

The Osiris Run  
A *Firefly* Fan Fiction by Valerie Mikles

PROLOGUE

*(River's first month at the Academy)*

River had looked forward to the new challenges she'd face in the Academy, but regret already clouded her excitement. She had not danced in over a month and several times she had woken up in hospital in serious pain. She couldn't remember why. As she limped through the sterile gray corridor heading to the administrative office, her mind was enveloped in fear. She wanted to tell them that they'd made a mistake. She was wrong for this program and wanted to go back to her regular classes.

The world was silent around her. On the left side of the hall, Exam Room 1 was open and empty. She shuddered at the sight of the cold, metal chair. Exam Room 2 was closed. On the right, a bay of windows looked into an empty lab and a huge incubator cooked up some bacteria or other. River heard a clatter as someone in Exam Room 2 dropped a clipboard, but otherwise the hall was still. Her own soundless footfalls as she hobbled through the corridor only added to the silence.

"STOP! PLEASE! NOOOOOOO!" Shrieks from Exam Room 2 pierced the silence. River froze, unsure of whether to run or to stay and help. She heard crashes and bangs as heavy equipment in the room was tossed and hurled about. One scream piled on top of another, pleading for help and for mercy, until a deathly silence fell.

Suddenly the door to Exam Room 2 burst open and a Chinese boy staggered out. His skull was shaved and dotted with pricks of blood from being cut. River's jaw dropped as she saw a doctor and three nurses in the room, blood pouring from their eyes and ears. The doctor was draped over a counter-top, looking as though he'd been caught off guard. Most of the nurses were backed into corners. Several machines had tipped over; one sparked angrily into the air. River looked from the bodies to the boy. He held his head, put a hand out to steady himself, and scanned the halls as if he couldn't remember where he was. Then his eyes locked on her.

"They are hurting you," he said, his breath coming in short bursts.

River choked, wanting to deny his statement, but unable to.

"The chain is broken."

Not waiting for her to respond, he grabbed her hand and began running to the exit. River's injured knee protested the motion, but she was too scared to fight him. They ran down the stairs toward the back exit and right through a security check point.

"Hey!" the guard called after them. "You're not authorized to leave through here!"

As the man reached for a walkie talkie, the boy turned around and cast an evil glare. River was confused by this sudden stop; her heart pounded and her knee throbbed from running. As the boy's stare intensified, his grip on her hand tightened and she bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain. She had thought about running away so many times, and though she didn't trust this boy, she wondered if he might be her ticket out. A stare-off with a security guard was not what she'd envisioned for her great escape.

"Come on, before he calls someone," she whimpered, tugging at the boy's hand. He didn't move and after a moment, she realized that the security guard wasn't moving

either. As River watched in horror, the security guard dropped the walkie talkie. Blood began streaming out of his eyes, ears, nose, and fingernails.

River screamed. "Stop! You're killing him!" She yanked as hard as she could, trying to get free of the boy's grasp, but she could not.

"Help me," the boy pleaded quietly. "Help or they will kill you."

River watched powerlessly as the security guard's scream drowned her thoughts. As soon as the guard fell, the boy began running again, pulling River along. Bursting through the back door, they were met with a sharp, cold breeze. The prickly fall grass poked at River's bare feet as they dashed across the campus and toward the woods. Tears streamed down her face as her mind clouded with confusion. She wanted so much to be gone from this place, but not in this way. There was nowhere for her to run. She had no money, she was not properly clothed. The world said shirt and shoes required. She had no shoes! The grass underfoot gave way to small rocks and tree roots. There was an electric fence just beyond the tree line and she feared the boy may plow them both straight into it.

But as soon as they crossed the tree line, he released her hand and pushed her sideways. River tumbled into the brambles, yelping as broken twigs scraped her skin. The boy walked to the fence, crouching behind trees when possible. His hand reached out, but he did not touch the fence.

"Peter Rabbit," he whispered.

River only half listened—her other half was looking for an escape. She scanned the fence quickly and pointed to a noticeable gap. "There!"

The boy grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet, and the two ducked carefully through the hole in the fence. After another twenty minutes of running, the boy finally slowed down. They had hit a river valley and were following the bank heading west.

"Where are we going?" River asked after she'd caught her breath.

The boy shrugged. "Away."

"Do you even know where we are?"

"Away," he said again.

River rolled her eyes, trying to make light of her fears. "That makes no sense. If we're going away and we are away, then we're already there. But since we're still walking, that can't be the case."

"You're new to the Academy aren't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You want things to make sense in a traditional way. What I said makes perfect sense, you just don't understand."

"I understand that you haven't thought this plan through."

"Then you do not comprehend."

River picked her steps carefully around a sludgy part of the bank. She was parched and wanted to drink the water, but the boy kept pulling her forward, his hand clutching hers with an iron grip. As much as she tried to pretend that she was adventuring through the backyard with her brother, she could not escape the danger of the situation. Her mind swirled around the fact that this boy had killed five people today and if she crossed him, she could be next.

"They would have killed me," the boy said suddenly. He didn't seem to be speaking to her as much as to the empty air in front of him.

"I didn't say anything," River replied, frowning her brow.

“You’re worried that I would kill you too. But I won’t.”

“What are you, psychic or something?”

“You are too. That’s why they want you.”

“Want me? I don’t understand.”

“They need you. They’ve already made mistakes with me, and they will make all new mistakes with you.”

“But I’m not—”

“I have learned how to kill them.” The boy stopped and faced her, his eyes glistening with madness. “If I go back, they will cut me to pieces to find out how I did it.”

“How did you do it?”

“With my brain!”

“That’s just crazy,” River criticized. If the boy had been her brother and this had been a game, she would have laughed and played along. But the boy was scaring her.

“Come on,” he insisted, yanking her into the river to cross it. The current pulled at her gown and her feet slid on the moss-covered stones at the bed. Suddenly, the current swept her feet out from under her and she submerged. Her shoulder snapped, anchored by the boy’s firm grip. He lifted her above the surface; the cold water rushed around her head as she gasped for breath. Slowly, they made their way across the river and up the muddy banks on the opposite side, shivering as the cool air scathed their damp skin.

“Stop!” a shout came from across the water. River looked back and saw three security officers crossing a fallen tree log as quickly as balance allowed. Why hadn’t they crossed that way?

The boy didn’t stop to consider; he just grabbed her hand and started running again.

“You can’t be afraid to kill them,” the boy panted as he pulled her through the foliage. “They will not hesitate to kill you.”

“But how—I don’t understand!” River cried.

POW! A sonic blast knocked the boy to the ground, unconscious. River fell with him, landing hard on her knee. She was suddenly stricken with fear. What if the authorities thought she was involved with the five murders? She couldn’t tell them that the boy had stared those people to death. Looks can’t kill! If she said that, they would put her in an institution, locked down more tightly than she was now. River caught herself on that thought. She’d never considered herself a prisoner at the Academy before today. She watched the boy as he writhed in pain from the sonic blast. He had called her psychic. He had said they would kill her.

Unable to walk, River scooted on her elbows over to the boy and cradled his head so he wouldn’t hurt himself on the rocky forest floor. “They’re taking us back now,” she whispered softly, a tear rolling down her cheek. The security officers surrounded them, shouting at them not to move.

The boy wheezed, pressing his eyes closed. “They will kill you.”

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## CHAPTER 1

The taste of ash filled her mouth. Her room and her body were coated in black soot. Smoke choked her breath and burned her eyes. River rolled off her bed, trying to get

below the smoke. Flames leapt from the floor, consuming her skin. She screamed as her body melted and died.

“River!” Simon’s voice cut through the flames.

*Stay away, she thought. Not safe.*

Suddenly, she felt his cold hands on her skin. The fire disappeared. She was lying on the floor, cradled in her brother’s arms. The cool air chilled her sweat-coated body. The vision dried up until all that was left was confusion. All she knew was that Serenity was going in the right direction, but with the wrong mission.

“What were you dreaming about?” Simon asked soothingly, stroking her hair.

“I’m in the wardrobe,” she answered. “Found mother’s black dress. I hear her counting.”

Simon did not answer, but River no longer expected it. She had told him the plan a dozen times and he never acknowledged. Time was running out. Almost to a hundred.

“I woke you,” River pouted, upset at herself for disturbing her brother. She touched his face which was rough with stubble.

“It’s okay, mei mei. Would you like something to help you sleep?”

River shook her head, sitting up. “I can’t see when I sleep. I need to find the lamp post.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Simon offered, not understanding.

“Ready or not,” she answered.

Simon helped her off the floor and she crawled back under her covers and closed her eyes. As soon as he left, River crept out of her room and up to the kitchen. The ship was still asleep, so she did her best to keep quiet. Pulling out a pack of matches, she lit one and watched it burn until the flame touched her fingers. Where was the lamp post?

Scrounging around the kitchen, she found several long candles and set them up in a circle on the table. She lit the candles and watched them burn, the wax dripping down the side. Time was running out. Five. Six. Seven. Ready or not.

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*Shells exploded overhead and Zoë crouched in the remnants of a church for cover. Desperately, she searched the fallen bodies for a weapon that still had a few rounds in it so she could defend herself. The sound of exploding mortars drowned out the warning sirens and the blast threw her backwards. Where was everyone?*

Zoë awoke with a start. Wash’s arm was draped over her and though he didn’t seem to stir, his hand began stroking hers. He had stopped asking if it was the same dream—it always was. He had stopped trying to get her to talk about it, stopped trying to council her through it. He had accepted the fact that she would never leave Serenity Valley. He had marked the experience as something he would never understand in his lifetime. But every time the dream of Serenity Valley plagued her, he acknowledged. He woke up with her, though less vocally these days, and he soothed her to sleep again. It had been her greatest fear, sharing this secret with him. She hated that the screams from the war still haunted her. She hated the memory, the horror, and the loss.

*A shell exploded overhead. Then another. The walls around her crumbled, but no one screamed. They were all dead.*

Zoë crawled out of bed to escape the dream, her toes tingling as they touched the chilly floor. Was it too early for breakfast? She had no desire to sleep anymore. Her leg throbbed where she had been shot on Three Hills. Her shoulder began to throb as well, then her chest. Old war injuries flared up angrily, shouting at her to remember.

*“Stay with me Zoë!” Mal was shouting. He was carrying her to cover, but it was too late. Shrapnel had pierced her body armor. Her limbs were going numb. Mal phased in and out of her vision as the sky above them crackled with mortars. In the distance, she could hear singing. “...I’ll hold you close to me.”*

Wash! The screams of Serenity Valley diminished and Zoë could feel Wash’s arms around her waist. He rocked her slowly, his warm breath caressing her ear. How long had he been singing? Zoë’s hands tightened around his as they swayed together in their bunk. His voice brought her to the present, to warmth, to love. Wash had made up the song long ago—about the same time he had stopped trying to council her through the dream. He made up most of the words as he went, but the refrain was always the same. She let his voice anchor her to the present as he repeated his song.

“I cannot calm the raging war / That haunts your memory. / But ‘til your calm, my lamby-toes / I’ll hold you close to me.”

Zoë smiled, amused that he’d worked the pet name “lamby-toes” into the song. Always different, yet always the same. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“I love you,” she whispered. He kissed her cheek

“You coming back to bed?” he asked.

“I just want to walk around for a bit, clear my head.”

“I’m sorry; I can’t let you do that.”

“Oh?” Zoë challenged.

“I promised the doctor I’d keep you off that foot. But I do know something that might clear your head.”

“You mean clear your head.”

“You know you like it too,” he said playfully. “And you’ll be off your foot.”

“Okay,” Zoë agreed mischievously. “But only if we’re really quiet.”

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“Waaaaaa-hoooooo!” Wash whooped as he sped around Serenity’s cargo bay in their new hover mule. Freshly stolen from the pirates on Three Hills, Wash considered the mule an upgrade in every way. The mule swung sideways, fishtailing mildly as he rounded the corner again and headed for the stairs. Zoë laughed as she held on for dear life. She was sitting sideways in the back seat, her injured leg propped up. As Wash whirled around the next turn, she felt herself sliding.

“Careful, Wash! Doc told me to take it easy!”

“You’re off your foot!” Wash pointed out, gleefully. He throttled back, giving Zoë a chance to reseat herself. After one more spin around the bay, Wash parked the mule and climbed into the back seat with Zoë. He tried to balance on top of her, but having bucket seats rather than a bench, he tumbled to the floor. Zoë’s giggles erupted into laughter as Wash rested his chin puppy-like on her lap.

“And I said quietly,” Zoë giggled, running her fingers through Wash’s hair. “Captain’s gonna shoot us both if he catches us here.”

“Captain seem a little testy lately?”

“He does a bit,” Zoë agreed, catching her breath as the laughter subsided.

“Captain just doesn’t like being handled. Stolte’s been pushing him around from the start.”

“Stotle, pushy, right. I don’t like it,” Wash mocked, knowingly. Zoë knocked his head playfully off her lap causing him to slide backwards into the front seat. They both laughed a moment, and then Wash jolted in surprise.

“Whoa-ho!” Wash jumped to his feet. “I’m vibrating.”

Zoë watched quizzically as he pulled a portable alarm out of his pocket.

“Problem?” she asked.

“No, just getting close to planet-side traffic.”

“I thought we weren’t landing till mid-morning?”

“Core traffic laws, dear. Alliance is telling me that I have to pay extra attention to all the empty space around the planet.” Wash crawled into the back seat again and kissed her lightly. “You wait right here for me. We’ll go for another spin after we land.”

“Wait here?” Zoë asked playfully.

“Right here.”

“You mind if I get some breakfast while I wait?”

“Bring me some?”

Zoë smiled as she watched her husband go to the bridge. As soon as he was out of sight, she turned a frustrated glare at her injured leg. If she couldn’t walk, she couldn’t do her job and that irked her. Captain had already grounded her for this job, but when things went wrong, she’d have to rescue him and rescues usually entailed running. Her mind turned to the Infirmary. Perhaps some pain killers with breakfast.

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The morning waned, but Jayne still lay in bed, the Lassiter resting on his chest. The Lassiter was a stout little beast as laser pistols went. The first of its kind, much of the bulk went into shielding and casing for the source. Jayne slipped his fingers through the grip, feeling the pistol mold to the shape of his palm. The piece was perfectly crafted... for someone with small hands. The first of its kind, and it seemed this laser pistol had been designed for a woman’s grip! Jayne envisioned Elle holding the Lassiter, but suppressed the vision quickly. His cousin’s second death weighed heavily on him and he fought desperately to fill his mind with other things.

Jayne aimed at the ceiling lights, making sound effects for the pistol. Then he swung to various other ‘targets’ around the room. Elle’s room. Since her death, Jayne had spent many nights sleeping in her bed rather than his own. There were times that he swore he could feel her next to him. There were days he was convinced that her second death would not be her last—that she had somehow cheated death and would meet him again. He could understand her reluctance to contact him. Working for Nia Stolte meant working close to Jantis and Jantis could not suspect that Elle and Nia were one and the same.

In the week and a half since Elle's death, Jayne had spent every waking minute moving. Push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, squats, curls, presses. He tried everything to make the pain in his body greater than that in his soul. He avoided the crew most days, partly for their overly sympathetic manner, partly because Mal told him not to return to meals until he could keep a civil tongue. Jayne hadn't noticed his talk being any less civil than before, but he didn't care much for the crew's company of late anyway. Jayne had been up late last night, lifting weights until he had dropped the bar on himself. Aside from a bruise across his chest and a lot of soreness, he felt fine. But then, he hadn't tried to move today. Book had come in earlier without a word, set a tray of scrambled egg-style protein on the table, then set himself on the floor to pray. Reaching into the backwaters of his memory, Jayne recalled Book saying that he was taking a day of silence, though Jayne could not understand why.

Laying the Lassiter on his chest, Jayne reached underneath himself and pulled out the LeMat revolver he seemed to have rolled onto. Also poking into his back were his Buhnder, Rutger, Mateba, and Desert Eagle. Vera rested patiently on the pillow, not mixing with the others as her scope was freshly aligned. Carefully, he adjusted Vera's position so he could sit up in bed and start eating his eggs. They would be landing in a few minutes and soon Mal would be asking him to run around and do things. Jayne needed the distraction. As he delved hungrily into the eggs, he looked at Book who was still sitting on the floor, head bowed.

"You don't have to stay, you know," Jayne told him.

Book looked up, catching his eye. He just smiled and nodded, as if to say he knew, but he wanted to be there.

"Damn shame losing this Lassiter," Jayne said quickly. "It's something I'd want for my own collection. 'Course I'd want it to work."

Jayne picked up the Lassiter again, turning it over in his hands and examining the power source. Huge, clunky, antiquated. A retrofit was possible because modern laser sources were so much smaller. Book reached out for the gun and Jayne handed it over.

"You probably know more about this gun than you let on," Jayne chuckled. His mind turned curiously about the Shepherd's well-guarded past. "You know a lot more about everything than you let on."

Book gave a short laugh and handed the Lassiter back to Jayne.

"Do you think Elle—" Jayne stopped himself from finishing the thought, sank into the pillow, and set his breakfast aside. He buried his head in his hands, wishing to pull the thoughts of his cousin out by brute force. Normally, Shepherd Book would make an eloquent speech at this time—something about letting go of the pain of the past. But today, Book was silent and the silence drove Jayne crazy.

With his eyes squeezed shut to close out thoughts of his cousin, Jayne reached for his Mateba, pointed it at his head, and pulled the trigger. The revolver clicked as the chamber turned. Book had long since taken the rounds from all of the weapons. The clicks of the revolver filled the silence where Book's voice should have been and the sound anchored Jayne to the present. He felt the rumble of the deck plates as the ship landed. Soon they would take on new cargo and he'd be put to work doing the heavy lifting. Soon, they would have a huge payoff—a hundred-thousand credits per crate. Soon, he'd forget his cousin, just like he had after her first death, and life would be back to normal.

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Captain Malcolm Reynolds hated the core planets. As soon as he opened Serenity's hatch, the smells of the city wafted in—exhaust fumes, bleached concrete, and stale urine. The whole space port was coated in an artificial gray and there were no trees or natural dirt in sight. With his forged papers freshly updated, the Port Authorities had paid Serenity little mind outside of a complimentary refueling. Working for Nia Stolte had its perks, but that didn't mean he trusted her. Mal had made a conscious effort to refer to "Elle" as "Nia" in the context of this job. Between Jayne's continued denial that he knew Elle/Nia and the advice of the people on Stolte Moon, he wanted his crew to keep the aliases straight. Jayne's words echoed in his mind. *I'm the one this truth is meant to protect.* Mal didn't have time to deal with cryptic truths and mysterious cargo. On Stolte Moon, he had met Andre Stolte, Jr.—Nia's stepson and heir to the Stolte Moon—and was convinced that these were bigger fish than he was accustomed to dealing with. They kept trying to exert control over this job and at one point had very firmly suggested he change the markings and the name of his ship. Mal had nearly punched the Stolte kid, but held back as he didn't want to end up fighting a duel with swords again. This was not his world and it made him uncomfortable. Mal didn't like being uncomfortable, and the only thing he could think to do about it was to make his own job. Now if only he could find that Lassiter.

As he came down the stairs for a second look through the cargo hold, he saw his first mate reclining in the passenger seat of the hover mule, her right foot propped up on the driver's seat.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" Mal asked suspiciously.

"Just sittin', sir," Zoë answered.

"Uh, huh, right." Mal figured she was up to something, but didn't have the time to care what. "Keep your husband off that thing. It's not a gorrám tricycle!"

"I think he did notice the lack of wheels."

"Don't think I don't know what you've been doin'. Ridin' around my cargo hold all week, wastin' all my fuel, and stinkin' up the air."

"Given the practical experience we've gained, I don't believe it counts as wasting fuel, sir."

At that, Wash came bounding down the stairs from the cockpit and hopped into the mule next to Zoë.

"Does she need fuel? We can go fill her up, Captain!" Wash said excitedly, revving the engine.

Mal rolled his eyes. "Fine. To the fuel station and back. If you get arrested for joy ridin', I ain't coming to bail you out."

"Understood, sir," Zoë said with a smile.

As the hover mule zoomed out of the cargo bay, Inara glided gracefully down the stairs. She looked beautiful and elegant as always... and very, very angry.

"This is low, even for you!" she growled at him. She was wearing her tall shoes so she could look him in the eye, and boy did she have a mean eye when she wanted to.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mal said quickly, walking away from her angry face and grabbing a flashlight. He crawled into the storage area, shining the light around the back corners, but the Lassiter was not to be found.

“Jamming the docking clamps on my shuttle! You can’t forbid me to work!”

Mal backed out of the hold and faced Inara. “No one is forbidding you!” he said defensively. “Look, I’m sure Prince Gavin is a very nice man and I promise I’m not trying to get in the way of your whoring—”

SLAP! Inara smacked him across the face, catching him off guard.

“You slapped me!”

“You deserved it.” She was beyond angry.

“The shuttle malfunctioned. It ain’t my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was your fault, but I do hold you accountable.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“You are responsible for the upkeep of this ship.”

“Inara, I didn’t sabotage your shuttle. You got a problem, talk to Kaylee. Don’t go slapping me. It don’t help nothin’.”

“It helps a little,” Inara muttered, crossing her arms. She fumed silently for a moment as Mal shone his flashlight through the grating in the floor. He swept back and forth, knowing the search was fruitless, but determined to leave no stone unturned.

