaylee found the belts. She wasn’t sure which one the Neptune would need, so she recommended that Braddox take a few of each. Finished with their survey, Braddox and Saskia collected their weapons from the guard and headed out through the store front.

Kaylee’s head hung sadly as they wove through the windshield wipers, all-terrain tires, and dashboard cleaners. Then suddenly, by the fog lamps, a familiar looking floral bonnet caught her eye. Hope surged through her again and it was all she could do to keep the broad smile off her face.

Captain Malcolm Reynolds browsed the aisles decked out in a tan, checked, cotton dress and a hideously mismatched maroon floral bonnet. She’d laughed when he’d worn it on a job on Triumph. Today, she wanted to cry for joy. She didn’t even realize she’d stopped until Braddox bowled into her, sending her tumbling to the floor. She yelped as her injured palms struck concrete.

Mal turned and gave her a quick wink and she ducked her head to hide her smile.

“You all right, miss?” Mal asked in a soft falsetto.

Braddox brusquely jumped between them and yanked Kaylee to her feet by the arm. “She’s fine,” he said gruffly.

Kaylee looked back at Mal as Braddox hustled her out of the store. He gave her another wink and went back to browsing. *They’re here!* Kaylee rejoiced, letting herself be shuffled along. As Braddox pushed her through the streets back to the Neptune, she scanned the crowds, hoping to catch a glimpse of any of the other crew members. Rain poured from the sky, soaking her to the skin, but still she held her head high. She would be home soon.

\*~\*

Wash waited anxiously at the foot of Serenity, too fidgety to be confined to the bridge. Water and mud sloshed around his feet, the ground beneath saturated. Just after landing, Mal had sent most of the crew to various hotspots around town to look for Kaylee. Wash had stayed on the ship with Inara and River and had armed himself in the event that any new kidnapers came to call. As far as he knew, River was still sedated, having spent most of the morning drawing pictures and then conjuring matches out of

seeming nowhere to burn them. Simon had returned early, knowing that the sedative would wear off soon and he wanted to be present when River awoke.

Book had arrived next, having spotted Caddock and Jie-rui attempting to make a purchase with their freshly stolen coin. It had taken a fairly persuasive bullet to the knee for the Deputy to let them go. Though the whole idea that a black mark could extend to something as tangible as coin had sounded like superstitious nonsense when he'd first heard it, Book was beginning to believe. Book went inside to dry off leaving Wash outside pacing in the rain.

Through the torrential downpour, Wash could make out the silhouette of his wife returning home. Hooded to shield herself from the rain, she turned often to check her obscured periphery. Apparently, whatever she'd seen about town had her on edge. Taking her cue, Wash edged into the ship and closed his hand around his Mateba autorevolver. If there was danger, he couldn't see it. Zoë backed into the ship, bringing a puddle of water with her, her shotgun raised. Wash stayed by the bulkhead, out of the line of fire, but ready.

"Problem sweetie?" Wash asked, following her gaze. The rain fell so heavily now that he could barely see out to the rise she'd just come over. Zoë waited a few tense moments, then finally dropped her weapon, satisfied that there was no immediate danger. Wash relaxed with her and put his gun down.

"Max is dead."

Her manner was rigid, cold, and detached as she found a towel to dry her gun. Her boots slogged as she crossed the cargo bay, but she paid them no mind. Wash, however, remained frozen in shock.

"Dead?" he stammered. "How?"

"Sheriff said he died in his sleep. Natural causes." Her tone said it was a lie, but it was the same lie she'd been told, so he didn't take it personally.

"Guess whoever threatened him made good on that threat," Wash said distantly.

"And I guess we just lost our last friend on this world."

\*~\*

Jayne returned to Serenity looking exhausted and dejected. Simon supposed that he'd spent most of the morning searching for Elle rather than Kaylee. Mal came over the hill shortly after noon, floral bonnet pushed back. The rain had let up just enough to see the short shadows of midday and the sun was causing the ground to steam. Simon squinted, then chastised himself as it was hardly bright enough to warrant a squint.