“Excuse me,” a sinister voice called, stopping Mal mid-sweep. A navy-suited man had walked onto his boat, accompanied by a rather brawny looking thug that Mal could only assume was his body guard. He could tell immediately that they were not Port Authorities, nor Feds. Although he didn’t know who they were, he did know that when men of their type showed up, he tended to get pushed into something he didn’t want to do. And Mal had been pushed around enough for one week. His hand rested on his gun as he walked toward the stranger.

“Can I help you?” he asked, warily.

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## CHAPTER 2

The man took Mal’s word as an invitation and took a few more steps into the boat. He looked distastefully at the exhaust trails rimming the cargo hold.

“Are you the Captain of this ship?” the man asked. His voice was nasal, smooth, and pretentious.

“I am,” Mal answered cautiously. “I have papers.”

“I’m not interested in your lies, Captain. I’m interested in your intended passengers.”

“Passengers?” Mal chuckled. “I don’t intend to take on no passengers. Too much regret from a previous experience. Ain’t that right, Inara?”

Inara was silent. Mal was disappointed. Zoë would have said something clever.

“What is your business here, Captain?”

“Just dropping off some cargo.”

“You don’t look to have cargo.”

“Got me something that’s a mite hard to find. Is there something I can do for you, because if not, I have to get back to my—”

“My name is Elias Prio. I have it on good authority that you intend to steal someone from me.”

“Thought never crossed my mind,” Mal said quickly. “Good man like you.”

“Don’t play with me, Captain. Who sent you?”

“I sent my own self here,” Mal answered, wishing desperately for the Lassiter. “I have legitimate business here involving property I stole from someone else.”

Prio gave a blood-chilling laugh, causing his double chin to wobble. Mal cast a side-long glance at Inara; she seemed frozen, her mouth partly open. As nonchalantly as possible, he stepped across, placing himself between Inara and Prio.

“You arrived on Three Hills at the same time as an acquaintance of mine. Chelsea Halden.”

“Ain’t that a coincidence? We were just restocking.”

“As I hear it, she paid for your restocking.”

“Our luck was running a little dry at the time. We weren’t too picky who we accepted charity from. Could be it was your friend. If so, pass along a thanks for us.”

Prio narrowed his eyes, circling Mal; his thug followed closely. Mal matched his steps evenly, maintaining the barrier between Prio and Inara, hand on his weapon ready to draw.

“Every time Ms. Halden shows up on Three Hills, something of mine goes missing. And I see that she’s been on Three Hills, you’ve been on Three Hills, and now you’re here.”

“Now I’m here. But I got nothing of yours and I ain’t takin’ on your passengers.” Mal drew his gun and continued. “You made your threat. I heard it. I think we’re done here.”

Convinced but not worried, Prio backed off slowly and warned, “I’ll be watching you.”

“I’ll be sure to smile.”

Prio and his thug left as quietly as they had come. Mal holstered his gun and could hear Inara start breathing again behind him. As he rubbed his eyes wearily, Kaylee hopped out of Shuttle One pulling off a pair of greasy work gloves.

“You’re good as new, ‘Nara,” she called cheerfully, oblivious to Prio’s visit.

Inara smiled in relief, grateful for an excuse to return to her own work. She headed quickly up the stairs, not looking back.

“Nara!” Mal called after her. With everything in him, he wanted to forbid her to leave Serenity. He also knew she would refuse and he wanted to avoid getting slapped again. Finally, he said, “You be safe.”

Inara nodded and kept walking.

“And you stay away from that Prio fella.”

“I’ll do my business, Mal. You do yours. Tomorrow evening, correct?”

“Five-thirty,” Mal said sternly. “Five-thirty sharp.”

Kaylee entered the bay as Inara left, confused because Inara had run out without saying good-bye to her. “Who’s Prio?”

“Someone who doesn’t want us picking up passengers.”

“We’re taking on passengers?”

“No, just cargo. But I don’t think he’d look too kindly on that either.”

“Cargo don’t come till tomorrow, right?”

“That gives us a full day to get ourselves killed, don’t it?”

Mal sighed as he noticed Kaylee’s cheerfulness wane. He should not be so snippy with her. They had two jobs. Two clients. Everything was going to go smoothly. Still, no sense being careless.

“I’ll have Jayne sweep the perimeter outside the ship and make sure Prio isn’t hanging about. Zoë and Wash will be back soon. After I leave, I want you to lock this door and don’t open it for anyone but me. Let them ticket us, tow us, whatever. But you lock this door. You got my red flag?”

“Oh, yeah” Kaylee said, remembering. She skipped cheerfully to one of the shelves at the side of the bay and picked up a walkie talkie. “Here ya go. You just press that button and we’ll come rescue you. Or if you wanna talk, that still works too.”

Mal shoved the comm into his pocket and began scanning the shelves on the side of the bay top to bottom. Kaylee watched a moment, unsure of what he was doing.

“Did ya lose somethin’?”

“Gorram Lassiter. Have you seen it?”

“Well, Jayne had—”

“Have you seen Jayne?”

“He’s in Elle’s room.”

“Elle doesn’t have a room!” Mal retorted.

Kaylee shrugged.

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Mal nearly kicked open the door to Elle’s room—the guest quarters. Book sat on the floor, his head bowed. A plate of half-eaten eggs balanced precariously on the night stand. Jayne lay on the bed, surrounded by a harem of weaponry. He hardly noticed Mal’s blustery entrance; he just stared at the Lassiter, testing the grip.

“Jayne?” Mal said, expectantly.

“This pistol is the granddaddy of handheld lasers,” Jayne mused, touching the casing for the laser source.

“I know that,” Mal said. “And worth a small fortune if we can get it to the buyer today.”

With a sigh, Jayne held out the gun for Mal to take. As soon as it was out of his hand, Jayne picked up another gun from his stash.

“Jayne, we’ve had our first unfriendly threat of this trip. I need you to make a sweep of the perimeter, make sure our cargo can come in smooth tomorrow.”

Jayne didn’t move right away and Mal’s patience was running too thin to wait another moment.

“Jayne, this is what I pay you for.”

Grunting, Jayne started gathering his guns and looking for his boots.

“And the agreement was ONE bunk,” Mal called over his shoulder as he left. “One! Not two!”

\*~\*

Just two doors down, Mal found Simon standing in front of a mirror, tying a tie. River was curled up on the bed watching him. Simon's dark brown hair was close cropped and his face was covered with an appallingly sparse three-day stubble as he had been attempting to grow a goatee by way of disguise.

"Nice costume," Mal chuckled. "You ready to go?"

"You're not wearing that are you?"

"I've been told that this shirt brings out the color in my eyes." Mal was sporting his traditional five-shades-of-brown outfit.

"Your eyes are blue."

"A dog's sense of smell is a hundred times more powerful than a human. But he is born with his eyes closed," River volunteered.

Simon smoothed his black tailored jacket, feeling over-dressed for his environment. He took a deep breath, willing confidence into his reflection. He knew Osiris and he knew how to hide there. At least, he tried to convince himself that he did. He ran a hand through his hair, disappointed with the cut. Kaylee had done her best, but couldn't get it to lay right. She had offered to shave off the rest, but Simon had declined. Now he wished he hadn't. At least then, the cut would be clean.

He caught River's reflection in the mirror, her lips counting out the seconds. Turning to her, he warned, "River, you need to stay hidden until we return."

"Can't hide here," she said, twirling her hair and looking disinterestedly at the wall.

"Just sit here, that'll do," Mal said impatiently. "Time to go, Doctor."

Reluctantly, Simon followed Mal out of Serenity, still trying to smooth his hair.

"Tell me again why I'm doing this," Simon whined, shielding his eyes as he stepped off of the ship. It wasn't that the sun shone particularly brightly; more that it reflected brightly off the white-washed walls.

"You know the place. You look the part. What? You want me to take Jayne?"

"Or Zoë. I recall something about a slinky dress."

"Zoë's limping again... which I got a gripe with you about because you told me she'd be fine by now."

"She was fine. She just..." Simon hesitated. "She busted a few stitches when she fell off the hover mule the other day."

"Fell off?"

"Wash took a turn too sharp—"

"Riding around the bay again? Damn space monkeys!"

"Can we at least stop to buy you a proper suit?"

"I'm dressed fine for business."

"Please," Simon pleaded. "It will be my gift to you."

\*~\*

As soon as Jayne stepped off the boat, he could feel the eyes on him. Having retrieved fresh rounds for all his weapons, Jayne carried no less than six different guns. He carried Vera on one shoulder, not willing to let the weapon out of his sight since it had been stolen. As barren as the space port appeared, there were plenty of places for unfriendly gunmen to hide and Jayne could see one already.

The landing platform was shaped like a pentagon and gave Serenity about a fifty foot clearance around. It was bordered on all sides by four foot walls, and at three of the vertices had causeways extending to neighboring buildings and space ports. A large fuel truck was parked along the east wall, unnecessary now that Serenity had been refueled. One of the unfriendlies was kicked back nonchalantly in the driver's seat, hardly paying attention to Jayne. Both the northeast and southeast walls were lined with freight crates, probably placed intentionally as cover because they served no other purpose in the open air. The three causeways extended to the north, west, and south. To the north was the main administrative building; to the west a second port; to the south downtown. The second quarry was likely covering the entrance to town and thus hiding on the southeast wall. He suspected a third would cover the west gate if they suspected a ship-to-ship cargo transfer. Because Alliance security guarded the administrative building, the north entrance was clear.

Realizing he probably should have concealed a few weapons first, Jayne made a beeline for the north causeway. About half-way to the administrative building, Jayne knew he was out of the line-of-sight of anyone at the landing port. He also knew he was getting dangerously close to the Alliance security force. Quickly, Jayne peered over the wall at the edge of the causeway. Turned out, it was actually a bridge and the city streets loomed about twenty feet below. So whoever was watching them in the space port was watching alone.

Carefully, Jayne threw his leg over the side, trying to balance on the causeway support beam. Cursing his large steel-toed boots, Jayne scooted back towards the port in a squat, trying to stay behind the walls. His fingers slipped on the smooth concrete, and Vera bounced against his back. As soon as he hit the north entrance again, the wall swung outward sharply. The support beam also disappeared underneath the landing platform, leaving Jayne high and dry. As sneakily as possible, Jayne crept over the wall and took up hiding behind the freight crates. Able to move with a little more stealth on solid ground, Jayne crept to the fuel truck and peeked in.

The man in the driver's seat was sound out cold, head back, mouth gaping. With a chuckle, Jayne opened the side door and climbed into the passenger seat. This was almost too easy. He took the man's gun and then found some twine in the glove compartment to bind the man's hands. The man was still asleep, drool dripping from the corner of his mouth. Should he wake the guy up and scare him, or should he just knock him out cold? Waking him up would be more fun.

With a twisted grin, Jayne placed his revolver in the man's mouth. The man jerked awake, but was unable to move between the twine on his hands and Jayne's forceful arm against his chest. Realizing his situation, the man twisted his head sharply, trying to get the gun out of his mouth.

"Sleepin' on the job, eh?" Jayne teased.

"Someone put decaf in the wrong pot," the man spat sarcastically, glaring daggers. With unexpected force, he heaved forward, slamming Jayne's arm hard against the steering wheel. Fortunately the blow was too low to sound the horn, but Jayne jumped against the man with twice the force, pinning him against the seat.

"Calling for your friends? How many you got out there?"

"This is my world. I have more than enough."

"I've heard that before."

“Prio is watching you.”

“Is that supposed to scare me?”

“No. Prio is weak. But Jantis is watching Prio.”

Jayne flinched at the name.

“So you have heard of Jantis,” the man sneered. “Prio doesn’t think I should be here watching your pathetic little ship. Jantis does.”

“Serenity has no gripe with Jantis.”

“If Jantis is right (and he usually is), then you soon will.”

Before every job, Mal always told Jayne not to kill anyone he didn’t have to. But looking at this man, Jayne could see that knocking him out would not be enough. This man was more than a hired gun, he was a minion in a very long, very powerful chain of unfriendlies. Dead or alive, he posed a continued threat to Serenity so long as they were on Osiris. He needed something between dead and alive—this man needed to go missing for a few days.

With a quick thrust of his elbow, Jayne broke the man’s nose and knocked him out cold. As carefully as possible, he moved the man from the truck’s cabin to the back compartment. The man wouldn’t be out forever and the twine was not likely to hold. The clock was ticking.

\*~\*

### CHAPTER 3

Inara’s skin crawled and the hair on her arms stood on end. The teacup rattled as she poured herself another drink, trying to calm her nerves before she left. *Take your time*, she told herself. *Gavin knows you were delayed. He said you could take your time, so take it. Don’t go until you’re ready.* She took another sip of tea. Part of her mind—the calm part—chastised her for her reaction to Prio. The rest of her didn’t want to leave Serenity.

“I thought you’d be gone by now.”

Inara jumped a mile. “Kaylee, I didn’t hear you come in.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Inara said dismissively, feeling even sillier now.

“Then how come you’re still here and not off with your prince?”

Inara hesitated. Kaylee settled on the couch, looking concerned.

“Gavin is not a prince,” she stalled. “I just—do you ever get the feeling that something isn’t quite right?”

“How do you mean?”

“I’m just being paranoid.”

“That Prio fella really shook you up?”

Inara nodded slowly, staring into her tea. “That must be it. Gavin is not dangerous. His estate is probably the safest place on the world.”

“Inara, you leaving soon?” Wash’s voice echoed over the comm.

Resolutely, Inara walked to the shuttle console and began powering up. “I’ll be off in a minute,” she told Wash. She had waited too long for Mal to bring her to a decently civilized world to sit on the sidelines now.

Kaylee came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Then go. Have fun. We’re right here whenever you want to come back,” she said quietly.

\*~\*

Jayne really wished he’d thought through his plan before driving the fuel truck so far from the landing pad. He’d found a storage shed in the east end of the space port that looked like it hadn’t been used in awhile and stashed the vehicle with his three prisoners there. After the first, the other two were easy marks, both being extremely bored with their assignment and extremely arrogant in their own ability. White collar gunmen never seemed to have a sense of what it meant to be prey. As Jayne approached the more populated areas of the space port again, he kept low and tried to be inconspicuous. It was difficult to do when carrying so many guns through a civilized world.

Just out from under the shadow of the landing pads and the beyond the lines of commercial tractors, the town of Andover sprawled, beginning at a four way intersection. One road ran parallel to the space port, the other extended from the spaceport into the main commercial district. The scent of real food from a nearby grill wafted over the gates of the spaceport, tempering the exhaust fumes. The food called to him.

Jayne ducked behind a tractor as a head bobbed over the top of the ramp’s guard rail. Had someone else approached the ship in his absence? He’d have to sweep the perimeter again. The person reached the bottom of the ramp and turned immediately toward town, half-running. Jayne scrambled to get a better look. Despite the long coat and hood, he recognized the gangly figure in combat boots immediately. To his horror, River Tam had just gone into town.

\*~\*

Mal shifted uncomfortably at the sight of himself in the mirror. The black material of his new suit seemed to gleam like polished chrome and he had to admit that the cobalt blue shirt did bring out the color in his eyes. The tailor had found him a comfortable leather shoulder holster so he could conceal his weapon neatly beneath his jacket and he practiced his draw a few times trying to get comfortable.

“You really shouldn’t use such a rugged gun,” the tailor was saying. “A suit like that calls for a much dressier pistol.”

“I’ve been through a lot with this gun,” Mal protested, tired of being told he needed an upgrade.

“Try this one,” the man insisted, holding out a custom-made, black metal pistol that gleamed with the same expensiveness as his suit.

“I’m fine, really.”

“Trust me. Take two shots at the target and see if you don’t change your mind.”

Mal took the pistol, tested its weight, and fired. It did have a nice balance to it.

“He’ll take it,” Simon said, coming into the room. While Mal was being fitted for the suit, Simon had gone to a barber to get his hair properly trimmed and his goatee grown. Simon definitely looked the part of a high-end criminal now.

“Where’d all that hair come from?” Mal asked.

“Growth enhancers,” Simon answered, keeping his voice low. “You’ll find it on all the core planets.”

Mal nodded, and placed holstered his new weapon, then began searching for a place to keep his old one. Finally, he tucked it into his belt at the small of his back.

“Are we finished here?” Simon asked the tailor who nodded fervently and began ringing them up. Mal shifted the jacket uncomfortably, still studying himself in the mirror.

“How do rich folk live like this,” Mal asked as the two left the store.

“Don’t think about how you look,” Simon commanded, walking with his head high. “Give me the key.”

Mal handed over the key to the safe box where the Lassiter was being stored.

“The agreement was eighty-thousand?”

“Eighty-thousand,” Mal confirmed, surprised by Simon’s confidence.

“What will we settle for?”

Mal considered a moment, then answered, “Fifty.”

“Stand up straight, keep your hands clasped in front. I’m the boss, you’re my body guard.”

Mal chuckled. “I know what I’m doing, Doctor. I have done this before.”

“Just want to be on the same page,” Simon said firmly.

“You’re awful bossy when you’re—”

“The boss?” Simon interrupted.

No longer having fun with the chatter, Mal fell silent. They turned off the main street, down a wide, empty thoroughfare—the historic district. Large manor houses dotted the side of the street and wary eyes watched them from behind half-closed curtains. Mal made note of the surroundings and possible avenues of escape. Most of the yards were enclosed by fences; others had signs warning of guard dogs. While Mal felt he was being snared in an open corral, Simon kept walking confidently to house number 387. He and Mal walked up to the door, but did not knock. Simon turned to Mal casually.

“The cost of fresh armadillo seems to be dropping,” Simon said.

Mal smiled and nodded at the code. Shortly after the door open and the two were herded into a rather dark den that had been converted into an office. So far there were two guards and their contact, Tarelli; all were impeccably dressed. Mal was glad that Simon had insisted on the new suit. The two guards flanked Tarelli, feet shoulder width apart, hands clasped in front. Mal mirrored their pose, reminding himself that he was in perfect control of the situation. Just because you dress nice don’t mean the crime ain’t the same.

Tarelli sat at a rather expensive table and with a slight nod, indicated a bag on the front corner. All Simon had to do now was take the money, hand over the key, and they could be on their way back to Serenity. Instead, Simon scowled deeply.

“Is this a joke?” Simon spat. Mal’s eyebrows raised in surprise.

“That’s your money as we agreed,” Tarelli said in a thick Russian accent.

“That’s not even half of the agreed price,” Simon retorted.

“Fifty thousand.”

“Don’t take me for a fool,” Simon warned. “Even vacuum sealed, pressed, and packed to the nines, this bag would not hold more than thirty.”

With a quick hand gesture, Simon pushed the bag and it fell to the floor. Simon looked back at Mal, who had no idea what the look meant.

“This bag falls pretty limp,” Simon criticized. “Not more than twenty, I’d say.”  
Simon kicked the bag sideways, launching it in the air directly into Mal’s arms as if it were a soccer ball.

“The deal is off,” Simon said and turned to leave.

“If the deal is off, then leave my money,” Tarelli growled.

Simon didn’t even bother to turn around. With his nose stuck pretentiously in the air, he answered, “This money is a fine on your arrogance. You have wasted my time. Tell your boss the deal has changed and the price is now a hundred thousand.”

Mal was becoming increasingly concerned with Simon’s zealous negotiation, but dared not contradict him at this juncture. Simon had essentially accused Tarelli of being a middle man in this deal. So far, no one had tried to kill them, so either it was an insult Tarelli was accustomed to, or they were in fact dealing with a middle man.

“Hold on,” Tarelli said quickly. “I see you drive a hard bargain. I can give you the eighty.”

“The deal is one hundred,” Simon countered, turning sharply.

Tarelli stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Would you consider the twenty in that bag as a deposit.”

\*~\*

River stepped out of Serenity, examining the spaceport carefully. An Alliance flag hung over the door of the administration building. The wind came in short gusts, bringing the smell of motor oil and asphalt. The fire was coming home. Though it still didn’t make sense, she had to get home and see if things became clear. Pulling up the hood of her trench coat and ducking her head, she made a bee-line for the exit.

She walked quickly through the streets, keeping her eyes low, noting the cracks in the pavement caused by non-uniform compaction of the subgrade. A small dog yanked against its leash, determined to sniff her ankles. It stayed so close, she nearly tripped over it.

“Heel you gorram mutt!” the dog’s owner griped, pulling the leash tighter. The little dog did not relent until a second dog-walker passed by and stole his interest. As the two dogs pulled against their leashes to get nose-to-nose, River hurried away. The lost time had cost her. She was being followed.

Three blocks later, she entered the residential zone. The streets were lined with clean, red brick rowhouses that had been there longer than the city. The front yards consisted of a porch and a small patch of over-landscaped greenery, each identical save the color of the blooms on the roses. Every five houses, there was a gap between the units. River darted to the first gap and crossed into the back area, which was not nearly as clean and landscaped as the front. The back yards were individually fenced in and fed into a narrow ally where the garbage truck came through. Rounding the corner quickly, River kept her back to the first fence, waiting to pounce her pursuer.

She easily heard his gun tapping against his belt and his disgruntled muttering as he approached. Just a few feet away, he stopped and fell silent. River reconsidered her plan to pounce. The fences were too high and she couldn’t make it to the next gap in the houses fast enough. She listened for the sound of his breath. Nothing.

Steeling herself for attack, she peaked around the corner. No one was there. Only a pile of guns half-way up the ally. Nothing was making sense! Her senses were betraying her. She felt him right on top of her, but he wasn't there. Curiously, she walked toward the pile long-guns.

"Hello?"

"There you are, girl!"

From nowhere, he rained down from the sky, tackling her to the ground. River wriggled easily out of the tackle and ran back into the ally.

"Gorramit, girl, it's me!" Jayne called out, chasing after her. She paused a moment at the next side-yard, but it was long enough. Jayne wrestled her to her knees, doing his best to restrain her as she flailed wildly. He grunted as her elbow connected to his temple.

"Girl, simmer a bit! If we ain't on the ship when Mal get's back, he's gonna kill me for real this time."

River stopped flailing, but didn't relax. She saw a broken window. The pieces were falling into place. Almost to a hundred. The fire was coming.

"I can't!" she cried. "I have to go home."

"Serenity is your home now."

"I have to go home!"

"If you go to your parents, they'll turn you in."

River shook her head frantically, tears streaming down her face. "No, they wouldn't!"

"Like I wouldn't. We got a tight schedule, and no time for this kind of trouble."

"Wo dei hui jia le! It will make sense at home."

Violently, River jabbed Jayne in the rib cage and rolled out of his grip again, running back the way they had come. Jayne chased after her, grabbing his long-guns as he went by. He couldn't tell if the people were staring because he was chasing a crying woman through the streets or because he was carrying six guns in plain sight. However, being private city-folk, they'd just-as-soon not get involved in someone's personal business, so none of them tried to stop him or help her.

The townhouses gave way to a small park lined with shrubs and expensive flowers. River cut across, prancing lightly over the hills and landscaped boulders. She slowed as the greenery thickened into a solid wall of evergreens. With two hands, she pulled the branches aside and peered through at the tall yellow manor house on the opposite side with a kink in the porch swing. She started to slip through the trees when Jayne caught her by the waist and pulled her back. Keeping one arm around her waist, he gathered her wrists with his other to restrain her. She didn't struggle. The air smelled too clear.

"Girl, you ain't invincible. First we watch, make sure it's safe."

"It's not safe," River said, shaking her head, the realization setting in. "It's burning."

"Don't look like it's burning to me."

Jayne had been right earlier when he'd said this wasn't her home. The fire was not here. This was the wrong home.

\*~\*

Wash had expected Zoë to be antsy while Mal was out on a job. Instead, the two had found the largest spread of flat deck plate in the cockpit and were laying down, cloud-watching out the overhead window. Zoë's head rested on his stomach and he twirled a lock of her hair with his fingers.

"One day we'll walk around the core as free people," he mused. "We won't be looking over our shoulders or carrying guns."

"You really think you could get me to settle on a core planet?"

"Not settle," he stammered. "But visit once or twice a... a decade. See the sights. Not just read about them."

"Can't imagine there are many sights here worth seeing."

"Come on, sweetie. The Air and Space History Museum has some of the original vessels flown here from Earth That Was."

"You want to go to a museum?"

"I want to see what brought us here!" he said, awed at the mere thought. "Don't you?"

"I've read that the first space explorers orbited Earth That Was in a vessel the size of a garbage can. The Vostok. Couldn't even stand up."

"Yeah, but can you imagine being the first man in human history to break atmo! We do it every day like it's nothing."

"Honey, most of the time we nearly burn up on the way out, crash on the way in, or end up on the drift in between. I wouldn't say it's nothing."

"I'm the one keeping her from crashing, baby. Trust me. It's nothing."

They fell silent a moment, letting the clouds drift past.

"The Vostok didn't have thrusters. When it entered atmo, they just moved the equipment to try to guide the fall," Zoë volunteered.

"Does this mean you'll go to the museum with me?"

"I'll go anywhere with you."

Wash smiled and caressed her face. She kissed his hand, then pointed out the window at a passing cloud. "That one looks like a duck."

"A headless duck," Wash countered.

"Well, that's how they look before you eat them."

"Are you hungry? We just ate."

"I—"

"Zoë! Someone's knockin'!" Kaylee's voice interrupted. Zoë sprang to her feet too quickly and snatched up the comm.

"On my way Kaylee. Don't open that door!"

"Weren't planning on it."

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 4

Thirty minutes later, Mal and Simon left Tarelli's house by the back door, each carrying two densely packed bags of money. Mal was completely baffled and kept looking from Simon to the house, and asking himself how he'd managed to walk away from this with (a) no weapons drawn and (b) more money than previously agreed upon.

He kept remembering the blubbing Simon on Canton and wondered who this stranger was now in front of him.

“When did you get so good at negotiating?” Mal asked as they ducked around a corner, taking a back ally between the backyard fences.

“What do you mean?”

“Last time you played the boss man—”

“You put my on the spot,” Simon finished. “This time, I had a full three days to prepare.”

“Well you did good,” Mal said.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Simon said warily. “I can feel them watching us.”

“Yep,” Mal agreed, shifting both money bags to one arm in order to free his gun hand. “We’re being followed.”

Simon nodded, taking a few more turns before heading back to the main street. Some of the streets had changed since he’d been here last. His intended avenue of escape now dead-ended straight into a theater.

“We don’t have time to take in the culture, Doc.”

“Trust me,” Simon said, making a decision. If there was one place in the world he knew how to lose people, it was the theater. The matinee show would begin soon and the theater lobby buzzed with people trying to find their seats. Walking quickly, Simon turned left, heading for a pair of doors that said “authorized access only.” A bored looking usher sat in front of the doors, polishing his fingernails ineffectively with his thumb. With a quick flash of what Mal could only assume to be Simon’s inside pocket, the two brushed past the usher into the backstage area. Going down two flights of stairs, they encountered a new crowd—the actors—all bustling about the green room excited about having a full house. Once within sight of two exits, Simon put his back to the wall, set down the money bags, and turned to face Mal.

“You think Tarelli wants his money back?” he asked.

Mal put his back to the wall as well, trying to take stock of the situation.

“Might be. Likely someone else. We need to get this cash somewhere safe.”

“There’s a bank about half a block out that exit.”

“Bank’s too easy to rob.”

“I’m feeling a bit easy to rob at the moment.”

“Shh,” Mal warned as a man approached. Simon nodded courteously at the man, but was ignored completely.

“Captain Reynolds,” the man opened snidely. “I expected you to be escorting your new passengers in person.”

Mal rolled his eyes impatiently. “I already told your boss I ain’t takin’ on passengers. I got other business here.”

“I see that,” the man said, eyeing the bags of money. Mal reached for his gun, but did not draw.

“I wouldn’t,” the man warned. “I know they are already in your safe-keeping, Captain.”

“The only folk in my safe keeping at the moment are my crew.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” the man advised and walked away.

“What does that mean?” Simon asked when the man was out of earshot.

“It means that Prio knows there’s been a delivery and he knows I don’t have it. Also means he thinks someone on this crew does. He’s on his way to Serenity.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m the Captain. I know everything.”

\*~\*

Kaylee hung back as Zoë strode confidently to the hatch at the back of the cargo bay, shotgun in hand, her limp squelched by determination and adrenaline. She leaned against the window making sure whoever was on the other side had a good look at her angry eyes and the barrel of her gun. The midday sun reflected blindingly off the white-washed walls of the spaceport, casting the three people outside in silhouette. One of them approached to door and held a sheet of paper against the window.

“Get me a flashlight,” Zoë ordered. Kaylee complied quickly and both read the paper.

“Looks like the cargo,” Kaylee said uncertainly. “I thought it wasn’t coming till tomorrow.”

“It wasn’t,” Zoë confirmed. Her mind raced for a contingency plan. “Call Jayne, get him down here.”

Kaylee walked to the comm box and made the call, then sat on the stairs while they waited. Finally she said, “He was on the perimeter. Don’t think he’s back yet.”

“You don’t know?”

“I was workin’. I left the door open for a little bit.”

“Can you go check?”

Quickly, Kaylee stood up and headed for Elle’s bunk. As she left, Book entered the cargo bay silently, rifle in hand.

“Shepherd, have you seen Jayne?”

Book shook his head, maintaining his vow of silence for the day.

“Take the catwalk. I’m going to open the door.”

Nodding, Book took position and set up a shot. Zoë took a deep breath, hoping she wouldn’t regret this decision. Shouldering her gun, she quickly yanked open Serenity’s back door, using it as a shield for herself. Thankfully, no one came charging through.

“Captain Reynolds?” a woman’s voice called from outside. Zoë didn’t bother to correct her.

Bringing her gun back to ready, Zoë circled into view, considering the three people at her doorstep—a woman, two men, and a forklift of cargo covered with a blanket.

“What’s your business?” Zoë asked tersely.

“We represent Stolte. This is the cargo.”

“Why has the timeline changed?”

The woman glanced around the spaceport warily and lowered her voice. “Prio knows.”

Zoë furrowed her brow, not understanding, but the woman was speaking again, her voice returned to its normal level.

“The cargo was ready to be delivered. We brought it. No sense leaving it in a warehouse when we can ship it off early.”

“No sense,” Zoë agreed slowly distantly.

“Oh, and this came for you?”

“Post?” Zoë asked, accepting a medium-sized box. The box was addressed to Inara, so Zoë tossed it on one of the shelves. Finally, she stepped back, closed the small door, and opened the wider bay doors to allow the forklift to enter. As the two men operated the forklift, the woman went over various bits of paperwork.

“Two hundred gallons of combustible liquid per box. The containers are safe, but keep the temperature steady, don’t get them near a flame, and don’t knock them around.”

“Do you have the hazmat license?” Zoë interrupted impatiently. She had hardly listened to the woman’s speech, keeping one eye on the two men and the other on the door to the outside. She didn’t care to ask what was really in the crates, she just wanted these people off the boat as quickly as possible. The woman handed over the hazmat license, collected a signature, and then the three left quickly. When she turned around, Kaylee was circling the crates and Book was stumbling awestruck down the stairs.

The three crates were large and black, covered with pictures of flames and warnings of flammability. What struck them was the shape of the boxes and the small panel of lights on the sides of each one. Zoë recognized the cryo-freeze boxes immediately. River Tam had arrived on Serenity in just such a box.

\*~\*

Inara rested comfortably in Gavin’s arms; her head lay on his chest as he stroked her hair. She had been jittery at first, but finally was able to give herself over to the moment and enjoy Gavin’s company as much as he enjoyed her.

“You’ve grown considerably since I was here last,” she commented.

“For better, I hope.”

“Oh, yes.” Inara propped herself up on her elbows and touched his face.

“Then can I convince you to stay another day?”

Inara smiled. “I’m not sure. Serenity is running on as strict deadline.”

“Perhaps I can convince you to stay for as long as we both shall live.”

“Would that be before 5:30 tomorrow?”

Gavin kissed both her hands with suave tenderness. Inara was accustomed to such offers and though flattered, she was not tempted.

“At least give me a chance to convince you,” Gavin said.

Inara smiled, forcing herself to relax. Gavin had certainly gained confidence since she had last seen him. Once an uncertain follower, he now seemed a force to be reckoned with. He had certainly become a pillar in the local community. Inara had nearly absorbed herself in the moment when suddenly, the hair on her arms stood on end. Adrenaline surged through her body as a din of noise floated into the room. Her lips broke out of the kiss.

“What was that?” she asked, sitting up sharply.

Gavin groaned. “It’s not even on this level. I have twenty hands out there ensuring our privacy.”

With a frustrated sigh, he sat up as well, massaging her tense shoulders and kissing her neck. Inara kicked herself for being so easily distracted, but also smiled at the reversal of roles. Usually she was the one pulling the client into the moment and asking him to forget the outside world. She let Gavin continue to massage her shoulders, reminding herself that she was safe here.

“Why are you so jittery, anyway?” he asked.

Inara shook her head, not wanting to discuss her personal life, but Gavin persisted, pulling her closer to him and wrapping his arms around her.

“Tell me,” he implored, rocking her slowly.

Inara forced a smile at the silliness of it all. “I was threatened this morning. I don’t know why it’s bothering me so much.”

“Threatened?” he cooed, nibbling her ear. “My poor baby. Anyone I can kill for you? Because I would sure like all of your thoughts here with me.”

Inara took his hand and turned to face him. “All of my thoughts are here.”

Gavin wasn’t convinced. “I’ll send someone right here and now. I can threaten people too. Just tell me his name. Or was it a her?”

Inara bit her lip, unsure of what to do. Gavin kissed one hand then the other, waiting for her to answer. Finally she admitted, “A man named Prio.”

Gavin dropped both her hands and jumped immediately to his feet. “Prio threatened you?” he demanded in alarm. “Elias Prio?”

Inara nodded, suddenly concerned. The suave confident gentleman had turned into a frightened kid again. Gavin bolted to the door, double-checking all the locks, then he picked up Inara’s robe and tossed it to her. As he hurriedly pulled on his pants, Inara began to protest.

“He didn’t threaten me directly,” she clarified, wishing him calm again. Already her nerves were shot and his reaction was making her feel justified. “It was more Captain Reynolds.”

“But he saw you?” Gavin demanded, pressing a comm box.

“Yes. What’s going—”

“Derek, lock down the building!” he shouted into the comm.

“Already have, sir,” Derek replied, his voice ringing true over the comm. Inara wondered why the comm on Serenity never had such clarity. Derek continued. “There’s a breach reported at the north entrance. I’ve sent security. Are you all right?”

“We heard a commotion on the floor below us a few minutes ago, but nothing up here.”

“I’ll keep it contained, sir. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“I think it’s Prio,” Gavin said, hopping impatiently.

“I’ll keep it contained,” Derek assured him, then closed the channel.

Gavin paced the room once, running a hand across his clean-shaved scalp. Then he grabbed Inara’s hand and pulled her toward a hidden door.

“Are we going somewhere?” Inara asked, confused, closing her robe. Gavin ignored the question

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“It didn’t strike me as any of your business.”

“It is now. Come on.”

Gavin lead her up a private staircase that went to the roof. Inara's shuttle was parked there.

"What did Prio say to your Captain?"

"Something about our taking on passengers," Inara said, struggling to remember the conversation through the memory of pure evil. That was it. Prio was the embodiment of pure evil. That's why he scared her. "He was looking for some people who belonged to him. But Mal isn't taking on passengers."

"Doesn't matter. Prio is very attached to his subjects and if he believes they are under your captain's protection, then you are all in grave danger."

"Subjects?"

Gavin grimaced. "Prio has a rather unlovely hobby of human experimentation."

"Torture?!"

"Some. Others medicinal. If he catches you, don't tell him anything. Don't give up any information."

"What?"

Gavin stopped running a moment and took time to look directly into Inara's eyes. His gaze was firm and frightened, yet defiant. "Tell him nothing. The sooner he gets what he wants from you, the sooner he will ship you off to one of his labs for experimentation. He is soulless and merciless."

"How do you know this?" Inara asked as they started running again.

"I can't reveal the details of my involvement."

The final steps to the roof were via service ladder straight up. Before climbing, Gavin activated a security camera. The roof was alive with activity. Men in clean suits circled the landing pad.

"Yours?" Inara asked hopefully.

Gavin shook his head and activated the comm. "Derek, they're on the roof."

"Now where?"

"A safe room. Come on!" Taking her hand again, Gavin dashed back down the stairwell. About three levels down, they rounded a corner and plowed directly into Prio and a handful of guards. Immediately, Inara's flesh covered with goosebumps and her grip tightened on Gavin's hand. He squeezed back reassuringly, keeping her behind him.

"Gavin, you are so predictable," Prio laughed.

"Elias. What did I tell you about barging into my home uninvited?"

"How inhospitable of you! Here I thought we were on the same side."

"Same side of atmo, not much else," Gavin retorted. The remark brought a fast draw from Prio. The gun did little to scare Inara as she was already scared witless. Prio approached threateningly, holding the gun to Gavin's face. With a leer, he reached out to touch Inara's hair, but Gavin jerked her away protectively.

"Oh, my lady," Prio laughed. "Apparently many men feel the need to protect you from me."

"Men will be men," Inara shrugged, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"Your Captain has been sending people off ship all day, but none to pick up my subjects. Could he really have been foolish enough to have them delivered to the spaceport?"

Inara's jaw dropped a moment, her breath catching. Gavin squeezed her hand again.

“It’s always the last place you look,” Prio complained, looking at Gavin.

“Your subjects are not here,” Gavin answered, releasing Inara’s hand and pressing her back lightly. “Now get out of my home.”

“You are hardly in a position to make demands, Gavin, naked and unarmed as you are.”

Like lightning, Gavin’s hands came up, grabbing the gun from Prio and getting him into a chokehold. Inara was startled by the sudden reversal. Using Prio as a hostage, Gavin backed slowly away from the crowd of guards.

“How about now?” Gavin seethed. Although they’d rounded the corner heading back toward the main corridors, Prio’s men stayed close.

“Call off your men,” Gavin ordered, holding the gun steady.

Prio gave a bone-chilling cackle. “Kill me, Gavin. I’d like to know if you have the guts.”

“I will kill you on my time, not yours.”

“Oh, but you couldn’t kill me could you?” Prio taunted. “That would make you a bad man ... like me.”

Gavin harrumphed. “You have goons to do the killing for you. I don’t think you’ve killed anyone.”

With a swift move, Prio flipped Gavin over his shoulder throwing him flat on the floor. Inara hardly had time to yelp in surprise before Prio reclaimed the gun and shot Gavin in the head.

“Think again,” Prio growled.

Inara stifled a scream and started to run.

“Hold it, my lady,” Prio called, his guards coming into view. “I only require you alive, but I’d prefer you undamaged.”

Inara froze, considering her option. Gavin’s blood pooled on the floor around the feet of Prio and his men. Breathing heavily, she wrapped her robe tightly around herself and with as much dignity as possible, she walked back to Prio.

Prio seemed disinterested, allowing one of his men to take her by the arm. Stepping over Gavin’s body, he pulled out a kerchief and wiped the blood spatter from his face and suit.

“Guns,” he carped, holstering his. “So messy!”

Inara’s jaw dropped in surprised. The guard followed Prio out, pulling Inara along.

“Bring her shuttle as well,” Prio ordered. “She may be of use to us.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 5

Throwing caution to the wind, Zoë limped to the comm box, switched it to the frequency of the Captain’s walkie talkie, and sent a few beeps. If he was safe, he would respond. If he wasn’t safe, she may have inadvertently given away his position to the enemy... or worse. Zoë often had to remind herself that, despite the quirks of her job, she was no longer fighting a war.

“Go ahead, Zoë,” Mal’s voice responded a half a minute later. She could hear the buzz of people in the background, and wondered if he might be in the commercial district already heading back.

“Captain, we are running hot,” she said simply, keeping to code. Her eyes resting heavily on the cargo. Mal was silent a moment, letting the information sink in.

“Zoë, take the ship, get off the world.” She was surprised by the urgency in his voice, but also the straight-forward talk. That confirmed he was currently safe, but the tone of his voice belied imminent danger. He was asking her to leave them behind.

“Understood, sir. We’re still looking for Jayne.”

“No time. We’ll find him and meet you at the rendezvous. You have about five minutes. Prio’s goons are coming.”

“We’re good as gone, sir.” She hung up the comm and turned to Kaylee. “Kaylee, lock us up. We’re leaving.”

“What about the others?”

“They’ll find their own way to Persephone.” Zoë hoped they’d been paid well for the Lassiter. With the right money, they could book passage easily enough. Using the railing as a crutch, she sped toward the cockpit two steps at a time.

“Wash, take us out of the world, now.”

Wash fired up the engine.

“What about Inara?” Kaylee persisted, following Zoë into the cockpit.

“Captain will contact her.”

“He sounded like he needed help himself. How can you just leave?”

Zoë turned giving Kaylee her full attention and stopping the engineer dead in her tracks. Irritated, Zoë explained tersely, “Captain says leave, we leave.”

“We’re not abandoning him,” Wash interjected, realizing that Zoë had given all the explanation she cared to. “It just means the safest place for us to be right now is off world.”

Kaylee opened her mouth to protest, but no words came out. Finally, she stomped her foot in protest and stalked out of the cockpit.

“Ta ma de hun dan!” Wash cried suddenly.

“What is it?” Zoë asked.

“Port Authorities aren’t giving us clearance.”

“Why are you even asking for clearance?”

“We’re landlocked without it.”

“Ta ma de hun dan is right! You have three minutes to fix it.”

“Sweetie, this ship is not leaving the world in three minutes.”

“Then we need to leave the ship.”

Reluctantly, Zoë picked up the comm again, running the alternatives through her mind. Prio was coming and Mal had urgently insisted that they leave world as soon as possible.

“All hands to the cargo bay,” she commanded. Wash grabbed a walkie talkie and darted down the steps ahead of Zoë.

“Now what’s going on?” Kaylee demanded angrily.

“Put the trailer on the mule, we’re getting this cargo out of here.”

“Wha—”

“No time for questions, just do it!”

Book and Wash pulled the trailer across the cargo bay to the crates and began loading. Kaylee brought the hover mule over and considered the situation. The trailer had been designed for the old land mule and she hadn't yet considered how it would work with the hover mule. A single hitch would cause too much stress between a hover vehicle and a land locked vehicle. As time was limited, she went for the brute force heavy chain attachment. Zoë opened the doors, letting in the daylight.

"Where is River?" Zoë asked.