"Any news, Captain?" Zoë asked optimistically.

"Yeah, Harlem's Auto Supply on North 34<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. Kaylee was there... she had a few friends."

"At an auto supply store?" Wash repeated.

"Just a front," Mal shrugged.

"How was she?" Simon asked, overflowing with concern.

"A bit beat up, but walking on two feet."

Simon's mind raged at the possibilities, wishing he'd been with Mal to evaluate for himself. Mal began to wring out the folds of his dress which hung heavily with water weight. The crew was beginning to circle, eager for word.

“What’s the plan, sir?” Zoë asked.

“Well, it doesn’t look like they stole anything yet. I imagined they took Kaylee there to get a collection list and are planning to go back in tonight. I’m hoping they’ll leave her on the ship with minimal guard.”

“Do we know where they’ve parked?” Wash asked.

“No, they—they were watching for me to follow,” Mal said.

“West of here,” Jayne piped up. “Bout six miles.”

Everyone looked at Jayne, but no one spoke.

“West of here, okay. We go in tonight,” Mal said. “Quietly in, quietly out. We take what’s ours.”

The crew dispersed, most wanting to dry off before lunch. Inara hung back a smile playing on her lips as she looked at Mal in his cotton dress.

“Is there a reason for the dress today?”

“Do I need a reason?” Mal smiled.

Inara raised her eyebrows, working with all her might to hold back a laugh.

“Tactics, woman,” Mal patronized jokingly. “Caddock knows me.”

“Right. And this is the only disguise you had available to you.”

“I’m not like you ‘nara. I buy a dress, I need to get all the wear I can out of it.”

Mal pulled at the collar and wrung fresh water from the bodice. “I hope this cotton is pre-shrunk.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 13

Jayne never felt more comfortable than when clothed with his guns. Lux was tucked safely into his left boot, the bowie knife in his right. Replacing Lux in the holster was his Rutger—a more appropriate evening gun. His primary weapon tonight would be an assault rifle with night-vision scope and laser sight. He had no idea how night-vision worked in the rain, but it was better than nothing. His belt was laden with supplemental ammunition and a few grenades for good measure. The arsenal was semi-concealed beneath a rain jacket, but on this planet there seemed no escape from getting wet. On seeing the get-up, Mal had chuckled, but didn’t object.

As the late-afternoon cloudburst gave way to an early-evening drizzle, Jayne, Mal, and Zoë climbed onto the mule and headed for Caddock’s ship. The tires protested the uneven ground, jostling the three of them. Zoë maintained a steady hand, following Jayne’s directions. The rain and darkness obscured all evidence of a road and they dared not use headlights for fear that Caddock would see them coming.

The Neptune came over the horizon, having no such qualms of being spotted. Running lights pierced the rain with strong beams, creating a reflective halo around the ship. Caddock and Jie-rui stood by the door, the former angrily waving his pistol in the air, the latter speaking calmly. The door was tipped only half open, creating a waterfall effect.

“We’ll leave the mule here,” Mal said. The three of them crept closer and waited.

As their angle into the cargo hold improved, Jayne could see a dull yellow hover mule just beyond the entrance. Jie-rui took up the pilot’s seat and Caddock stood in the seat next to him.

Suddenly, Kaylee got pushed into view by a stodgy little man with a half-buttoned purple uniform. Bandages on her hands dripped with blood and she had a fresh black-eye. A stodgy man strong-armed her into the hover mule. The Neptune's hatch opened fully and the hover mule raced toward town, its engines leaving a burning trail through the rain.

"Oh, *juh jen sh guh kwai luh duh jean jan*," Mal muttered. Jayne didn't need to be told twice. The three of them rushed back to their own mule and took up pursuit. Having a wheeled mule, Zoë had more trouble with the terrain, and often the Neptune's crew disappeared behind sheets of rain.

Once in town, they were confined to road-ways. Traffic was light at this hour, but it afforded them a little more visibility. Caddock's mule turned into an ally with six-foot-high brick walls. Zoë slowed as they drove past the ally and the auto-supply store, but did not stop until two blocks later. They would park here and walk back.