Kaylee looked about, realizing she hadn't seen River all day. "I don't know."

"Go find her," Zoë commanded. Kaylee checked the hook on the chain to make sure it would hold, then dashed from the cargo bay, trying to figure out where to look first. Zoë headed out the door.

"Where are you going?" Wash called, running after her.

"Jayne may still be close. We good to go?"

"Loaded and ready," Wash confirmed. Book was already in the driver's seat, starting the engine. Carefully, he eased forward, testing the hitch. Zoë banged the comm box impatiently.

"Kaylee! River! We have to go now!"

A moment later, Kaylee came running across the top catwalk. "River ain't here! She ain't anywhere!"

"Kaylee, get down here. Wash, take Book and Kaylee and find a spot to lay low."

"Wait, we can't—" Kaylee began.

"Enough talk! Go now!" Zoë ordered, limping out the door. Kaylee climbed onto the hover mule, looking uncertain.

"Zoë, wait," Wash called, running to catch up with her. She didn't meet his eye.

"I'll meet you at the gate at sunset. Go now."

Wash lowered his voice to a whisper. "Zoë, I'll stay. You go with the cargo. Keep them safe."

"This is not a debate."

"It just became one," Wash replied, touching her waist gently. "Your leg is slowing you down. I can circle the perimeter and check all of River's hiding spots on Serenity much more quickly. Like you said, they'll be here soon."

He leaned so close that their foreheads touched and she couldn't help but meet his eye. Making a firm decision, she handed him the shotgun.

"Zhu yi. I'll come back to the gate at sunset."

Wash nodded quickly and ran back into the ship. "If we're not here, we'll be at the museum."

"Which one?" Zoë asked, then remembered. "Oh, right."

\*~\*

Book pushed the hover mule as fast as possible. Loaded down with five people and a ground-trailer, the initial down-ramp was a physics nightmare and every turn he took stressed the makeshift hitch. Instead of leaving by the main entrance, he headed east into the fallow end of the space port. At first, the roadways were aligned with empty cargo crates, but those gave way to a small reclamation yard. Signs were posted on a line of repossessed ships that would be auctioned off at the end of the week. If anyone was

working, they were out to lunch at the moment. The exit gate was triggered to open automatically; apparently the authorities only cared about unauthorized entry into the yard.

Once in the streets, Book made a bee-line for down town. Being so close to spaceport, cargo transport was not uncommon through the commercial district. However, cargo transport by a Shepherd and two rustic looking women on an open ground-trailer jury-rigged to a hover mule was bound to gather a few looks. As they crossed main street, they could see an unorthodox concentration of unmarked black vehicles near the entrance to the spaceport.

“Wash... River,” Kaylee whispered, watching in trepidation as the cars entered one at a time. Zoë kept her eyes averted.

Book wanted to speak, to comfort her, but he could not break his silence for another hour. The afternoon sun barely cut through the canyon of buildings. He thought of reaching out to Kaylee, but she was in the back seat, facing backwards, keeping an eye on the trailer hitch.

“Shepherd, I think we should be goin’ out of town,” Zoë said, noticing the thickening of shops and people.

He held up a hand as if to say *trust me*.

Zoë didn’t look particularly inclined to trust at the moment. She eyed a local law enforcement officer, who leaned against a shop wall munching a pastry. She was sure they would be cited for any number of violations, the simplest being their lack of safety restraints. But then she looked at Shepherd Book, dressed in the attire ascribed by his order. For all anyone knew, he was a humble man of God transporting food to the needy. If that cover failed, he still had a mysteriously powerful ident card.

“Shepherd, we need to get as far from here as possible.”

Book only nodded this time, keeping his eyes on his destination. He drove with swift determination and dead-set eyes. Zoë realized he wasn’t looking for direction; he knew exactly where he was going.

\*~\*

Mal leaned heavily against the wall, wishing he had a view of the sky so he could see Serenity off. The money they had could get them to Persephone easy enough, but leaving a core planet with a fugitive would require careful planning. And they still needed to find Jayne and warn Inara... that meant losing a perfectly good shuttle.

“Now what?” Simon asked.

“You wanna watch the show?”

“But Prio knows we’re here.”

“No, he knows we *were* here. Hopefully he thinks we’re not crazy enough to stay.”

“Are we crazy enough to stay?”

“You’re right. Let’s go walking through the streets again with our expensive suits and large bags of money.”

Simon sighed and leaned on the wall next to Mal. “My arms could use a rest.”

Simon stroked his goatee, unaccustomed to the thick, coarse hair on his face. He thought briefly of River, hoping that she made it safely off world. Suddenly, Mal's comm came to life again.

"Captain, you safe?"

"Zoë," Mal whispered. "Tell me you're off world."

"Book has some local friends. We're heading into the shadows for a spell."

Mal recognized the code, remembering they were on an open channel. Was she giving him a direction?

"You'll leave the window open for me?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir. We left mine circling to look for the other two."

*Two?* Mal wondered.

"Lost a button?"

"The one everyone is looking for."

"Understood. We'll meet you as soon as we can."

Mal put away the comm again, feeling a headache coming on. Simon was looking on anxiously.

"What did all that mean?"

"They're going to a church. We'll meet them there."

"There are a hundred churches in Andover."

Mal thought through the conversation, trying to differentiate the directions from the report on the crew. "How many on the west side of town in some kind of circle?"

"You mean Midtown Abbey?"

"That has to be the one." Mal picked up the money and started walking. "Guess we'll catch the show another time."

"What did the rest mean?" Simon persisted, picking up his two bags and jogging to catch up.

"Your sister's gone missing."

Simon stopped dead in his tracks, nearly dropping one of the money bags on his foot. "What? Riv—"

"Hush, now. Seeing as you're both wanted fugitives, and we're in a theater, I'd think twice before yelling her name. Wash stayed behind to look for her. Chances are she was hiding on the ship somewhere. They couldn't just wait for her to come to herself and sit there like ducks."

"I never should have left her," Simon murmured. Mal walked and Simon followed, his feet going at a snails pace compared to his mind.

"Did your sister say anything to you about leavin' the ship?" Mal asked

"No... just... all those pictures she's been drawing of our childhood home. Maybe she went there."

"Maybe she did. Possible if Jayne saw her go he's with her right now."

"Possible he's trying to collect the reward on her right now too."

\*~\*

River had not stopped babbling since they had left her parents' home and it was really starting to tick Jayne off.

“They eye cannot see the eye,” she explained, excitedly. “I saw clearly, but through the wrong filter. A polarized lens cuts off the light and two polarized filters at right angles extinguish all vision. The sun is completely blocked and there is no fire because the fire is not a conflagration!”

“Will you stop muttering nonsense!” Jayne exploded. His outburst gathered a few annoyed glances from passers by, but for the most part the crowds ignored them. Still the crowds bothered Jayne. All it takes is one to recognize River and then they’d both be in trouble. River, however, did not miss a beat.

“Not nonsense! It’s clearer now. Contradicting clues. Can’t hide here. I ran away from the fire, not towards it.”

“Seems like a bright idea,” Jayne commented, only half paying attention.

River pointed left, down a cross street. “Mother is coming to pick us up. We’ll have dinner and ice cream, and then she’ll pick us up at ten.”

Jayne rolled his eyes, pushing her arm down. River was pointing to a museum with a very large, very phallic display of rockets on the front lawn.

“This is no time for sight seein’,” Jayne grumbled, pulling her along now. At least she had stopped talking. Jayne glanced around at the city. River’s mention of dinner only reminded him of how long it had been since breakfast. On Stolte moon, he’d acquired a fresh stash of apples and Book owed him a pie. It seemed right to request the pie today as Book wasn’t talking and couldn’t make excuses. Jayne checked the sky. Though he couldn’t see the sun, the clouds over the buildings were turning deep crimson. It was getting late and Jayne wanted to get back before Mal. They’d get their first payoff from the Lassiter tonight.

Jayne picked up the pace and nearly plowed into a policeman. River stopped only a few steps behind him, keeping her eyes down as Jayne considered the lawman carefully. A new crossroads. River. The lawman. The reward for River was more than double anything he’d be making on this job. In addition, bounty hunting was the only reasonable excuse he had for carrying so many illegal firearms (not to mention the legal ones). The lawman raised his eyebrows at the sight of Vera, the assault rifle, and Jayne’s calculating smile.

“Evenin’, officer,” Jayne said, weighing his options. River wasn’t about to wait for the final measures. She tugged Jayne’s wrists and smiled at him innocently.

“Come on! Dinner and ice cream.”

Realizing that turning River in at this juncture would mean a further delay in eating, Jayne reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled back toward the space port. As it turned out, dinner was not meant to be. The entrance to the spaceport was cluttered with dark vehicles and crawling with unfriendlies. River walked toward them unconcerned, but Jayne grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back.

“We ain’t walkin’ through that fire, girl.”

\*~\*

Wash had made the quickest run of the perimeter as possible before locking himself onto the ship. Even as the hover mule disappeared into the back roads of the space port, he could see the enemy pressing in and up. He broadcast a quick announcement to River, warning her to stay hidden if she was still onboard. Then he

started crawling through the bowels of the ship himself, looking for a hiding spot. He had wriggled into an access shaft for the grav drive—although calling it an “access” shaft seemed rather generous at the moment. The area was so tight and difficult to reach that he only knew of its existence because Kaylee had gotten stuck in it the week before. Of course, Kaylee had been carrying a very bulky vacuum pump at the time.

After three hours, Wash’s legs began to cramp and his neck ached. He wished he could have traded his watch for food. At least then, he’d be wondering about the time instead of counting the minutes.

He could hear Prio’s men searching the ship, yanking panels off the walls, circling, yelling, frustrated. He hoped his occasional muscle spasms would not give away his hiding spot. He knew now how the crewman on the Vostok had felt after circling Earth That Was in a garbage can.

Wash closed his eyes and thought of Zoë. She had been behaving oddly of late—ever since Newhall. He thought of her long legs, of her head resting on his stomach as they cloud watched. He smiled at the memory of the headless cloud-duck, wondering if maybe his wife was pregnant. His smile grew as he imagined her, Washling in one hand, shotgun in the other, still giving Badger a run for his money. Stifling a laugh, Wash enjoyed the game. Thinking of Zoë seemed to open the tight little hiding spot into a world of possibilities.

Suddenly a muscle spasm! Wash’s head jerked back hard against the panel. He wrestled his arm around to touch the back of his head. Yep. He was definitely bleeding.

“Gou shi.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 6

Mal recognized the church from three blocks out. He wondered if it really did stand out from the other buildings or if it only did to him. It was as if the entire building was surrounded by a repulsive aura. He swallowed the lump of his dead faith and considered the building again. It was no newer or older than the other buildings on the block. None of the passers by stopped to consider its architecture. It was just another building to them. As he and Simon approached, he noticed the gate tip open and Shepherd Book peaked out.

Simon rushed into the gate, bursting with questions, but Book maintained his silence. Mal kept his gait steady until he was inside, and even after Book locked the gate behind them, he did not feel safe. Three crew unaccounted for, hot cargo ... at least Inara was safe.

Kaylee came running up as they went inside. “Are you okay?”

“How could you lose River?!” Simon exploded, directing his fury at Kaylee.

“I looked for her,” Kaylee stuttered. “She must’ve run off.”

“Run off?! She’s my sister! She’s your friend! You’re supposed to watch out for her!”

Kaylee’s eyes were wide as saucers. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?! This world is crawling with feds!”

“Jayne and Wash are probably with her.”

“How is that better? Jayne—”

“Doc, no need for a fit,” Mal interrupted, rescuing Kaylee with a quick hug.

“They lost my sister!”

“And we’ll do everything we can to find her again,” Mal assured calmly. “No need for yelling.”

“The feds—”

“We got bigger problems than the feds right now,” Zoë cut in. “Three men out, boat’s blocked off—”

“And all of us are in mortal danger from a man named Prio who takes offense to us transporting this cargo,” Mal finished. Zoë had filled him in as to the nature of the cargo and Prio’s threat had finally made sense. Between them, they only had three guns, so their next move would have to be a very careful one.

“Calm down, son,” Book said. Everyone stopped in surprise because it was the first thing he’d said all day. His day of silence was finally over.

“Shepherd’s right,” Mal agreed. “Your sister is crazy enough for the both of you.”

“Wash arranged a rendezvous at sunset,” Zoë told him.

“It’s almost sunset now. Take the mule and see if you can find them.”

“If he found them, they’re safe,” Zoë assured Simon, taking her leave.

“If not,” Simon fumed.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Mal answered distantly. “I’m going to the roof to keep watch till Zoë gets back. Doc, your job is to keep our cargo living. Dong ma? Shepherd—”

“I’ll talk to the monks about preparing some food.”

“Okay,” Mal nodded. “Kaylee, you start working on a way to increase mobility with that trailer. We may have to leave in a hurry and those crates plus eight crew just won’t fit in the mule.”

Kaylee didn’t move. She just stared after Simon as he stalked off to the boxes.

“Kaylee,” Mal repeated.

“He’s so mad at me,” she moaned.

“Kaylee, focus. You can smooth out your differences with the doctor later. Right now, there’s work to be done.”

\*~\*

River wasn’t trying to move anymore, but Jayne still held her shoulder uncertainly. Unlike the three scouts Jayne had taken out earlier, the men swarming about the spaceport were far from bored. He could see ten men guarding the perimeter entrance, which meant no telling how many were on the landing deck.

“They’ve come to put out the fire,” River murmured.

“Snuff us is right,” Jayne agreed. Jayne wondered if Mal and Simon had gotten back before this development; if Kaylee had locked up the ship without him inside; if anyone had noticed him missing. What if the whole crew had been captured? He quickly dismissed that thought. If the crew were captured, there wouldn’t be people laying wait at the spaceport entrance.

Seemingly oblivious to the problem, River found them a table at an outdoor bistro half way down the street.

“Brilliant idea,” Jayne grumbled, trying to stash and conceal his weapons beneath the table cloth. Sitting in a crowded city with a wanted fugitive and a few illegal firearms... yet a meal was appealing. River was keeping her head low in the menu. The sun had set and the area was dark enough. The first moon was already high in the sky and the second was rising. Jayne cracked open the menu and started reading slowly.

“The whole gorram thing is in Greek!” he exclaimed, frustrated.

“French,” River corrected him.

Jayne closed the menu in frustration.

“What would you like?” River asked calmly.

“How the hell can I tell? Foreign words, no pictures.”

River rolled her eyes. “Chicken or fish?”

Jayne mulled a moment, testing the tastes in his head. Fish was too light. “I could eat a whole chicken right now.”

A few minutes later, a waiter came. River ordered in French and then the two sat in silence. Jayne carefully watched the space port. The crowd of unfriendlies thinned slowly and Jayne guessed that in another hour or so, he'd be able to sneak past them. To what purpose, he didn't know.

The waiter returned and set a dainty plate in front of River with food so gourmeted, Jayne couldn't even tell what it was. A minute later, the waiter set a plate in front of Jayne. On it was a two pound chicken, seasoned and smoked. Jayne's eyes and mouth watered in delight. He delved voraciously into the chicken, ripping it apart messily with his hands.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Rosemary Rotisserie Chicken,” River answered. “It's meant to serve three.”

Jayne looked at her crossly, intentionally chewing with his mouth open just to provoke a disgusted look from her.

“I'm three of you,” he retorted.

Jayne polished off the chicken and belched loudly. By that time, River had finished a bowl of ice cream and was staring out into the street.

“Time to go,” she said, dropping a bill onto the table and standing up.

“Wha—” Jayne muttered, surprised. He quickly gathered his guns and stood. His eyes rested momentarily on the money River had left on the table, but before he could take it, River grabbed his wrists.

“Time to go,” she repeated, pulling him toward the street.

Jayne adjusted the weight of the guns on his shoulders, lumbering along as he was tired from eating. Then he saw what River saw.

“Zoë!” he called, dashing toward the hover mule. She was circling the block slowly, scanning the streets. Alarmed at hearing her name, she motioned him to be quiet. He and River hurried to her and as soon as they were on, Zoë sped away.

“Have you seen Wash?” she asked.

\*~\*

Wash shrugged out of his shirt and held it against his head. He should have gone for a sock. He wouldn't have wrenched his shoulder trying to remove a sock. Even after

the bleeding stopped, he left it there because it was nice to finally have a pillow. The ship was quieting down as Prio's men had apparently given up on the search.

Cautiously, he wriggled out of his hiding spot and listened. The ship was silent. He eased out a little more and stretched his sore muscles. Still not a sound. As he tried to walk, his feet nearly gave out on him, cramping and seizing up. Patiently, he rolled his ankles, stretched his calves, and tried again. Coming down the long corridor away from the engine room, panels had been ripped mercilessly from the walls as the intruders had searched for hiding spaces. Concerned, he checked the engine. Someone had mucked up the wiring, rigging it to fail. Wash fixed it as best he could, but unwilling to fire up the engine and give away his presence, he couldn't test his handiwork. Hopefully, it would work well enough to get them started.

Making his way forward, he stopped in the kitchen and downed half a protein bar, equivalent to three meals. His stomach churned darkly at the addition of food, but he knew he needed the energy. Wash checked the cockpit next, making sure the controls were still connected as they should be. Prio clearly expected the crew to return to Serenity and try to escape. Wash expected it too, but still hoped they wouldn't. He searched briefly for the walkie talkie, then remembered that Zoë had taken it with her. If he could remember the channel, he'd send them a wave. First he wanted to clean the dried blood from his hair.

As Wash trudged to his bunk, complacency got the best of him. Suddenly, he was knocked over by a gun butt right between the shoulder blades. He rolled quickly to face his attacker—a man so dark he could have easily been a shadow. Wash pulled the Mateba from his belt and shot the man in the gut. Although the man staggered backwards, there was no blood. Gorram body armor! Wash needed some of that.

As the adrenaline surged through his body, Wash jumped to his feet. He had no idea where he would run, but away was the safest bet now. Unfortunately, the gunshot had drawn the attention of others and most of the easy hiding spots had been exposed by the previous search of the ship. Wash dashed for the cockpit, locked himself in, and fired up Serenity. Time to test those engines! The ship wrenched upwards, hovering and tilting skyward. Land lock! Wash used the position, jerking the ship side to side, hoping to shake out a few of the bad guys. The rudder rocked and keeled and Wash had to fight to keep her from falling out of the air. The engine seemed okay, but something between the engine and the yoke wasn't connecting. Wash steadied the ship and crawled under the console, hoping the problem would become clear. If he set down again, more of Prio's men would board. But he didn't have the control to get the ship out of there without crashing it. He had to pull free of the land lock.

Not much time. The latch on the cockpit could only withstand so much force and the shadow man was already pounding it. Forcing a quick fix, Wash crossed the grav feed into the main drive, dumping enough energy into the engine to fly out of a black hole. Don't need gravity in atmo anyway! If he didn't crush himself with the g-force, he could at least break out of the land lock and hopefully the Alliance wouldn't shoot him out of the sky. Yanking the yoke to the left, the ship turned strongly. Navigation!

Wash didn't have much time to celebrate. He had no sooner crawled out from under the console than the shadow man broke through the door and entered the bridge, gun at ready.

“I’m sorry for the bumpy ride,” Wash said quickly. “Terrifying space monkeys invaded the ship and—”

Before he could finish, the shadow man slapped him with the broad side of his gun and the world went black.

\*~\*

Simon noticed Zoë was still limping as she entered the back room where the crew was hiding. He felt helpless without his med kit, but even more disheartened because she was apparently alone. Her eyes carried sadness, exhaustion, and defeat. But then, she also carried a new gun. A moment later, River and Jayne followed her in.

“River!” Simon shouted, running toward her and embracing her. He checked her over, making sure she was not hurt. She was already talking excitedly.

“The eye cannot see the eye,” she exclaimed.

“River, what happened?”

“I saw the flames around the bodies. It was at home. I thought they were burning. But it was the wrong home!”

“Did we get paid?” Jayne asked Simon, talking over River.

Simon shot him an angry look. “Where did you take her?” he demanded.

“Hey, she ran off,” Jayne said, throwing up his hands. “Lucky she didn’t get herself caught.”

“You ran off?!” Simon exclaimed, chastising River. River started repeating the same babble she’d been saying all afternoon and Jayne, having heard enough of it, backed off and surveyed the room. Large, sparse, probably a classroom of sorts. Narrow windows leading into the courtyard. Jayne sighed as Mal approached. River was a situation Jayne didn’t want to explain.

“Jayne,” Mal said slowly, in that annoyingly patronizing voice. “Explain to me why you felt the need to traipse about Andover with an arsenal attached to yourself.”

“Did we get the money?” Jayne asked again, ignoring Mal’s question.

“All that we wanted and more. The Doc is a swift negotiator.”

Jayne raised an eyebrow at Simon who helplessly chased River about the room while she babbled about yellow siding. “That Doc?”

“Now all we need is our ship,” Mal said.

“What happened to the ship?” Jayne asked. “I cleared three scouts. That’s all there were when I left it to follow Crazy Girl.”

“Cargo arrived early,” Mal answered, indicating the crates. River was circling them and Simon followed, hands on her shoulders.

“Their bodies are surrounded by fire,” River was saying. Jayne smiled at the thought of the payoff, but his smile quickly faded as he recognized the type of cargo he was looking at.

“Them crates look eerily familiar.”

“That they are,” Mal agreed, surveying the situation. “Jayne, we could use a long range up top for look out.”

“I’ll go,” Zoë volunteered, reaching out and taking the rifle from Jayne. Quickly, she hobbled up the stairs, clearly wanting to be away from the room.

“Shepherd will be in shortly with supper,” Mal told Jayne.

Jayne was about to say that he'd already eaten, but decided a second dinner wasn't a bad thing. He was just glad that he wasn't the one having to listen to River's yammering anymore.

"I should go make sure Zoë doesn't take a topple on that ladder," Mal said, then more loudly continued. "Doc, you keep her away from that cargo!"

Simon looked over as Mal disappeared up the stairs. Try as he might, Simon could not coax River away from the cargo. She circled each crate slowly.

"Boy," she murmured. "Girl, boy."

Unexpectedly, River kicked the lid off the first crate, sending a crash echoing through the room.

"River, no!" Simon yelled. He rushed forward to restrain her, but she flailed wildly, her elbow catching him in the jaw. Grumbling a stream of curses, Jayne jumped into action, tackling River to the ground, but not before she knocked the lids off the other two crates. The cold air rising from the box created a steaming effect. Simon felt his stomach drop apprehensively.

"Kaylee, go and find some clothing," Simon ordered.

Jayne wrestled River until they were both on their knees. Once she could see the boxes again, she dialed back her struggling.

"We keep finding ourselves in this position, girl? Day wasn't enough for you was it? Had to go compounding our troubles wakin' them up."

As they watched, a girl crawled quietly out of the first box, hiding stealthily behind it and surveying the scene. Staying low, she crawled to the second box and helped a little boy out, warning him to be quiet as well.

"Their exit from the box is a fair ways quieter 'an yours," Jayne teased River. Their eyes all came to rest on the third box and after a few moments, nothing happened.

"The third box," Simon whispered, pointing. Suddenly the first girl was on her feet, screaming, coming between Simon and the third crate.

"Stay away!" she yelled.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 7

Simon, River, Jayne, Kaylee, and Book all froze, startled at the girl's demand. She stood her ground confidently, as if she weren't even naked. One hand she held low, palm facing back, indicating to the boy that he should stay down. Simon was surprised at how young the boy was—he couldn't have been more than ten or eleven. The girl, for her part seemed far more lucid than Simon would have expected for someone coming out of hibernation. She jealously guarded the third box, looking ready to spring anyone who came near. Still, the fact that no one had emerged from the third box worried Simon greatly. Coming out of hibernation could be very dangerous and he needed to help the occupant.

"Stay back!" the girl warned.

"It's okay! I'm a doctor," Simon said, ignoring her warning and approaching with both hands raised to show he meant no harm.

"Jian ta de gui," the girl muttered, grabbing Simon's arm, whipping him about, and tossing him flat on his back.

“Simon!” Kaylee yelled, dropping the clothing she was carrying and sliding to her knees behind him. Simon was too stunned to move, but accepted Kaylee’s help in trying to sit. The little boy reached for the clothing that Kaylee had dropped, but the girl grabbed his arm and held him back.

“Toss those over here,” she commanded Book.

Book crossed the room slowly, keeping his distance. A handful of worn sweaters, light trousers, dresses from the donations pile, Simon didn’t think it could be tossed. But Book folded the bundle carefully and the little boy caught it with ease. Quickly, the two children dressed, the girl pulling on some light brown trousers and a blue top. The boy was swimming in a green sweater so large he hardly needed pants. The girl helped him find a viable pair of trousers and she cinched it around his waist with a head scarf.

“They gave us clothes,” the little boy whispered to her.

The girl shook her head. “That doesn’t mean much.”

“What the hell is going on in here?” Mal yelled, storming into the room. He stopped short when he saw the three open boxes, Simon laying on the floor, and Jayne holding River down.

“Oh!” Mal said with raised eyebrows, understanding.

“Little sister thought we should meet all her friends,” Jayne sniped as Mal surveyed the two kids. The girl had resumed her guard of the box and the boy hid behind.

“Where is friend number three?” Mal asked.

“He’s not out yet,” Simon said. “We need to help.”

The girl started pulling at the heavy box lid, trying to replace it. “Stay away,” she told Mal.

Mal looked from the girl to Simon to the others on his crew. All were maintaining their distance from the girl and the third box. She had managed to tip up the box lid and was trying to slide it on.

“What’s your name?” Mal asked her. She didn’t answer.

“Alegra,” River said.

Mal shot a look at River who nodded to assure him that she meant to speak just then.

“Alegra? Is that right?” The girl looked at him warily and nodded. “Do you mind if we help out your friend?”

“He doesn’t need your help. He needs to be back to sleep.”

“Even if that were possible, it isn’t wise,” Simon told her. Alegra shot him an angry look.

“Why did you wake him?” she asked Mal.

“Weren’t my decision really.”

“He saved my life,” River spoke up. Everyone looked at River a moment, no one understanding.

Finally, Alegra replied. “He may yet end it.”

\*~\*

Inara huddled beneath her robe, wishing she and Gavin had taken an extra moment to dress or at least find slippers. Prio had locked her in a bare cell, the walls a rough cinderblock gray without a hint of paint. The cold cement floor sucked the heat

from her body, causing her to shiver. A slab of concrete extended from the wall and a flimsy plastic coated mattress spoke of its intentions to be a bed. The mattress was stained and filthy, probably coated with the decaying remnants of the cell's previous occupant. Inara worried that she might die here. Her stomach growled, reminding her that several hours had passed since her last meal. She rubbed her feet to warm them, hoping that someone would come for her soon. This room was a solid block of concrete and as far as she could tell, all her air came through the crack under the door. For her to escape, the door would have to be open. Despair crept in as she realized no one on Serenity would even notice her missing until tomorrow evening. Was it tomorrow yet? In her timeless prison, it was impossible to tell.

Gathering her strength, Inara tried the door. On this side, there was no handle, only a key hole. She pressed against the door, but the material did not yield. She threw herself against it a few times until her shoulder hurt. The door would not be knocked down. But there were no protests from the other side, either. No one was guarding the door...at least no one awake. Curiously, she started to knock at the door. At first, she chose a steady rhythm, then she started tapping out songs. After several minutes of tapping, she finally got a response.

“Knock it off!”

So someone was out there!

“I would like something to eat,” she responded, hopefully. She started bouncing between her feet, preparing herself for a quick sprint. A few moments later, her captor yelled through the door again.

“Sit down on the bed!”

“Okay,” Inara said, sidling up to the door, hoping to have surprise on her side when the door opened.

“I ain't bringin' this food in till you sit down!”

Could he see her? Uncertainly, she walked to the back of the room and swallowing her disgust, she sat on the bed. Almost immediately the lock started to jiggle. Thinking quickly, Inara leaned back on the bed and slipped off her robe. A tall, thickly muscled man came through the door with a protein bar and a piece of fruit. At the sight of Inara lying naked on the bed, he dropped them both.

“Thought you said you was hungry,” he drooled, coming eagerly into the room, salivating at the sight of her. He would be an easy mark.

Inara played her best pucker and didn't move from the bed. “I am hungry,” she pouted, touching her lips seductively. “My Gavin was taken before I could get my fill.”

With a disgusting leer, the guard quickly closed the door and locked them both inside. She could see the swell in his pants as he cackled with delight. “I could fill you up nice.”

“I'm not sure you could,” Inara teased. “I'm insatiable.”

The man grinned, pulling off his belt. “As am I”

\*~\*

It had taken nearly twenty minutes to coax the boy out of the third box—long enough for Shepherd Book to return to the donation pile, find smaller clothes for the younger boy, Tyler, and have clothing waiting for the older boy when he emerged. Book

guessed him to be in his late teens or early twenties. Simon guessed him to be a vegetable.

“Wei doesn’t speak anymore,” Alegra explained. “He doesn’t listen. I know he can. He will.”

She sounded hopeful, despite Simon’s disbelief. In the end, Alegra had crawled into the third box and crowded Wei out. His head was covered with dark black peach fuzz, indicating that it had been shaved when he entered hibernation. Having opted for a friendly approach, Tyler bounced around the room, introducing himself to everyone. Despite Book’s offer, Tyler insisted on keeping the large, green sweater which came to his elbows, even with the sleeves rolled all the way up.

Book served the lamb he had been preparing and they ate sitting on the floor. Wei would not sit, but stood by the window, staring at a corner in the ceiling. River said she’d already eaten and stood next to Wei, considering that same corner. Jayne sat far from the others and ignoring his chopsticks, he picked out chunks of lamb with his fingers and popped them into his mouth. Tyler sat next to Kaylee and despite Kaylee’s protests, he mimicked Jayne’s eating style. Alegra sat next to Mal, maintaining her defiant posture even as she accepted the bowl of food and ate.

“Do you really think your boy saved River’s life?” Mal asked Alegra.

“Hard to say. I only just met him. I don’t know who he used to be.”

“For having just met, you seem pretty protective.”

“People want him dead,” she said simply. “You go into those boxes and you have no idea where you might wake up. This isn’t the place I expected.”

“None of us expected it,” Mal assured her. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you home.”

Book finished pouring drinks for everyone and took a seat next to Jayne. His half-eaten plate set aside, Jayne pulled out his Desert Eagle and turned it over in his hands. Book worried, because unlike this morning, now the gun was loaded.

“Why did you have to do a day of silence?” Jayne asked, his voice low and perplexed. Book took a slow drink of water to prepare his answer.

“When we’re silent, we can truly listen, and we learn what it is that needs saying,” he answered. He thought back to his earlier conversation with Jayne, thinking about what needed saying.

“Elle’s death was not in vain.”

Jayne slapped the gun against the palm of his hand in frustration.

“I don’t know if she was who I thought she was,” he said slowly, as if still trying to work through the details. “She used to be a great story teller, but looking back, I was the one telling all the stories. And these kids . . . there’s no percentage in this for Stolte, they must be taking a loss. Elle wouldn’t do this.”

Book considered Jayne’s dilemma and thought through any of various lectures on how people change. He thought about how much he had changed over the years and how different his life was now.

“It doesn’t mean she’s not herself,” Book said finally. “It just means she’s not the person you once knew.”

Jayne pondered this for a moment, his face twisting in dissatisfaction. “If she’s not the one I knew, then who did I rescue? I miss the person I once knew.”

Book smiled mysteriously. “And all these weeks, you’ve been insisting you never knew her.”

\*~\*

As the evening wore on, Wei circled the perimeter of the room, his hand touching the wall, feeling the windows, and tracing the door frames. River followed at a distance, her eyes locked on him. Alegra had gone to the roof, insisting on keeping Zoë company and getting a lay of the land. Tyler bounced in circles, running up to Jayne every few minutes, then running away in a fit of giggles when Jayne gave a menacing glare. Next to Tyler's frenetic bouncing, Jayne was practically a statue. Kaylee worked converting handholds on the trailer and boosting the engine power so the hover mule could handle a full compliment.

"I really don't understand kids," Simon mused. "Of all people, he's only interested in Jayne."

"You don't choose kids, Simon. They choose you." Kaylee smiled, her eyes steady on the mule. You could never be sure a hand-cranked bolt was tight enough. "I think it's sweet."

"I think if that kid is not careful, he's gonna get shot."

"Nah, Jayne wouldn't shoot 'em." She lifted her head from the engine block and looked at the pair just to make sure. "Look how Jayne's smilin'! He likes the attention!"

"He's smiling because he's holding half his gun collection. I'm telling you, the kid is gonna get shot."

Kaylee shook her head with a laugh and returned to her work. "What about the other boy? Wei?"

"It's hard to say. I—at first, I thought he was in a vegetative state."

"Don't look like a vegetable now," Kaylee said as Wei walked past. Simon furrowed his brow, searching for a better explanation.

"He doesn't communicate. He doesn't respond to light or smell or touch. He didn't eat. I still can't figure out how Alegra got him out of the box, or if he's even aware of where he is. If he even knows he's walking."

"How can you not know you're walkin'?"

"I'm worried," Simon said, frustrated. "When it's time to run from here, will we be able to convince him to get on the mule? Will he be able to run? If we tell him to stay down and be quiet... we were safer with him in the box."

Kaylee pressed her lips together, considering Wei with pity. She watched River trail him around the room, mumbling to herself. "River will convince him."

Simon looked from River to Kaylee, his mouth hanging open. Finally, he leaned close to Kaylee and whispered, "I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier."

\*~\*

Within twenty minutes, Inara had worn the guard out and lulled him to sleep. As he sprawled on the bed, snoring loudly, Inara pulled on his uniform which, though filthy, was far warmer than her robe. Then she grabbed the keys, the gun, and the food and slipped out of the cell, locking the guard inside.

The hall was empty, dead ending in one direction, so she dashed off in the opposite. The guard's boots were heavy and awkward, too big for her feet. Sliding out of

them easily, she continued on with just the socks, carrying the boots for when she made it outside. She walked purposefully, hoping that if security monitored these halls, they would ignore the ill-fitting uniform and take her for a guard.

She rounded a corner and stopped dead. It was the last security checkpoint before exiting the prison blocks and three guards were congregated eating donuts. She couldn't just waltz through. Hoping no one had seen her yet, she backed around a corner. There was another door across the hallway leading to a stairwell. Testing the keys on her stolen ring until she found the right one, Inara ran quickly, hoping the stairs went up and out.

About two flights up, she found an openable door that spit her out into what seemed like a hospital ward. The corridor was sterile gray with exam rooms on one side and a lab on the other. Walking through it gave Inara chills. She found a diagram on the wall posting an "emergency escape plan" and studied it carefully, keeping her head down. There were too many people here, but among them she heard only one.

Prio's unmistakable smooth, nasal voice floated through the corridor from around a corner. Inara ducked into a vacant exam room. The cold exam chair, machines, and wires made her shudder. Finding a closet, she quickly changed her ill-fitting guard uniform for scrubs and a white coat. She had to get out soon!

Taking a deep breath, she peaked out of the Exam room. Prio was coming toward her! Desperately, she searched the room for a hiding place. The closet was too small. Thinking quickly, she pulled open an air vent and climbed into the ceiling. Seconds later, Prio entered with two nurses and a very dazed subject.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 8

Zoë stayed vigilant on the roof top of the church, focusing her mind on protecting the crew rather than her missing husband. Alegra had wandered up twenty minutes ago and after scoping out the city, had settled down next to her with hardly a word. Between the light of the twin moons in the sky and the city glow, Alegra was avidly reading a bible she had found inside. The damp evening air was thick with smog and as the night wore on, the roads emptied. There were no signs of Prio's men, but Zoë did not think for a moment that they were safe. She glanced over at Alegra who was flipping one page back and forth loudly, as if it were saying something it shouldn't.

"You look perplexed."

Alegra gave a frustrated sigh. "Gideon's battle strategy is entirely counterintuitive."

"Most stories of faith are."

"He gained good ground in a short amount of time. There must be something to his tactics."

"Aside from it being a faith story?"

"I considered that. But fanatical devotion to a deity and a mantra of self-sacrifice do not explain the small losses."

"Why are you trying to glean battle strategy from a Holy Book?"

"I've studied so much of military strategy and tactics, but I've never seen this book before. The Shepherd says it depicts actual events on Earth That Was!"

"Some think so."

Alegra paused for a moment, considering the book. “It does get rather fantastical at points.”

“You’re a strategist?”

Alegra nodded slowly. “I worked for Alliance Intelligence for over a year.”

“They’re recruiting young,” Zoë commented, surprised.

“Between a prodigious intelligence and synesthesia, it just comes naturally to me. I find things people want to hide. That’s how I found the Academy. Found them.” She made a brief gesture toward the church, indicating the boys inside, then she stared silently at the space in front of her.

“Why them?” Zoë asked softly. “Of all the ones to rescue, why them?”

“Tyler is an orphan. He has no one to rescue him.”

“They got him pretty young.”

“He cries and the room shakes. That kind of power only happens in fiction... Wei, they were going to kill. They say there’s not enough of him left to be useful. But I have to believe he’s in there somewhere.”

Alegra trailed off again, letting the silence hang between them. Zoë stood up again, circling the roof to watch for any changes in the environment. As the first moon set, the sky darkened and more stars became visible. Mal climbed onto the roof, stumbling on the loose gravel and swearing loudly.

“Had too much to drink, Captain?” Alegra teased.

“Not enough,” Mal answered dourly. “You should get some rest.”

“I just woke up a few hours ago.”

“I have a feelin’ we’ll be doin’ lots of runnin’ tomorrow and I want you to be rested.”

“Tomorrow, if you don’t show your face, Prio will try to draw you out.”

Mal looked doubtful. “Are you suggesting I show my face?”

“Absolutely not!” Alegra chuckled, skipping toward the stairs. “I’d advise you to find a way off this rock without him *ever* seeing your face!”

With that, she disappeared into the church. Mal turned his attention to Zoë.

“I was actually talking to you. You should get some sleep.”

“I’m not tired,” Zoë replied stoically.

“I didn’t ask if you were tired,” Mal pointed out. “How’s your leg?”

“It’ll do.”

“Good. At sunrise, you and me go back to the spaceport and try to get the ship back.”

Zoë shot Mal a questioning look, but Mal wasn’t about to explain his logic. She considered the possibility that Wash was still hiding on the ship. He was clever and bendy and could fit into tight hiding places. Hoping against hope, Zoë finally let the exhaustion sink in, and she went back inside to sleep.

\*~\*

Jayne rolled over, trying to get comfortable on the floor which, despite the pile of blankets and small pillow, was still a floor. He had almost gotten to sleep, but a clanking metal sound had woken him. He stilled his mind and body, listening for the sound again. A gun tapped once lightly against the floor.

Concerned that their hideout had been infiltrated, Jayne reached for Lux. His revolver was gone! His eyes shot open and he scanned the room, rolling over as casually as possible. There didn't seem to be new intruders, but he heard the sound again. Jayne bolted upright and searched the darkness. Most everyone was sleeping on the floor. River had fallen asleep upright in a corner where she had perched to watch Wei; Wei circled Zoë, staring down at her. Jayne couldn't blame him for that, but a small part of him hoped Zoë would wake up and see this. Derelict or not, Zoë would probably give Wei a fair beating... or at least a satisfactory conk on the noggin. The sound came from the middle of the room where Tyler sat with all of Jayne's guns lined up smallest to largest. He was busy dismantling one of them.

Leaping to his feet, Jayne stormed over to give the kid a piece of his mind. As he was about to reach for the kid's collar and lift him off his feet, he noticed that the gun in Tyler's hand was actually Mal's revolver. The others in line looked as though they hadn't been touched yet. For a moment, Jayne's anger melted into amusement as Tyler looked up at him with innocent eyes.

"What in the hell do you think you're doin'?" Jayne asked evenly.

"Cleaning the guns."

Tyler worked carefully, clearly having no idea what he was doing. Jayne wished this were any other day where he could wait for Mal to discover Tyler himself and just watch. But here, they needed every gun working. Sitting on the floor next to Tyler, Jayne calculated the damage done to the weapon. Tyler handed it over, watching Jayne's inspection.

"Listen, Fidget, you don't touch other people's guns! Got it?"

Tyler nodded. Jayne picked up the pieces which were all laid out neatly on the floor and started reassembling the gun. He picked up the cylinder.

"Wo de ma! This thing's still loaded!" Jayne cried out, looking at Tyler. The boy's chin dropped, his eyes a mixture of confusion and guilt. Jayne dumped the rounds from the cylinder, then found the screw he needed to replace the cylinder and crane.

"You could have killed yourself!" Jayne scolded, struggling to get the screw in against the spring load. Soon, a new thought perplexed Jayne and he considered Tyler again.

"You ever take a gun apart before?"

Tyler shook his head.

"How'd you know what to do?"

Tyler reached over and touched the screw in Jayne's hands. The screw went in and locked into place easily. "Most times when there's a screw, there's something needs unscrewing to get to the middle."

Jayne tested the cylinder. The screw held.

"How'd you do that?"

Tyler shrugged again.

\*~\*

Inara couldn't tell how long Prio and the nurses tortured that poor kid. She imagined they only stopped because they were tired. She had winced at every scream, terrified, knowing it could easily be her strapped to that chair if she didn't get out now.

Her legs ached from being cramped in the ceiling too long and though Prio and the others had left, she couldn't bring herself to move. The kid's cries as he begged for mercy from his tormenters echoed in her brain. Her stomach growled noisily, but she felt too sick to eat. Between fear, hunger, and exhaustion, she couldn't say why her body shook. She looked at the gun, wondering that she didn't shoot herself during those dreadful hours of torture... or more mercifully, shoot the kid. Exhaustion fueled by despair overwhelmed her. No reason for despair, she chided herself. You are nearly free. You need only climb out of this ceiling and walk out.

Listening carefully until she was assured of the silence, Inara crept down and walked to the door. It was locked from the outside. She tried all of her keys, but none fit this door. After all this, she was a prisoner again, but this time in a much creepier cell. She cowered into a corner as if smallness might protect her from the evil around her. Desperately, she nibbled on the protein bar, hoping the food might give her strength and clarity. She prayed silently until she remembered the gun.

Pressing her eyes closed, she conjured the emergency exit plan. Then with quick aim, she fired the gun at the door. Unprepared for the backlash, she missed the lock and the spray of heat of the impact scathed her hand. Quickly, she tried again. Time to run!