The ally was confining and empty when they arrived, except for the hover mule. At the end of the brick walls was a high, barbed wire fence. A rusted metal door at the end of the ally was kicked in and wedged open with a broken security camera. Caddock's voice echoed from within.

\*~\*

Kaylee's wrists were bound, forcing her hands to smack together painfully with every step. Her clothing and bandages were rain soaked; she could barely see through the spots that danced before her eyes. Caddock pushed her gruffly through the warehouse, forcing her to recount the shopping list that Braddock had lost. Unfortunately, Caddock was edgy and would not tolerate a calm stroll through the aisles. Kaylee was tired of waiting for the Captain and had determined to make her own way out. There was a propane tank out the back window but every plan she came up with for using it involved serious burn injury and she'd had just about enough of that.

Braddock shoved her past the back window as she stopped to consider the plan once again. She tumbled into the next shelf and spun sideways. That's when she noticed a strange red dot glowing on his left shoulder.

BAM! Shots fired, shattering the back windows of the warehouse. Braddock fell to the ground and Kaylee yelped. She dropped to her knees instinctively, and then tumbled over Braddock's body, falling hard on her elbow. Jayne flew through the window, followed by Zoë and Mal. Jie-rui and Caddock drew their weapons, taking cover in the steel-shelved aisles.

Glass flew through the air, catching Kaylee's cheek as she crawled to safety. A moment later, the room fell eerily silent save for the sawing sound of metal against rope as Kaylee cut herself free. She saw Zoë swoop past the aisle, gun aimed somewhere to her left. Kaylee crept closer to the aisle with the deck plates, hoping to find some shielding there.

As the seconds crawled past at a snails pace, the air filled with a ghostly laugh.

"Is this the piss-ant Reynolds coming to seek revenge?" Caddock's creepy disembodied voice echoed through the warehouse.

"Looks like, Captain," Jie-rui's voice responded. If Caddock's voice could be traced to a direction, Jie-rui's came from the opposite.

“Just comin’ for what’s mine, Caddock,” Mal answered.

“You do have a death wish, fool.”

“Still, it’s only for you,” Mal retorted sardonically.

“You think I didn’t notice you following, Captain Reynolds. You need to learn to let go.”

“I need to let go?” Mal balked, lightly. “Is this about your wife?”

Fresh gunfire rang through the rear window, sending a stack of ducts tumbling to the floor. Kaylee grabbed a loose deck plate from the display and began crawling toward the exit. Saskia and four other Neptune crewmen jumped through the back window. Saskia dove for Kaylee, knocking her to the ground, sending the deck plate clattering. Jayne appeared around one of the aisles and shot Saskia’s shoulder. Zoë reached in and pulled Kaylee through the next aisle and they took cover behind a bin of compressor coils. It was all Kaylee could do not to reach in and grab a couple. Kaylee stayed behind Zoë, waiting for the next move. The additional men from Caddock’s crew meant they were seriously out numbered.

“I’m just like you Captain,” Caddock’s raspy voice continued as the gunfire cease again. “Just trying to survive. I took from you, you took from me, we’re square now.”

“I don’t recall stealing a member of your crew,” Mal said darkly. “I’ve had just about enough of you, Caddock. You gotta quit takin’ what’s mine.”

Zoë motioned for Kaylee to head for the door. Kaylee grabbed a few of the compressor coils and peered around the next bend.

SHOTS FIRED! A spray of bullets whizzed past Kaylee’s face. Jie-rui had spotted her. She retreated down the previous aisle, headed for the front of the warehouse. Zoë followed behind, getting off several shots. As Kaylee rounded the next corner, Zoë hopped and tumbled sideways.

“Zoë!” Kaylee shrieked. Zoë crawled out of the line of fire, blood trailing from her leg. Jayne jumped around the bend, startling Kaylee and causing her to scream again.

“Damn it, Kaylee, keep quiet!” Jayne hissed. He reached under Zoë’s arms and pulled her quickly down the next two aisles. Zoë hobbled as much as she could, but let Jayne mostly carry her. Mal rounded the corner to join them, firing his gun in the general direction of the mayhem.