Inara made a mad dash through the hallways, following signs toward the exit. Through the windows, the sky already glowed with pre-dawn light. Her unshod feet slid on the cold, tile floor. The front door was made of glass. Should she bother seeing if she had a key or just blast her way through? She never had the opportunity to decide.

Four armed guards appeared outside the door. Inara slid to a stop, turning around to find another exit. More guards! She was surrounded!

"You almost made it," Prio cackled, coming into view. Behind him, she could see another thug pushing the security guard she had seduced. The guard was naked.

"I keep telling him think with your brain," Prio intoned. "But he doesn't listen."

Inara's heart pounded with fear.

"If your hand offends, cut it off," Prio continued evilly, then shot the guard in the crotch. The guard fell over, screaming, bleeding. No one rushed to help him. Inara stood speechless, wondering if Prio intended to harm her too.

"You have a choice," Prio warned. "You go back to your cell now and wait. Make no more attempts of seduction. If you offend, I will cut out everything in you that makes you a woman. Dong ma?"

Swallowing hard, Inara realized that terrified compliance would only work against her. Prio wanted to intimidate her by making her watch this guard suffer, and making her feel she was responsible. Although it was working very well, she did not want to let on. Inara glided defiantly over to the ailing security guard. He was beginning to shake and would soon go into shock. Prio was just going to let him bleed out in the middle of the entrance lobby with everyone watching. Steeling her nerves, she pulled her gun and aimed it at the man's head.

"Does it hurt?" she asked sweetly. She worried her performance lacked the nuances it needed to be convincing. "I was worth it, wasn't I?"

The man looked up with pleading eyes. Mercifully, she sent a bullet through his brainpan, ending his suffering. Blood splattered on her white coat and scrubs. Prio's face was a mixture of amusement and disappointment. He grabbed Inara's wrist firmly and took the gun.

“A compassionate spirit,” he mused. “That I can use.” Then to the guard, he continued. “Take her back to her cell.”

Inara shook Prio’s hand off her wrist before he could notice she was shaking. How did Mal shoot people on a daily basis? Mustering her strength and not waiting for the guard to handle her, she strode back toward the prison block, pulling the keys from her pocket and shaking them in the air.

“I can find my own way back.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 9

Zoë woke up while it was still dark, her heart troubled, her back sore. With a deep breath and a long stretch, she reached for her toes, then pulled her boots on. For the first time in days, her leg did not hurt. In the dim lamplight, she saw that Wei had finally stopped circling and was resting next to Alegra. Tyler had somehow broken through Jayne’s defenses and was sleeping on his shoulder. Jayne leaned against the wall, one arm wrapped around Tyler, the other cradling Vera.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Zoë stood and strapped on her gun holster. It was empty. She checked the area around her, but the gun was nowhere to be found. Jayne’s holster was empty as well. The only gun in sight was Vera. Zoë walked over and kicked Jayne’s foot to wake him.

“Seems he grew on you,” Zoë remarked.

“Yeah, we’re attached at the hip.”

“Where are the guns?”

Jayne grunted, still tired, but maneuvered his way to standing, bringing Tyler with him. It took Jayne a moment to situate the boy so he could be carried with one arm, but once up, Jayne led Zoë out towards the church’s sanctuary.

“Little Fidget thought it would be fun to take all the guns apart,” Jayne explained, enjoying the look of alarm that flashed through Zoë’s eyes. He led her to a storage locker which closed with a combination lock. Opening the locker, Jayne handed Zoë her gun, Mal’s revolver, his Rutger, and the pistol Mal and Simon had bought the day before.

“Careful with that revolver,” Jayne warned. “May have a screw loose.”

Zoë cocked her head, noticing the rifle in the locker as well. “Captain and I are heading out. Could use the rifle.”

“Scoutin’ or fightin’?” Jayne asked.

“Scouting, but you never know.”

“May be best to take another hand-held. That particular rifle is illegal on the world.”

“You carried it around all day yesterday.”

Jayne shrugged. “Your call.”

Zoë opted for an autorevolver, which she tucked into her boot before heading upstairs. She found the Captain fast asleep and unarmed, drool twinkling in the soft hue of daylight. Rolling her eyes, Zoë nudged his side with her boot. Mal sprang into action, scrambling for the missing weapons and struggling to right himself. When he caught sight of Zoë, he froze in embarrassment and wiped the drool from his face.

“Way to watch out, sir.”

“I was watching out,” Mal protested. “I just got lost in thought.”  
Zoë tossed him his revolver and his pistol.  
“Did you take these?”  
“The kid did, while you were sleeping.”  
“I wasn’t sleeping, I was just thinking really hard!”  
“Right, sir.” Zoë raised her eyebrows and began walking back inside.  
“Why’d you interrupt me? I had almost figured out how to get the ship back.”  
“Sorry, sir, I didn’t realize.”  
Mal paused and looked around the roof once more. “Where’s the rifle?”

\*~\*

Inara had been in her cell just long enough to finish her food before someone came for her. It was hardly enough time to collect her thoughts or recover from the horrors of the night before. She had seen through the window that it was morning and she desperately wanted sleep. Perhaps sleep deprivation was Prio’s way of torturing her. The guard led her into an interrogation room with two hard metal chairs and a small table. Prio sat in one chair looking relaxed and refreshed. He was pulling off a pair of blue latex gloves and eyeing Inara carefully. She sat down in the other chair, sitting straight, maintaining composure, and waiting for him to speak.

“Your captain is not on his ship, nor are my specimens. He is hiding them somewhere and you will help me draw them out.”

“Have you tried yelling olly-olly-oxen-free?”

Prio sneered. “I thought you might try for me.”

“Captain Reynolds will recognize a trap.”

“I’m not sure he would,” Prio goaded. “You see, he still thinks you are safe, returning to the ship right on schedule. I’m thinking he will jump from the shadows in some futile attempt to warn you off.”

Inara knew what he said was true, but she matched Prio’s sneer with her own wicked smile. Perhaps she could stir him the way he did her.

“You must be pretty frightened. Going to such great lengths to retrieve these people,” she scoffed. “What do they have on you?”

Prio twitched, amused and haughty. “They are powerful and dangerous creatures who will kill your friends with a single glance. I have used one to develop this.”

He brandished a black rod, less than a foot long. It looked like a magician’s wand.

“Dear me, it’s a stick!” Inara cried, bring her hand to her chest in mock alarm. “Be careful, you could poke someone’s eye out!”

“You laugh at my weapon. One specimen, eighteen dead doctors, and I have a seemingly innocuous “stick” that will cause you a most unpleasant death.”

Prio twirled the rod in his hand, smiling at its power. Then he cast moon-eyes on Inara, shaking his head with forged pity.

“The subject still has the power, but less control over it. ‘Twould be a pity if he killed your crewmates while they slept. So you see, my lady, my intentions for retrieving this subject are purely philanthropic.”

Inara looked at the stick again, not believing its power. Her determination wavered, but only for a moment. Prio was a manipulator and a liar. She wouldn't be played.

Firmly, she stated, "The Captain doesn't take on passengers."

"Help me find him and I'm sure we can clear up the whole matter."

Inara stood, ending the debate. "Kill me with your little stick. I won't help you."

Prio rose as well and walked her down the block back toward her cell, making no threats. Inara was beginning to think she'd called his bluff, but he stopped short of her cell. They were facing a window into another interrogation room, but the blinds were drawn.

"Killing you serves no purpose as yet. But what if I kill him?"

Prio pulled the blinds. "Would you help me to save him?"

Inara couldn't make out the face, but the blonde hair and Hawaiian shirt were unmistakable. Wash! He was lying in the middle of the floor, flat on his back, feet tied to a pole suspended about two feet off the ground. Wash's boots were off and a brutish man was beating the soles of his feet with a bamboo cane. Inara shuddered every time the cane made contact.

"What are you doing to him?"

"Bastinado," Prio revealed as if talking about a new recipe for cookies. "It's really quite fascinating, the response. You don't hit the feet hard enough to break them with a single blow. Rather, you can drive a man mad just by the repetitive low impact. It's usually quite effective in extracting information."

Inara pressed her lips together, wanting to turn away, but unable. She feared that if she turned her back on Wash, he would die.

"If I help you, will you stop?"

"I would consider it."

"Then stop. Let him go."

Prio smiled smugly and pressed an intercom button on the wall. "Echi, take the subject back to his cell."

The brutish man paused, putting down the cane. Roughly, he untied Wash's ankles and pulled him upright. Unable to stand on his battered feet, Wash fell hard on his knees and dropped to the floor. Inara saw Wash roll over, still throwing defiant insults at Echi.

Prio rolled his eyes and clarified. "Echi, *carry* the subject back to his cell."

\*~\*

Wash was still seeing stars from the pain in his feet. He wouldn't be walking out of here. Echi had thrown him onto a foam slab, which was a poor excuse for a mattress, but Wash had slept on worse. He decided that Mal should give him time and a half for hours spent enduring torture on behalf of the crew. Maybe even double that. He imagined Mal taking the money out of his "vacation" time spent recovering.

Finally able to lie flat, the blood circulation returned to his legs, and while his calves were grateful, the soles of his feet throbbed in agony. He considered lying on the floor and propping his feet on the bed, but just the thought of the position made him shudder. He pulled his feet to his chest in a fetal position. Yes! This could work!

The position made him think of Zoë again, carrying a kid, craving headless cloud-duck. He thought of Mal threatening to sleep with her—arguing with Mal over Zoë had gotten him through his last bout of torture. He wondered if Zoë had been tortured during the war and if so, how had she gotten through it? He thought of that morning—Zoë waking up, still haunted by the memory of Serenity Valley. Maybe she hadn't gotten through it yet. Maybe she was still pulling through.

In his mind's eye, he held his wife. He wondered where she was and hoped she hadn't been caught. She would come for him, he knew. Just like he would come for her. Wash rocked side to side lightly, still holding his knees to his chest, and began to sing. His breath came in short bursts and the sound barely escaped his lips, but just the resonance of the melody in his mind held him true.

"I cannot run into your arms / Or 'scape this misery. / But till you come, my Zoë, love, / I'll hold you close to me."

\*~\*

Mal adjusted his jacket. He was still wearing his new suit from the day before and although he felt too clean to be in a gunfight, he did blend into the crowds much better than Zoë.

"Maybe we should get you a nice suit too," Mal quipped. In her tight olive pants and brown vest, Zoë didn't blend into the flat grayness of the city, nor did she look like she was associated with him.

"I don't think the women here wear suits, sir."

"Then a fluffy dress and frilly shoes."

"That fancy suit's gone to your head."

"I slept in it and it didn't even wrinkle! And look!" Mal stopped walking and leaned against the wall, looking suave. "It's like rich-folk camouflage!"

Zoë stopped walking and shot him a snippy glare.

"See there! Now you look like you fit in," Mal laughed, but stopped quickly as the look on Zoë's face suddenly changed. Mal turned quickly to see what had caught her eye. It was Inara's shuttle! Immediately, the two started running toward the spaceport. Zoë led Mal through the back entrance, past the reclamation yard, the same way they had escaped the day before.

"She's early!" Mal carped, watching the shuttle circle the sky. "She's never early!"

"You think something is wrong?"

The two slowed as the protective line of cargo crates thinned out. They needed to get to the topside of the landing port. Prio seemed to have scaled back his presence overnight. There were no guards visible along the ramps heading up. Mal started to rush forward, but Zoë grabbed his arm and shook her head. She nodded, instead, toward the basement level of the administrative building.

With no time to lose, the two rushed through the building and up the stairs, nearly setting off an alarm with their guns. Once topside, they kept low on the causeway and ducked behind a pressure-washing truck. Mal cast a worried glance skyward. Inara's shuttle was still circling. Serenity's landing struts looked a little beat up and the cargo bay was open for the world to see in. If Inara landed, she'd be caught for sure.

“She’s probably wondering why no one is answering,” Zoë said.

“Let’s hope she assumes the worse.”

A few moments later, two Alliance patrol cars came speeding up the ramp, sirens blaring. Nearly a dozen men streamed out of Serenity’s cargo bay, some taking refuge behind storage crates, others crossed the causeways to the adjacent docks or toward the administrative building. The Alliance Feds chased after them, only catching a few, but placing them in handcuffs and putting them into the squad cars.

“She called the Feds?” Mal balked.

“Makes sense,” Zoë said. “She had no qualm with them.”

Inara landed her shuttle next to Serenity, then came out and thanked the two Alliance officers for their help. One of the Feds told her to wait outside while he checked the ship. Mal couldn’t believe her tactics, but she seemed to have successfully emptied the area of Prio’s goons.

While Inara waited for the Fed to return, she sat on the ramp of the cargo bay and started fiddling with the hem of her skirt. Occasionally she glanced around the landing port, and Mal knew she was watching for him. The two squad cars departed, leaving the last Fed on the ship with Inara. Thinking it was safe, Mal looked to Zoë for her take on the situation. Zoë’s eyes were wide with emotion.

“What is it?”

“Prio has Wash,” she said solemnly.

“Why do you say that?”

“Inara’s seen him. Look at what she’s doing.”

Mal looked at Inara, then back to Zoë. “It’s Inara. She’s preening.”

“It’s a trap, sir. And she’s the bait.”

Mal crouched a little lower and reexamined the situation. Inara’s hair, though beautiful, was not to its normal standard of perfect. He realized that even though he had been privy to her preening, it was not something she would do in public view. She would have gone back into her shuttle. Alegra had been right. Prio had set up this elaborate ruse to draw him out. It was a trap, but not a bad idea.

Keeping low, Mal darted back down the causeway toward the administrative building. Zoë followed quickly. Once inside, Mal stood as straight as possible, working to adopt the same smugness he’d seen in Simon the day before. Smoothing his jacket, he approached a bored looking blonde receptionist whose nose was buried in a romance novel.

“Hello, I’m Sergeant Callahan, this is Ms. Washburn.” He flashed his inside pocket as if it were a badge. “We’re from the morgue.”

Reluctantly, the lady put down her novel and folded her hands. Although her posture asked “how can I help you”, her face said “shoot me now, I hate my job.”

“We had a body come in this morning—a Captain Reynolds. We understand he has a ship here.”

The lady consulted a computer screen, then she asked, “What’s his debt?”

“Beg pardon?”

“There’s a government auction tonight. I can make room in the line. What are his debts?”

Mal thought quickly, having no idea of what sounded reasonable, and trying to balance that lack of information with the very firm limit of how much cash they could get. “Thirty-thousand.”

The lady typed in a few more lines of her form. “The Firefly?”

“That’s the one.”

“We’ll start it at 50.”

“Fifty?” Mal repeated, worried that this idea was worse than it initially seemed.

The lady rolled her eyes. “It still needs to be inspected.”

“Oh... right,” Mal nodded, understanding. “You see, I was hoping I could take it.”

“Then you can come tonight and bid on it like everyone else,” she said, nonplussed, handing him a card with the auction information. Mal exchanged a look with Zoë.

“Beat up old junker like that. We’ll be lucky to get 50,” the lady muttered.

“Oh, I bet there’s a fella out there willing to go twice that. Right Zoë?”

“I know someone that might,” she replied.

\*~\*

Inara wrung her dress as if it were wet, twisting so hard the wrinkles did not come out. It had been nearly two hours since their staged police sting, and still no sign of Mal. From her vantage point, she could see Prio in her shuttle pacing impatiently and conversing with someone on vid. What might happen to her if Mal didn’t show? As the next hour came and went, a blonde woman exited the Administrative building and started walking toward Serenity, bringing two people in bright orange jumpsuits bearing the Andover Spaceport logo.

“Excuse me, can I help you?” Inara asked, jumping to her feet as they approached the ship.

“Ma’am, is this your shuttle?” the blonde lady asked.

Inara nodded.

“I’m going to have to ask you to vacate this landing dock.”

“But I’m waiting...” Inara pointed toward Serenity.

“Tow this to the reclamation yard and get her polished up,” the lady ordered the two orange jumpsuits.

“What’s going on? Did something happen to Captain Reynolds?” Inara stammered. Prio came to the mouth of the shuttle, looking confused.

“Sorry to be the one to tell you, but Captain Reynolds is dead.”

The news hit Inara like a ton of bricks.

“And the others?” she asked, her voice trembling.

The girl shrugged. “Sorry. I don’t know.”

Inara tottered backwards toward her shuttle, the world becoming small. Prio’s jaw dropped in surprise as Serenity was piloted off the dock, the land lock clearly lifted. This was no prank.

“I’m afraid you need to vacate this landing pad. Do you have a place to go?”

“Yes,” Prio answered, pulling her angrily onboard. Inara stumbled on, letting Prio pilot the shuttle back towards his lair. Her eyes welled with tears as she circled the room, remembering how often Mal had entered it uninvited.

“What now?” Inara asked, fearing for Wash and for herself.

Prio shook his head. “I have no use for you. But you are the last of your crew still alive. The last one to see Chelsea Halden. And that’s of use to Jantis. You will go to him.”

“The last? But Wash...”

Prio leered evilly. “Didn’t I tell you? He didn’t make it.”

Inara’s world crumbled. She felt faint. Collapsing on the bed, she no longer cared if Prio saw her cry. Through the sobs, she reached into her nightstand and pulled out a slender metal box containing the standard companion immunization kit. She had no guns, no swords, no great physical strength. She had only her skills of manipulation and seduction... and now, she had an immunization kit.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 10

Mal burst through the doors of the abbey, Zoë only half a step behind him. Rushing down from the roof, Jayne met them in the sanctuary, reading Mal’s intense look as a sign of trouble.

“He has her! He has Inara!” Mal fumed. The crew gathered round, listening intently as Mal and Zoë recounted their morning.

“Poor Inara!” Kaylee moaned.

“Did she look injured?” Simon asked.

“She seemed fine,” Zoë answered.

“We saw Prio on the shuttle with her. He’s taking her back to wherever he’s been hiding her. Wash has to be there too if Inara saw him.”

“A powerful man like Prio could have a dozen safe houses around town,” Book pointed out. “It’s possible he’s not even keeping her in this city.”

“He is,” Alegra interrupted, her voice soft, her eyes a million miles away. “Prio has only one refuge—it’s the place we escaped from.”

Mal waited for her to say more, but her breathing became shallow, her mind lost in the memory. Mal looked at Simon and River, who had both gone a little moon-eyed as well.

“Great,” Mal chuckled. “At least we know it’s low security.”

“It took me years to infiltrate that place,” Simon intoned. “How are we ever going to get in?”

“I know the way,” Alegra spoke up.

“I know the way,” Tyler repeated, coming to her side.

River stood as well. “I know the way.”

\*~\*

Simon’s protests were unnecessary—Mal had no intention of taking River. He had no intention of taking any of the kids, but after spending twenty minutes trying to

decode Alegra's directions, he gave up and just brought her along. He hadn't much developed a notion of how to storm the place, but just in case, they stocked up on rounds before going. Hiring a cab to get across town, Mal tried to flesh out the details of his plan.

"What's the layout?" he asked quietly, even though the cab driver seemed to be actively ignoring them.

"Standard square, very few windows, up to four parallel hallways on the floors with no labs."

"Standard square means limited exits," Zoë said. "What if our primary route is cut off?"

"The floor layout and exits are posted in the halls," Alegra said. Mal raised his eyebrows in surprised, so she explained. "In the event of a fire or something. Just don't try getting out by any of those exits and you're fine."

"And how are we gonna find the others? Just walk around knocking on doors?" Jayne asked, doubtful. "We're ain't exactly incon-suspicious."

"If anyone asks, say you are escorting a subject," Alegra shrugged. "On your way to or from. People there have seen it all."

As Mal exited the cab, his jaw dropped at the sight of the place. All he saw was a wall of solid concrete rising twenty feet in the air, topped by iron spikes. It looked like a fortress.

Alegra smiled, "Now you've seen the front door."

She led them westward and after half a mile, the height of the wall dropped slowly and eventually the solid wall was replaced with evenly spaced iron bars, with the intention of looking ivy league. Through the bars, huge buildings stretched for miles. The fencing changed again as the campus backed up to a woods. A formal sign told them they were now entering "Andover World Forest – No Trespassing After Sunset." The barred fence gave way to a more practical grating and barbed wire that promised 10,000 Volts to anyone that crossed it.

"How big is this place?" Mal muttered, growing concerned.

"About five miles on a side, protected." Alegra began following a river bed deeper into the woods. Dust from the trail caught in the dappled sunlight and branches cracked loudly underfoot. After tottering across a log bridge, the path steeped steadily uphill. As they returned to the fence, Mal noticed a small gap and he hoped that Jayne would fit through it. Hell, for 10,000 Volts, he hoped he would fit through it.

"They never repair this," Alegra mused. "I don't know why."

"Maybe they do and people just cut it open again."

Alegra ducked nimbly through the fence and waited while the others proceeded more cautiously. Jayne opted to pass his weapons first, then slithered through, sweat beading from his face. Mal knew that should push come to shove, they would never make it out this way quick enough.

"The building we're looking for is about one mile past here."

"What makes you think he'd take Wash and Inara there?" Zoë asked.

"It's where he goes. I call it the Black Box. Every other building on campus has a documentable purpose... classified, but documentable. But what occurs in the Black Box stays there. It is where Prio crosses the line of morally questionable activities that are

government sanctioned into the full-fledged acts of inhuman cruelty driven by morbid curiosity... some of which are also government sanctioned.”

“God love the Alliance,” Mal grumbled.

As the forest thinned, Alegra led them along the tree line, but eventually, she cut out into the broad daylight making a beeline for one of the buildings. Mal and the others followed hesitantly. Jayne was getting antsy, wanting to either find cover or run. He turned often, checking for potential snipers, but the campus was quiet. Finally, he broke the silence.

“If this place is all guarded up the way you say, how are we supposed to get in?”

Alegra pointed to an unremarkable building up ahead. “Through the window.”

\*~\*

Kaylee and Book entered the auction yard just as the doors opened. The ships were lined in a semi-circle facing a courtyard, each with their best face forward. Folks milled about, browsing the merchandise, but onboard inspection was prohibited at this juncture. While Book signed in, Kaylee looked for Serenity. It stuck out like a sore thumb against the other ships, most of which were twice her size and much cleaner. But someone must have seen the beauty in her because the starting bid had been upped to 86,000 credits. What would they do if the bid broke 100?

“You think they cleaned her out?” Kaylee whispered to Book as he came up, flipping through the auction catalog.

“Doesn’t even look like they cleaned her up,” Book said, running his hand along the damaged landing gear. Kaylee wince as if the scrapes on the hull were on her own body.

“Do you think she’ll fly?” Book asked.

Kaylee circled to the engines. “Looks like she plowed into a brick wall and fell outta the sky. No tellin’ from out here.”

Book offered a paper insert from the program. “This is the mechanics report from the auction book. They’ve refused a tour even though this ship missed all the inspection previews.”

“Alls this says is she’ll run well enough to get her to a repair shop.”

“They do offer a complimentary detailing. I guess they haven’t cleaned her out.”

Kaylee gave a frustrated sigh as she stared at the lock doors.

“I’m breakin’ in,” she determined.

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

Kaylee shrugged. “We’re goin’ to fly her outta here whether we win her or not, right? Better to make sure she can fly.”

Book raised his eyebrows. “I thought I had volunteered myself for the legal part of the job.”

“It’s as legal as the money we’re buying her with.”

\*~\*

River hadn’t spoken to Simon since he had forbidden her to join the rescue party. She and Tyler had gone to the roof to watch the others depart. Wei was already there,

circling, running his hand along the high brick edge and kicking up the loose gravel on the roof top. Simon knew that River was angry, so he decided to give her time to decompress and went in search of food. Unlike Serenity, the abbey had quality fresh food that made him homesick. He couldn't believe how close he was to his former home, yet he still couldn't go back.

Simon polished off the last piece of a blueberry pie, his eyes closing in an indulgent sigh. Soon, he and the kids would take the mule to the auction yard, then they'd take Serenity to pick up the others, and hopefully all fly out in one piece. It was a simple plan with room for lots of complications before it completely fell apart. Mal's plans always needed wiggle room.

Not knowing how long it might take to coax Wei back down the stairs and onto the hover mule, Simon headed for the roof. River sat cross-legged in the center, reading and revising a bible. But otherwise the roof was empty.

"Where are the boys?" Simon asked, concerned. He hadn't noticed them come down stairs.

"Boys are gone."

Accustomed to cryptic answers, Simon knelt calmly until he was face to face with River. "Gone? Gone where?"

River met his gaze. "They went to the Academy to help the others."

Simon jumped up in alarm, his feet running in two directions at once, alternately toward the door to try and stop the boys and back to River.

"Don't worry," she said calmly. "They know the way."

"Way?" Simon repeated in a panic. "Wei is barely functional! And Tyler is just a kid. How could you let them go?!"

"I couldn't go with them," River laughed. "Someone has to fly the ship."

\*~\*

The building was so unremarkable, Mal couldn't imagine it containing anything more or less reprehensible than the others they had passed. The open window disturbed him though and Mal grabbed Alegra's arm, jolting her to a stop.

"You're just goin' to climb through an open window?"

"What's a place like this doin' with an open window anyhow?" Jayne asked.

"Trust me."

She climbed lithely through the window, then motioned the others to follow. Mal climbed in, scanned the room, and stopped dead, jaw dropped. Zoë and Jayne nearly plowed him over as they came in the window behind him. The window led into a break room with a few couches, a table, and a refrigerator. On one of the over-stuffed, green couches, Tyler sat, consulting a hand-held computer.

"Where's Wei?" Alegra asked.

"He went to the second floor. Says there's something there he needs."

Feeling he'd been duped, Mal nearly exploded. "You planned this?!"

"He knows the way," Alegra answered.

Jayne chuckled. "What? You didn't see it coming?"

Alegra ignored Mal's fuming, keeping her attention on Tyler. "Did you find them?"

“The man has been everywhere between the basement and four. The lady is only ever in the basement or somewhere undisclosed with Prio.” Tyler made little quotation marks with his fingers as he said “undisclosed.”

“Where is Prio now?” Mal asked impatiently. He often wondered what the point of being Captain was if no one listened.

Tyler shrugged, indicating that he didn’t know. “His office is on Two?”

“I’ll take Two,” Mal said. “Alegra, Zoë, go to the basement work up. Jayne take Four, work down.”

“What about me?” Tyler asked, jumping off the couch.

“You stay here and try not to get dead.”

“Jayne will pass easier through the halls if Tyler is with him,” Alegra spoke up. “People in this building don’t blink at a gunman accompanying a subject.”

“Fine. Don’t kill anyone you don’t have to.”

\*~\*

Kaylee started in the engine room, clearly torn apart and only haphazardly repaired. Despite the auction catalog’s claim, the ship probably wouldn’t have made it to the nearest repair station. She recognized Wash’s handiwork on the engine, bypassing safety systems and dumping raw energy wherever he needed it. Serenity would break atmo, but once there, a new fix would be needed. Kaylee worked carefully, trying not to think of how little time she had. The catalyzer was looking weak again and the compressor strained, but it would hold.

Working her way forward, she passed through a gauntlet of damage in the hallways. Most of the ripped wiring affected onboard electrics, communications, and conveniences—nothing necessary for escape. She tipped up most of the wall paneling, only keeping open the few damaged comm lines. If she had time, she’d fix those before takeoff.

The cockpit was a bloody mess and Kaylee worked hard to mask her fear for Wash. She hoped he’d managed to inflict as much damage as he’d taken. The console seemed fine, though with the electric off, it was difficult to diagnose. The lock on the bridge door had been broken open. What had Wash been trying to do before his capture? You can’t fly away from someone on the same ship as you... for that matter, the whole reason they left the ship in the first place was because of the land lock. With a sinking suspicion, Kaylee dropped below the main console, willing the wiring to tell its story. The grav line spoke.

“He dumped the whole bout of energy into the engine!” she exclaimed. Suddenly, the damage to Serenity’s hull made more sense. Wash had essentially thrown the weight of the Earth onto the ship trying to dislodge it from the land lock. He could have blown up the whole ship and himself with it!

Kaylee, traced the cross feed of the wires and started the disconnect. This trick was easy to do, but not so easy to undo. She quickly rerouted the wires, then headed for the main grav feed line that ran under the floor of the cargo bay. This could take days to fix, but she didn’t have days. How long could an auction last?

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 11

Jayne kept one hand on Tyler's shoulder as they navigated the fourth floor hallways, creating the illusion that he was leading Tyler towards an exam room... or away. Jayne made note of every nook and cranny where he could take cover, every holstered gun, every orderly that looked like he could put up a fight, and every kid that could potentially go crazy. The whole floor was unsettling, and Jayne clutched Vera more tightly, ready to spring into action at a moments notice. Tyler led him down a side hallway and Jayne tipped the blinds on the various rooms, looking for Wash or Inara. The needles and the screams from inside the rooms made him flinch. Tyler's posture slumped a little and his head hung as though it were only loosely pinned to his shoulders. This place sucked the youth right out of his face and Jayne couldn't imagine him being led behind one of those disquieting doors.

"What did they do to you here?"

Tyler looked so tired that Jayne feared he would fall over. "Please don't make me go in there. If I sing for you today, will you let me leave early?"

Jayne jerked Tyler to a stop and pulled him into a lavatory.

"Please..." Tyler whimpered.

"Fidget, listen to me," Jayne commanded, shaking Tyler's shoulders. He pulled the Mateba out of his boot and tucked it into Tyler's belt. "You ain't some gorram lab rat. Anyone thinks otherwise, you shoot 'em, hear?"

Tyler nodded, light slowly returning to his eyes as Jayne's words anchored him to the present. Jayne steeled his nerves, getting ready to face the medical hell outside the door. But no matter how many windows they peaked through, Inara and Wash were not on this level.

Finding a staircase, they went to the third floor, which contained mostly labs. There were no subjects on this floor, no narrow hallways, and no exam rooms. Here they were out of place. Jayne retreated quickly to the stairwell, but not fast enough.

"Hey!" a pipsqueak guard called after them. "You are not authorized to be here."

Rather than running, Jayne turned and charged the guard who barely had time to draw his weapon before Jayne had plowed him to the ground. Two other guards took notice and drew their weapons. With a grin tugging the corners of his mouth, Jayne let loose a spray of bullets from Vera, taking out lab equipment, breaking glass, and sending the room into enough chaos for him to grab Tyler and run. Pushing Tyler into the stairwell, he darted up the stairs, taking them three at a time. His legs much shorter, Tyler lagged behind.

The door to the stairwell opened. Jayne fired at the pursuers and they backed out again. Scooping up Tyler, Jayne dashed upstairs again, hoping he could lead the guards away from the rendezvous point, or at least distract them long enough for one of the others to find Inara and Wash.

\*~\*

The second floor was lined with offices, interrogation rooms, and invalids. In his new suit, Mal blended easily among the armed guards who were escorting white-gowned patients. The sight was unsettling enough, and part of Mal wanted to stage a jail break, but he had to watch out for his own first. Against his own instinct, he'd let Inara leave

Serenity and now she was caught by a deranged man with a sweet tooth for torturing children.

Prio's office was at the end of the hall. The door was tipped open and Prio sat behind the desk, pen in hand. Although that end of the hallway was not being conscientiously guarded, the overabundance of armed men in the vicinity of the interrogation rooms warned Mal to keep silent. He needed to get the information without gunfire. Squaring his shoulders, Mal walked directly into Prio's office and closed the door. At the sound of the door closing, Prio looked up calmly, deadly.

"What is it?" Prio asked, as if awaiting a security report.

Mal reached for his gun. "Where is Inara?"

"Captain Reynolds?" Prio queried, cocking his head in surprise. Suddenly his eyes lit with recognition. "I heard you were dead!"

"Death lends itself to convenient mobility."

"Inara has discovered the same. She killed herself this morning."

Mal's heart stopped for a moment. Prio's surety made the statement so easy to believe, yet he knew Inara. "You lie."

"It was masterful!" Prio smiled, as if talking about a poker match. "The dual of two manipulators. At my command, she locked herself away. I told her to take her own life, and she did. She is a poor manipulator, dependent on seduction. But her feminine wiles do not work on me."

"I guess you're not much of a man are ya?"

Prio laughed evilly, hands reaching under his desk. Mal tensed.

"How petty of you, Captain. This is not a pissing contest or a bar brawl. This is your life."

Prio's hands whipped above the desk like lightning and he shot Mal in the shoulder. The impact knocked Mal hard against the door, the knob jamming into his spine. His jacket lining exploded in a puff of cotton, but the bullet only dented his armored vest. Annoyed, Mal shrugged off the jacket.

"I was getting tired of this suit anyway."

Prio shot again, but this time Mal dodged, rolled, and fired back, connecting with Prio's gun hand. The gun went flying, but Prio hardly flinched.

"You are persistent," Prio commented. "What an interesting subject you'd make."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find me simple enough. You shoot me, I shoot back. Sometimes, if I really don't like you, I'll shoot first."

"The exception is the mystery."

Prio dove across his desk and grabbed a slender black rod. Mal shot again, but Prio hid behind his desk and wood chips sprayed into the air. Suddenly, the door burst open behind him. Thinking the cavalry had come, Mal rolled behind the desk, getting Prio into a chokehold and placing the gun to his head. No one spoke. A moment later, Mal rose slowly, pulling Prio up with him, to see who had come through the door. Wei!

"Wei, get out!" Mal commanded.

Prio chuckled. "What is this brainless wang ba dan doing here?"

"You cut his brain out. Ain't his fault it's missin'."

Prio held up the black rod in one hand, but Wei brushed it aside and stared him down. Confused, Mal held steady, waiting to see what Prio would do to Wei. Soon enough, he realized it was Wei doing something to Prio!

Mal released his grip and backed off as Prio began to tremble and scream, blood pouring from his eyes, ears, and nose. Shocked and horrified, Mal watched as Prio fell silent and dropped to the floor, his breath and life gone. He had never seen someone fall over and die for no apparent reason. As soon as Prio was down, Wei bent over and retrieved the black stick from the floor.

“What just happened?” Mal stammered.

Wei held up the stick and another black cylindrical device. Mal backed away, concerned.

“This is my brain,” Wei explained. “Soon I will be whole.”

Mal looked from Wei to Prio to the black stick, unenlightened. “I guess that’s using your noodle.”

\*~\*

Book sat silent, helpless, as the cost of Serenity soared. Although he was sitting on 100,000 credits, he was powerless to buy back his former home, now up to 165,000. With alarm, he noticed Simon and River enter the courtyard. Simon looked ten years older with his thick goatee and dark suit. When they spotted him, they ducked into the aisle.

“We seem to be a few credits short,” Simon noted, looking concerned.

“And you seem to be a few kids short.”

Simon sighed and sank into a chair, discouraged and embarrassed. “This is the revised plan. Didn’t you get the memo?”

Book didn’t answer. At this stage, he was thinking of how they would break onto the ship. Then vaguely, through the shroud of his scheming, he heard his paddle number. River had bid 245,000.

“River, no!” Book whispered, hoarsely.

“Just bid,” she told him, crossing her legs and looking prim. “The money will come.”

“River, we can’t,” Simon explained, trying to take the paddle from her. She pulled it back, swatted his with it, then bid again. 325,000. Simon glanced at the auctioneer, wondering if he noticed their struggle for the paddle or if he suffered from tunnel vision.

A few seconds later, the auctioneer shouted, “Sold to the pretty girl in the back for 325,000.”

They’d won the ship, but could not pay. The three stood, retreating to the rear of the auction hall as bidding started on the next ship.

“Now what?” Simon asked.

Just then, they saw Kaylee dash around the perimeter of the courtyard. Why had she left Serenity?

“What is it?” Book asked, as she screeched to a halt, out of breath, fumbling through a box of post and brandishing a letter.

“Did we lose her yet?” Kaylee panted, handing Book a letter.

As Book read, Simon answered, “No. No, we won her... we just can’t pay what we bid. What’s in the letter, Shepherd?”

“An answer to prayer.”

“The payoff for this Osiris run,” Kaylee explained. “Three hundred k!”

Stunned, Simon looked from Book to the box in Kaylee's hands. A dash of red and gold peaked from the edges; he pulled it out. "Where did you get this dress?"

Kaylee shrugged. "It's post for Inara. Came this morning with the crates. I don't know why I thought I should opened it."

"Elle borrowed this dress from Inara. She wore it the night she left."

"You think Elle's still alive?" Kaylee asked, her eyes growing wide.

Book shook his head. "Not likely. We were on Three Hills for awhile. It's possible she mailed this to Stolte before she died and they forwarded it to us."

River grabbed the dress and covered her head, ducking low into the seats. "It's time to go."

Simon saw the feds talking to the auction security staff and dropped beside her.

"I'll go pay the man," Book told them, taking the money. "You three get on board."

\*~\*

While Alegra distracted a guard, Zoë came up behind him and knocked him out with a blow to the back of the head. Taking his keys and his firearm, they ran down a back stair case onto the basement level. The floor was dimly lit and painted in a drab white that somewhere in time had turned to yellow. Zoë guessed there must be fifty doors along the hall way. One by one, Alegra found the keys for each and opened them. Some were empty, but most were occupied by cowering prisoners, frightened by light and sound—not paralyzed though. The occupants took to the halls, slowly at first, but soon began rushing the exit.

"Way to blow our cover," Zoë said.

"Would you lock them back up?"

"This is taking too long!"

Alegra jingled the key in next door, but having lost the element of surprise, Zoë lost her patience and started shooting the doors open. As she shot lock after lock and kicked open the doors to empty rooms, her ears began to ring. Was she wasting bullets? Then somewhere in the ringing, she heard a familiar scream. Concentrating hard to listen over the din of escaping prisoners, Zoë skipped the next quarter of the hallway and started shooting again. Behind the third door, Wash lay on the floor in a fetal position, screaming.

"Wash!" Zoë cried, running in and kneeling next to him.

"Zoë? Am I dead. I can feel you like a dream..."

"Can you walk?" Zoë asked urgently, helping Wash to sit. She didn't see his boots, but at the sight of his battered feet, realized that searching for them would be a waste of time.

Alegra darted in. "Inara isn't here."

"I don't have feet anymore," Wash told Zoë, his head lolling side to side. "I had them removed for the sake of my own sanity. I intend to get peg legs and become a pirate."

"I thought you guys were pirates... I mean as real jobs."

"Smugglers," Zoë corrected. "There's a difference."

"Right."

“Pirates! Arrgh!” Wash cried, drool leaking from the corners of his mouth.

“He’s delirious.”

“This I can see,” Alegra agreed.

“My hair! Is it still there?”

“Yeah, baby, you still have your hair.”

“It’s hard to tell. It’s the only thing that doesn’t hurt.”

Alegra leaned over and yanked Wash’s hair impatiently. “Did that hurt?”

“Arrgh!” Wash cried. “If I had feet, I’d step on your toes!”

Hefting Wash up from under the armpits, Zoë sat him on the bed, trying to get him in a better position to lift him. She handed Alegra the rifle. “Take the gun.”

Alegra accepted the rifle uncertainly while Zoë lifted Wash over her shoulders.

“I’ve never fired a gun before,” Alegra murmured, looking frightened.

“Just look threatening. That usually works.”

“And aim for the feet!” Wash slobbered. “I am a vengeful pirate!”

\*~\*

Kaylee watched over Book’s shoulder as he nervously lifted Serenity off the ground. It had been a long time since he’d flown and he wished he didn’t have to start with a take-off. Serenity’s yoke responded easily to his every move, sometimes even reading his mind. A few times, the ship turned and jerked on her own accord.

“Sensitive,” Book commented.

“The ship only responds to your commands,” River told him, slipping off her boots and curling into the copilot’s chair.

Book had flown a Firefly a long time ago and the yoke hadn’t been nearly this sensitive. He wondered if there had been a redesign of the steering column since his youth or if this modification was purely Wash. He handled Serenity more tentatively, careful not to give any push he didn’t intend.

“Any way to make her less sensitive?” Book asked.

Kaylee pointed to the wall. “I think it’s one of them switches.”

Book looked hesitantly at the three switches and decided not to mess with them. River directed him toward the Academy and with every minute he was getting more confident in his ability to hold her steady. He pulled Serenity higher into the sky, not wanting their approach to be too obvious.

Suddenly, the console flickered and the ship dropped 2000 feet. Book had to fight the yoke against the pull of wind and gravity, insensitive to his touch. Be careful what you ask for.

“What was that?!” Simon cried.

“I’m sure it was just a hiccup,” Book said, worriedly running through the possibilities. He fought his instinct to yank hard on the yoke, not wanting to overcompensate for the drop.

“We lost the electric! The wire is down!” Kaylee cried, thinking of all the ripped up wiring she’d overlooked so she could detach the grav line dump. She dashed from the bridge through the halls of Serenity, pulling away loose wall panels to find the source of the short.

Book gritted his teeth as the Academy approached. He couldn't steady a broken ship!

"We'll be there soon, son. You should get to the cargo bay."

Simon nodded hesitantly. "Let's hope they haven't sealed off this exit."

\*~\*

Jayne dashed up the last flight of stairs, Tyler in one arm, Desert Eagle in the other. Having run out of floors to hide on, he hoped the roof might offer some cover. Jayne had shot three of their pursuers; two more were still chasing them, but maintained their. Daylight blinded him as he burst through the last door onto the roof, but Serenity's outline was unmistakable hovering several thousand feet above the building.

"Run!" Jayne yelled, setting Tyler down and pulling the door closed behind him. There was no way to lock it! Tyler ran to a hatch in the middle of the roof, that was raised not more than an inch. He opened the doors to create cover, but Jayne worried that something so flimsy would not protect him against gunfire. However, knowing for sure that he could not hold the stairwell door closed against gunfire, Jayne ran to the hatch as well and ducked next to Tyler. He realized, he was looking down the building's elevator shaft—the same one they had been planning on coming up through.

Serenity seemed to fall out of the sky, zooming toward the roof and the open hatch. The bomb bay doors opened and Simon peered out.

"Doc!" Jayne hollered over the beating wind and roaring engines. Simon jumped, startled to see anyone on the roof.

"Hold her steady!" Jayne yelled, lifting Tyler onto his shoulders. Simon reached down. Just then, the doors to the stairwell burst open and the two pursuers shot through.

BANG! A bullet caught Jayne's side and he fell to the roof, dropping Tyler. Jayne screamed in surprise, rolling over and grabbing Vera.

"I'm sorry!" Tyler cried. "I didn't see!"

Jayne aimed and fired, catching one of the men in the shoulder. The kickback from Vera sent Jayne skidding backwards, forcing gravel into his wound. He rolled behind the hatch doors as the second guard let off a few rounds.