“Elle was right! I should not have brought up his wife!”

Jayne dropped Zoë onto Kaylee’s shoulders and reached for the grenades on his belt. He handed one to Mal and kept one for himself.

“Whatever happened to ‘quietly in, quietly out’?” Zoë asked.

Jayne grinned adventurously. “This is my kind of quiet!”

“Star up the mule,” Mal ordered them, walking softly to the end of the aisle with Jayne.

“Captain, watch for those propane tanks out back,” Kaylee warned. “A grenade on them will leave a crater for three blocks.”

Mal shot a look at Zoë.

“Sorry, sir. Guess I should have parked farther away.”

\*~\*

Kaylee half dragged, half carried Zoë through the side door. Blood spilled through Zoë's boot and was swept up by the rain as they entered the street. Mal and Jayne had provided cover fire, but were still trying to make a safe exit of their own.

"That way," Zoë said weakly, pointing out the ally and to the left. But Kaylee had a better idea. She lifted Zoë onto Caddock's flying mule and then hotwired the engine. Zoë pulled the strap off her gun and made a crude tourniquet at her knee; then she positioned herself on the back seat, gun aimed into the warehouse. She let off a few rounds through the door, aiming for ceiling lights.

"You're covered, sir," she yelled through the torrent. Jayne ran out the door and nearly past them before Kaylee called him back. He hopped onto the back of the mule next to Zoë, offering some cover fire. Next, Mal dashed out the door and hopped on board.

Kaylee kicked the engine into high gear, racing out of the ally. She flinched as gunshots rang past her ears. Making a few quick turns through the streets, Kaylee was able to set some buildings between them and their adversaries. As the gunfire ceased, Mal turned to face forward and direct Kaylee back toward Serenity.

"Nice thinkin'," Mal complimented her. Despite the adrenaline coursing through her system, her hands burned and her bruised and battered body cried out in agony. The world was swimming.

"*Sheh Sheh*, Captain," she said through gritted teeth, fighting to control the hover mule. "Sure took your time comin' for me."

"Well, I like to make an entrance."

\*~\*

As soon as the doors closed, Wash kicked Serenity's engines into gear. Having Kaylee in the engine room again was a godsend and the fresh re-fit from Max's crew an excellent bonus. The deck plates rumbled on take off, and they were not a few hundred feet off the ground before an explosion rocked overhead. The ship shook and Wash immediately took evasive action, trying to find the source of the explosion.

"Wash, what's happening?" Mal hollered, stumbling onto the bridge.

"Looks like the Neptune," Wash answered.

"He never quits," Mal complained. He grabbed the com. "Kaylee! How fast is the Neptune in atmo?"

"Neptune's not movin', Cap," Kaylee responded, her voice shaky but confident.

"What's that?"

"Took this shiner for it, Captain. Neptune ain't flyin' anywhere till she gets a new mechanic. Just get out of range of that cannon and we're fine."

"Easier said than done," Wash muttered, darting to avoid another round.

"Serenity," a new voice cackled over the com. Wash couldn't believe his ears.

"Elle," he called, surprised. A blip on the radar indicated a shuttle had taken off and was approaching. "This is hardly the time to meet us in the air!"

"No need to meet," she answered. "Just go, I've got you covered."

Wash didn't understand. He veered left as another round exploded, spraying shrapnel on the hull. He headed east and upward, trying to get out of range of the Neptune's cannon.

“Did I hear Elle?” Jayne asked eagerly as he bound onto the bridge. His face was laced with concern.

“There.” Wash pointed to the radar screen, but kept his attention on the sky. The Neptune kept firing above him, raining down shrapnel and forcing him to stay low.

“If we know where they’re firing from, we can find the blind spot,” Jayne told Mal. Mal quickly took the co-pilot console and tried to get a visual on the Neptune. Elle’s shuttle zigzagged in low atmo, circling Caddock’s ship. The motion made it difficult for the Neptune gunner to aim and gave Wash the much needed time to shoot straight up into the sky. Finally, the Neptune’s gunner got weary of the game and shot down the little shuttle, taking one last opportunity to fire at Serenity before she was out of range. Jayne watched the little shuttle enter a tailspin and hit the world; it seemed to happen in slow motion. As Serenity crossed atmo into the Black, Jayne felt his soul go cold. The last few days with Elle had been like a dream, and now the dream was over.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 14

The Infirmary was getting crowded. Zoë reclined on the side bed, her foot propped up. River curled up on the bed and fell asleep next to Zoë. It was an unusually intimate position for the two, but given River’s behavior of late, they were just glad to see her calm. Kaylee lay on the central bed, doped to dull the pain, waiting her turn as Simon tended to Zoë.

“Baby, you okay?” Wash asked, hurrying in and taking Zoë’s hand.

She kissed him as calmly as if the doctor were treating a mosquito bite.

“She’ll be fine,” Simon answered, strapping a brace onto her foot. “The bullet nicked the bone. I’d tell you to stay off of it for a few weeks, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“She needs to stay off of it? I can keep her off of it,” Wash assured quickly, and then turned to Zoë. “Sweetie, you are hereby confined to bed.”

“You can’t order me around,” Zoë challenged, playfully nuzzling Wash. “I outrank you.”

“Rank has nothing to do with it. I have other tactics.”

“Yes, and we don’t need the demonstration here,” Mal said curtly, entering the Infirmary. “Wash, where we headed?”

“Persephone at the moment, Captain. Figured we could use a little re-supply and find work. Were you thinking some place different?”

“I thought we might head for Stolte,” Mal answered. “See if we can make a contact about this Osiris run. If the job is still there, we can make a good bit of money. A trip to Osiris might also give us a chance to unload that Lassater that’s burning a hole in my cargo hold.”

“I’ll send them a wave.” Wash kissed Zoë’s hand before he let go and then headed back to the bridge.

Simon tended to Kaylee’s wounds; he did his best to swallow his anger at her attackers. She was covered with bruises, welts, and lacerations. He had yet to find any broken bones, but as far as Kaylee was concerned everything hurt, so it was difficult to assess the true damage. At the moment, he was checking for breaks along her torso.

“How is she?” Mal asked.

“She’s in a lot of pain,” Simon answered, cautiously. “Some of the wounds ... it’s amazing she was still walking when you found her.”

“Willpower, Doc. She wanted to come home.”

Simon shook his head, amazed. Kaylee’s hands were burned and blistered, but then lacerated again over top of that. Carefully, he cleansed them in a bowl of water to prevent infection.

“How is your sister?”

Simon looked over at River who was still sleeping in Zoë’s lap. “I don’t know what set her off,” Simon mused. “She just kept setting things on fire and screaming ‘It’s burning.’”

As he said it, Simon stopped moving and looked at Kaylee’s burnt hands. Had his sister been somehow reacting to Kaylee’s pain? As much as that didn’t make sense in the context of the drawings, Simon couldn’t help but wonder if it did make sense to River. As Mal left, Kaylee drifted out of her drug-induced sleep and smiled.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked.

“I’m just glad to have my doctor here,” she replied, her voice a sweet melody. Simon smiled back, unable to help himself. Even when beaten to a pulp, she managed to find the bright side of everything. Tenderly, he re-wrapped her wounds. Then he just sat next to the bed, stroked the back of her hand lightly, and watched her.

“Did I miss anything exciting?”

“An epic tale,” Simon smiled. He looked briefly at River, wondering how she would have told it when they were kids. Doing his best to hyperbolize, Simon filled Kaylee in on Jayne’s heroic rescue of Elle and then their equally heroic quest to rescue her. Kaylee floated in and out of consciousness during the story, but always kept a soft smile on her face.

When he finished, she asked, “So you think Nia was really Elle? Jayne’s Elle?”

Simon thought back to the needle in his neck and he touched the invisible wound. “I know most of the crew doesn’t think so, but I think she was. She was so ... protective of him.”

“Like you are of River?”

Simon smiled thoughtfully. “I guess so.”