"Shoot him!" Jayne yelled at Tyler as he pushed himself up.

Tyler pulled out the gun that Jayne had given him earlier, peaked around the hatch, and let off two wild shots. Good for a distraction, Jayne thought, but not much else. He suddenly wished they'd spent the night on target practice rather than gun cleaning. Clutching his side, Jayne checked over the top of the hatch for the second guard. Nothing. He dropped quickly and peaked around the side. The second guard was down, shot in the head.

"Come on!" Jayne hustled Tyler, not questioning their good fortune. After lifting Tyler through the bay doors, he climbed in himself, pulled out his hip flask, and took a long swig of his rotgut hooch. The liquor dulled the pain and stopped the room from spotting up.

"Let me see that!" Simon said, pulling at Jayne's shirt to examine the wound. Jayne swatted him away

"Bullet's not in me, I just lost a chunk of flesh."

Suddenly the comm crackled. It was River. "Simon! Come help!"

Simon pulled gauze and tape from a first aid kit and handed them to Tyler. "If he ever stops moving, tape this to the wound."

Tyler nodded, watching Simon go. Jayne picked up Tyler's gun where he had dropped it on the floor of the cargo bay. With one hand holding the wound on his side, he reached for the controls to the bay harness and tested the straps.

"Nice shot," Jayne complimented. "How'd you do that?"

Still holding the gauze and tape and looking a little shell-shocked, Tyler answered, "It's what I do."

\*~\*

Simon dashed onto the bridge, medical kit in hand. Book lay on the floor, unconscious; smoke rose from his console. River sat upright and alert in the co-pilot seat, holding the ship steady.

"Simon, help," she pleaded. He came to her side, worried by her tone, but knowing he could do no better than her.

"It's okay, River," he consoled her. "You're doing fine."

"She shrugged his hand off her shoulder. "Not me! Him!"

With a deep breath of relief, Simon knelt next to Book. Still breathing, heart fine, he thought, going through a mental checklist. He felt for signs of internal bleeding. Book moaned painfully.

"Not me," Book groaned. "Steady the ship. Bring up the others."

"Those jobs are covered," Simon assured him, digging through his bag. Carefully, he treated the burn on the Shepherd's face and neck. "Now, I'm doing my job."

\*~\*

"My wife has the nicest legs," Wash mumbled, groping Zoë as she walked.

Mal met Zoë, Alegra, and Wash in the first floor hallway. He ran toward them, uncertain of how to help Zoë without taking Wash off her shoulders. Finally, he did just that, carrying Wash the rest of the elevator shaft.

"You have nice legs too!"

"So I've been told," Mal commented.

"Captain, have you seen my boots? I lost my feet."

"If you keep stroking my backside, you're gonna lose your hands too."

Zoë pulled Wash's hands away from Mal, and motioned to Alegra for the gun. Alegra readily handed over the rifle, but something else plagued Mal.

"Where's Inara?" he asked intensely.

"Not on zero," Zoë answered. "Jayne and Tyler?"

"Up here!" Jayne shouted from the roof. He lowered a net from Serenity's bay. "Comin' down!"

"Did you find Prio?" Alegra asked.

"Prio is dead. Wei killed him."

"Where is Wei?" Zoë asked.

Mal swallowed hard, putting Wash on the floor while they waited for the net to lower. "He ran off. There's no time for talk. You get on the ship, I'm going after Inara."

The net arrived and they began shuffling Wash into it. Alegra climbed onto the outside of the netting and held on.

“She’s not here,” Alegra insisted.

“You don’t know that.”

“She’s not in the cell block, nor with Prio, nor being experimented on. She’s not here.”

Zoë started climbing onto the netting as well. Wei burst into the elevator shaft from the second floor, leapt onto the rope and slid down to the harness.

“The man walks upright, the ape climbs higher on the branch!” Wei cried.

“That’s good. You go too, monkey boy,” Mal said

“He’s trying to tell you that Inara’s not here,” Alegra said adamantly. “Jantis has her.”

“Jantis?”

“He’s the next one up the ladder. If you’ve crossed him...”

“I haven’t—”

Mal stopped himself, remembering Jayne’s cryptic words. He pulled out his walkie talkie and radioed Serenity.

“Jayne does the name Jantis mean anything to you?”

“It means turn high-tail and run for the hills. Get your ruttin’ ass outta there!”

Hesitantly, Mal climbed onto the netting and held on for dear life as their makeshift elevator started rising. “Any chance Jantis is on this world?”

“If he is, I owe him a bullet to the brainpan,” Jayne yelled.

Still uncertain about leaving, Mal turned to Wei.

“Next branch up?”

Wei nodded.

“You best not be lying to me,” Mal said.

The group rose slowly into Serenity and the bay doors closed behind them. As soon as there was floor beneath him, Mal jumped off the net and dashed toward the bridge. Zoë, Alegra, and Wei hopped off a bit more carefully so as not to rock the harness.

“Where’s the doctor?”

“Bridge,” Jayne answered, lowering the harness slowly to the ground. “You want I should carry him?”

“Look at all the pretty legs.”

As Zoë and Jayne tried to disentangle Wash from the harness netting without hurting him, Wei came up, tapped Zoë’s shoulder, and placed a black cylindrical device in her hand.

“This is my brain,” Wei told her. “When I hold it, I am whole, but it cannot mend me. It can help mend him.”

Zoë took the device, confused. “Thank you?”

Alegra smiled, not nearly as confused as Zoë. She touched Wash’s arm reassuringly. “Sorry, pirate. No peg leg for you.”

“Grrr... Arrrgh!”

\*~\*

Out of breath, Mal dashed onto the bridge. Taking stock of the damaged primary console, he scooted into the second seat, displacing River, and steered Serenity out of atmo.

“Doc, Wash needs you.”

Simon nodded calmly, helping Book up.

“And Inara?” Simon asked.

Mal clenched his jaw and kept his eyes firmly ahead. For a moment, Simon feared that Inara had died. With dead-set eyes, Mal pushed Serenity through the edge of atmo and toward the stars.

“She’s not here,” River said. “Inara is not here.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 12

The crew lingered anxiously outside the Infirmary as Simon and Zoë tended to Wash. Simon discovered that he could use Wei’s black cylinder to repair most of the bone damage, and having done that, was starting to cast Wash’s feet. Book prayed silently and Jayne paced nervously, unwilling to sit still. The mission had only been a partial success—Inara’s absence was palpable. As soon as the engines were running steady, Kaylee bolted from the engine room to watch and wait with the others. Having set a course that was firmly away from the core, Mal hoped he wasn’t heading away from Inara as well.

“You’re a strategist,” Mal said to Alegra. “What ideas do you have?”

Alegra’s crossed her arms tightly as if she were squirreling her innards. With a heavy sigh, she said, “Leave Inara for dead, run to the rim, and spend the rest of your life avoiding Jantis.”

“No!” Kaylee cried.

“Second half is okay. Not so keen on the first point,” Mal said.

Alegra thought again. “Find someone else with a grudge on Jantis who may be tracking his whereabouts.”

“No time for that.”

“Caddock!” Jayne interrupted. His feet stopped suddenly as if they couldn’t run at the same time as his mouth. “Surely Caddock’s figured Jantis is the one that black marked him.”

“Don’t mean he’s found him,” Mal countered.

“If Jantis black marked him, they’ve had direct dealings,” Jayne pointed out. “Caddock would at least give us a solid start.”

Mal rubbed his eyes, wearied by the prospect. Finally he turned to Kaylee. “Any chance he’s still on Three Hills?”

“Damage I did to his ship, it’d take a team of folks a month to fix it. Far as I know, since I left he don’t even have one mechanic.”

“Jantis will be watching the ports for you,” Alegra warned. “Three Hills doesn’t allow landing out of port.”

“Easter Island,” Book volunteered, standing to join the discussion. They all looked at him, waiting for an explanation. “It’s an abandoned Alliance base on Three Hills. We can land there easily enough and shouldn’t be bothered.”

“Kaylee, get the engines ready for a hard burn. We’re going to Three Hills.”

Happy to be doing something positive towards Inara’s rescue, Kaylee headed back to the engine room. Her brain was already churning up ideas to boost the engine power. With a smirk, she told Serenity, “When I see that Caddock again I’ll give him a piece of my mind. Hwa dun still has my lucky wrench.”

\*~\*

The Infirmary was quiet and smelled of plaster, paste, and canvas as Simon immobilized Wash’s feet and ankles. Mal coughed at the powdery taste of the air. Wash was doped and stared lazily at Zoë, while Zoë held his hand and stroked his hair. She acknowledged Mal with a curt nod.

“How is he?” Mal asked.

“He suffered multiple fractures, but this device seems to have stimulated bone growth,” Simon answered.

Confused, Mal looked to Zoë for a translation.

“He won’t be running a marathon any time soon, but I expect he’ll be flying by morning. We got a course?”

“Three Hills.”

“Sir? You think he took Inara to Three Hills?”

“Not looking for Inara, we’re looking for Caddock. There’s a good chance Caddock can point us to Jantis.”

Zoë raised an eyebrow. “Any chance he won’t steal our cargo, kidnap our mechanic, and shoot us out of the sky?”

“Got no cargo to steal, so we’re safe on the first.”

“One less thing,” Simon broke in sarcastically. “What about the kids?”

“Ain’t worried about them at all. Powerful group like that don’t need our protection.

“We leavin’ ‘em here, sir? On Osiris?”

“Alegra wants to get left on Three Hills. Plenty of ports there can take ‘em to the edge of the ‘verse.”

Wash started mumbling and purring. “We gonna see the museum before we leave?”

“Museum?” Mal mouthed.

“Space History,” Zoë explained to Mal. Then to Wash, she said, “No, sweetie. Next time.”

“We gonna see the Earth ship? See our history?”

“Come on, Wash,” Mal chuckled. “You had a front row seat in the history of obscure foot tortures.”

“Qu ni de,” Wash spat, his head lolling.

“I guess the sense of humor isn’t recovering as quickly as his bones,” Simon remarked dryly.

“We safe?” Wash asked looking at Zoë. “Are we all safe?”

Zoë shook her head. “Inara’s missing. ‘Prio took her.”

“When?” Wash became suddenly intense and alert, his eyes wide. “How long? Zoë, he’s gonna kill her. Mal, we have to go now. Go help her. Baby, you can’t stay here by my side. You have to go save her.”

He tried to sit up and push Zoë into action, but she cooed softly to calm him. “She’s not here anymore.”

Wash didn’t seem to hear her; he just continued looking at the others as if they were crazy to stand still at such a time as this. “I wouldn’t have made it another day. If he’s done to her what he did to me... if she finds a way to kill herself, she will. Why are you still sitting here?!”

“We’re going. We’re going now to get her.” Zoë looked to Mal who turned and left for the cockpit. Then she turned back to Wash to reassure him. “She was alive yesterday. Alive and walking, we saw her. I don’t think he means to hurt her.”

Wash panted, fear filling his eyes. “Then he means to do much worse.”

\*~\*

Inara set up an altar in the corner of her cell, and knelt down to pray. This wall had the only light in the room and she angled it so that it shone down on her altar—only a pillow bordered by a silk scarf as that was all she had. She offered a square of red protein from her meal and asked for protection. In her mind’s eye, she envisioned the holy beings on her home altar melt into light and enter her heart to join her here. Inara closed her eyes, seeing the man she had seduced and later killed. Despite the rigorous scrubbing she’d done on her shuttle, she still felt his blood all over her hands and on her face. She prayed for Mal and the crew of *Serenity*, not wanting to believe them dead. She chanted her prayer until peace came and she could return to the moment.

Prio had sent her away from *Osiris* on a ship, heading to a place where no one would know to look. That meant she was on her own. From the folds of her gown, she pulled the immunization kit she had swiped. Did she dare open it here? Facing the altar to shield herself from any remote onlookers, she tipped open the box and checked its contents. Several types of microbicides, cleansers, and basic first aid supplies, including peroxide, pain killers, and instant heat/cold packs. Not enough for a cleansing ritual, nor were there any obvious weapons among them. But since no one from *Serenity* could come for her, these were the tools of her escape.

“Woman,” a gruff guard said, entering the cell. Inara quickly closed the box, then pretending to pray again, she hid it in her sleeve. Taking her time to show her defiance, Inara then stood slowly and faced the guard.

“Come with me. Jantis will see you now.”

\*~\*

Zoë lay awake in the side bed of *Infirmery*, her eyes closed, her mind reeling. She wasn’t in the habit of keeping secrets from her husband, but this one she just didn’t know how to tell. Wash slept soundly on the center bed, aided by heavy medication. Though she was there to keep him company, she still felt alone. His breathing had settled into a gentle rhythm, but her mind stirred about. Not two months ago, she and Wash had talked about having a baby. At that time, it had been exciting, an ideal, a wonderful thought—at

least for her. Wash had not been too keen on the idea. Now, in the middle of a rescue and heading into danger, it was a terrifying decision. Could they really raise a child on Serenity? She had been raised on a space ship, but not as an outlaw. With Mal constantly pulling them into bar fights, fist fights, sword fights, gun fights... Maybe Wash had been right. What if she had to leave Serenity? Would Wash stay behind? One of them had to earn a living.

And Mal! What would happen to him? He'd probably get himself killed real quick. She had saved his life countless times (and he hers), but lately, she'd felt herself slipping. Despite her denial, the mourning sickness had crept in and the others had certainly noticed. But she couldn't tell the doctor just yet. Didn't want him to know before Wash. She sighed as her mind replayed the pros and cons of keeping the baby over and over again. She knew it by heart now. If only this weren't happening now!

Her stomach churned and she feared she would be sick. Sweat beaded on her face and a tear glistened in her eye. Suddenly, she heard Wash stirring and with a groan, he rolled off the bed onto the floor.

"Gah!" he screamed, falling on his hands and feet. Then his feet slid out from under him and he landed hard on his knees. Zoë leapt out of bed to help him.

"Wash! Honey, are you okay?"

She dropped to the floor, putting an arm around his torso to stabilize him. Wash rolled into her, then onto the floor adopting a fetal position and crying. Or was he laughing?

"It seemed like such a good idea at the time," he snorted, his eyes squeezed shut in a mixture of pain and laughter.

"What did?"

"Just roll off the bed, don't need to land on my feet," Wash chuckled. Zoë wondered if this was a drug induced euphoria. "Bed's too tall. But my feet don't hurt... I just didn't know where they were. I can't feel them at all."

Zoë cradled his head, gently. "Can you feel me?"

Wash's eyes finally met hers and he swallowed hard, his face looking serious. "I was going to surprise you. Cozy up next to you while you slept."

Zoë chuckled, shaking her head and caressing his face. "You certainly surprised me."

Wash moaned deeply, kissing Zoë's hands and drifting back into the euphoria. Carefully, she placed a pillow under his head and another under his feet, then she pulled a blanket from the bed and snuggled up next to him on the floor. She felt his hand wrap around hers, squeeze lightly, and settle in until their two hands became one. The mental and emotional distance between them vanished. He's here, she told herself. Just tell him! Taking a few deep breaths to steady herself, she finally spoke; and though she whispered, it seemed as though her voice carried through all of Serenity.

"Wash?"

"Yes, my sweet?" His voice was soft and gentle. So peaceful, she hated to drop this bombshell in the middle of it.

"Wash," she repeated his name only to stall. She hadn't thought about how to say it. "I think—I know – I'm pregnant."

She waited. He was silent, still breathing steadily. For a moment, she wondered if he had fallen asleep again. But then, just as tenderly as before, he whispered, "I know."

A smile played across his face, and he hugged her a little more closely. Zoë was a bit relieved, but also a bit confused.

“You know?” she repeated irately. “What do you mean you know? How do you know?”

“I’m your husband,” Wash explained softly, not opening his eyes. “I love you. I know all you’re rhythms. Plus, I’m very intuitive.”

Zoë swatted him dismissively. “You didn’t know.”

Wash shook his head and corrected her. “I’ve known since Newhall. Well... suspected... well...I don’t know.”

Zoë sat up crossly, considering him. She hadn’t even suspected since Newhall! Quietly, he reached out and stroked her torso, hip to breast then back again—just as he had in the hatch on Newhall. Her breath caught. Had he really suspected that early? Why hadn’t he said something to her? How dare he leave her to deal with this turmoil alone! He knew! How could he sleep so soundly? Why wasn’t he lying awake worried about the future? Had he already come up with a plan?

Desperately upset and frustrated, Zoë pressed both hands against her face. She forced herself to breath steadily and maintain a clear head. “Wash, what are we going to do?”

With a deep breath, Wash propped himself on his elbows and pulled Zoë toward him. She laid on her back, looking up into his soft blue eyes, his blonde hair all askew. His hand caressed her face and she felt the scabs on his bruised knuckles.

“I seem to recall someone saying that we would make one beautiful baby. Here’s your chance to meet him,” Wash answered, kissing her nose. “We’ll meet him together. But tonight, my lamby-toes, I’ll hold you close to me.”

\*~\*

Jayne tossed a horseshoe and it landed a good two feet from the stake, clanking loudly against the cargo bay floor.

“That’s not close enough,” Tyler pointed out with a mischievous smile. Tyler stepped up to the line and tossed his horseshoe stake. It swung wildly up in the air, then in clear defiance of gravity, arced gracefully downward landing directly on the stake. He smiled triumphantly.

“Don’t think I don’t know what your doin’,” Jayne warned.

“I’m just throwing it like you taught me,” Tyler squeaked.

“It’s cheating if you move it in mid-air.” Jayne tossed another horseshoe. It sailed right past the stake, nearly sliding into the back door. He hadn’t made a toss that bad since he was first learning the game—since he played with his cousin.

“It’s cheating if you move mine too,” Jayne pointed out. “This is a game tests your skills.”

“That is my skill!”

Jayne laughed. “Don’t get me wrong, Fidget; cheatin’ is a good skill to have. But if a man knows your cheatin’, he might shoot ya. Even you miss a bullet once in awhile. If you wanna cheat, you gotta make it look natural.”

Tyler furrowed his brow and pursed his lips, staring at the horseshoe stake.

“Toss it. Watch it fall natural,” Jayne encouraged him.

Tyler tossed the horseshoe lackadaisically and it only made it halfway to the stake. He turned disappointedly to Jayne. "Its not falling right."

Retrieving the horseshoes and placing one in Tyler's hand, Jayne explained, "Shoe always falls the same. The only thing that changes is how you toss it."

Tyler pouted at the horseshoe stake a moment, then turned to Jayne. "Can you show me again?"

With Jayne guiding his release, Tyler tossed the horseshoe and it landed on the steak.

"A leaner!" Jayne beamed. "Try again."

\*~\*

River and Wei sat quietly at the dining room table. River sketched Serenity—her new home—and this picture, she had not intention of burning. The vision made sense now and the fire extinguished. She had no new pressing dreams to draw, which relieved her. For now, she could be a girl, and just draw to draw. Wei sat across from her, staring at the various devices he'd stolen from the Academy, holding the long rod in one hand and the wide cylinder in the other.

"What am I?" he finally asked. "A killer? A mender?"

"You saved my life," River answered.

"Did I? I don't remember."

"You taught me to resist so that I could call and Simon could come for me."

Wei didn't seem to hear at first. Finally he said, "No one came for me."

"Alegra did. She will take care of you, the way Simon takes care of me."

"Your turn will come."

They fell silent again. Abandoning the devices, Wei picked up a pencil and started drawing as well.

"Are you two gonna color all night or you gonna make us some supper?" Mal asked wandering in.

"We have no food," River told him.

"What?" Mal jumped, alarmed to the cabinets, opened one and saw a stack of food stock. "What are you sayin'? We got protein in ever color of the rainbow."

"That's not food," Wei said. "Not even to first order."

River laughed, and Mal assumed it was some sort of smart-people joke.

"I'm sure if you put your heads together, you'll think of something."

Wei stopped drawing and picked up one of his devices. "Here's my two cents."

\*~\*

A week later, Wash crawled out of the Infirmary and onto the bridge of Serenity, insisting on landing the ship himself. Mal stayed in the copilot's chair, waiting to take over at a moment's notice, but they landed smoothly and the old port was vacant, just as Book had predicted. With no time to waste, Mal headed outside to get a lay of the land. The cold night air chilled him to the bone and he wrapped his brown coat tightly round himself like a blanket. He was glad to be out of the zoot suit and back into the company of normal folk.

Alegra stepped onto Three Hills and gazed awestruck at the night sky, her breath steaming in the cold night air. Her steps slowed until she just stood, open-mouthed, gazing skywards, her arms crossed tightly across her chest, her teeth chattering. For all her strength, confidence, and determination for coming here, Mal saw fear in her eyes.

“Taking up stargazing?” he asked. She continued to gaze upwards, watching her breath eclipse the stars then disperse into the night.

“I don’t know this sky.”

“It’s the same sky.”

Alegra scrunched her nose, finally taking her eyes from the sky to look at Mal. “I’ve never seen it from this perspective before.”

Mal came up beside her, looking skyward as well. He remembered the first time he’d left home and set down on a new planet. Why he kept returning to the sky after that. To not be a prisoner to the world was true freedom. After a moment, he stopped pondering the sky and returned to his work.

“Trust me,” he promised. “You’ll never look at it the same way again.”

TO BE CONTINUED....