As Kaylee drifted off to sleep again, Simon added, “Like I am of you.”

\*~\*

Jayne grunted loudly as he did chin-ups in the cargo bay. The energy burn was meant to clear his head, but it failed miserably. Book’s attempts to engage him in conversation only worsened the turmoil. Since they’d left Three Hills, Jayne had looked up both Nia Stolte and Chelsea to see if he could reconcile their histories to where he’d lost track of his cousin three years ago. Stolte ranked high in both the legal circles and the underground circles and was a known business associate of Jantis. “Keep your enemies closer,” his cousin had always said. Chelsea did not seem to exist outside of Three Hills, but was not considered a native. Jayne couldn’t help but wonder if Jantis were connected to Max’s death. If Jantis had somehow connected his cousin to Chelsea and Chelsea to Max... Jantis had a habit of killing your associates just to let you know he was close. Though Elle was gone, Jayne had to wonder if Jantis was closing in on him. Angrily,

Jayne pressed through twenty more chin-ups despite the burning in his biceps. He had to stop thinking himself into this corner!

“Elle made a great sacrifice for us,” Book lectured, misreading Jayne’s anger. “Her sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

Jayne dropped to the floor, landing heavily on two feet. He used the back of his gloved hand to wipe away the sweat glistening on his brow.

“We’ll do best to forget her,” Jayne said darkly. “Forget her sacrifice. Forget every name of hers you ever heard. Forget she was ever here.”

“Jayne, it is okay to mourn her death,” Book persisted.

Jayne grabbed his hip flask from the workout bench and took a quick swig, enjoying the burn of the alcohol on his throat. His cousin was not the kind to just go and get dead like that. It was another thing that irked him. If it was some kind of love sacrifice, it had made her sloppy and he hated to think he could succumb to that. The crew’s ability to connect Elle to Nia Stolte—whether they believed it true or not—that alone rang as a death warrant in his ears. He grabbed his towel and headed for his bunk.

“I’m telling you, preach. It ain’t worth it.”

\*~\*

Inara walked with Kaylee through the halls of Serenity to the crew quarters. Although Kaylee had been released from the Infirmary early that morning, she’d spent most of the day between the engine room and the dining hall, avoiding her bunk. The memory of the barren, pirate-ravaged walls plagued her. When Kaylee had asked to sleep in Inara’s shuttle, Inara had just laughed sympathetically. As the two strolled along, Inara spoke of the past few days.

“Jayne was civil,” Inara was saying. She hesitated at ‘civil’, only meaning it in the loosest sense of the term. “Polite. Helpful. He was a different man—for all of one day.”

“I’m sorry I missed that,” Kaylee smiled, stopping at her bunk. The door to her bunk was framed with little Christmas lights and decorated with a colorful sign. It was a cheerful contrast to the stark, white walls of the Neptune. Kaylee’s breath caught in her throat, grateful for another homey memory.

“Don’t know if I’m much ready to sleep,” Kaylee said, looking at the hatch as if at a deep pit.

“The doctor says you need your rest,” Inara chided. “Didn’t you notice him hounding you in the engine room?”

Kaylee scrunched her nose in frustration. “Yeah. Seems the only way I can get him to touch me is when he’s playin’ doctor.”

“Aww,” Inara chuckled, putting her arm lightly around Kaylee’s shoulders. “Just heal slowly, then.”

Kaylee sighed, accepting the sympathetic advice.

“Good night, Kaylee,” Inara said, kissing her head.

“Good night,” Kaylee said. With that, she tipped open the door to her bunk and climbed down. Her bandaged hands complained a little, but at least she made it to the bottom without seeing stars. As soon as she hit the deck, she froze. There, hanging over her bed as though it had never been missing, was the pink and white fluffy dress she’d worn to the Shindig on Persephone. Reaching out slowly, she touched the soft ruffles and

lace in awe. How many of the crew had been in on this? How had they managed to keep quiet? Mesmerized, she sat on her bed and started a recording of classical, serene music. Captain hadn't just brought her back to Serenity, he'd brought her home.