

Big Damn Rescue  
A *Firefly* Fan Fiction by Valerie Mikles

PROLOGUE

The job was finished, no turning back. Fifty men dead at his command, five by his weapon. He had done it. He was now the most powerful man in all the core planets. Only he didn't want it. He felt hollow inside, like a part of him had died to attain this goal.

He looked sideways and noted a satisfied grin on his brother's face. Although Amadi wasn't his blood brother, they had been raised as such; they'd risen through the ranks of their social circle as such. And now they had taken control together. Amadi clapped him on the back in victory.

"What do you say, Book?" Amadi always called him Book because he would walk around in Shepherd's garb carrying a bible. Book found that the costume confused the local authorities, as well as the rival crime bosses.

When Book didn't speak, Amadi laughed. The blood from the bodies pooled at their feet and his brother laughed! Book stepped out of the circle of corpses. He did not fear the police – he owned the police now.

"Do you want this, brother?" Book asked.

Amadi looked confused, following as Book walked down the street, toward the space port. "Do I want what?"

"This," Book waved his hand in the direction of the bodies, then toward the tall building that was their center of operations.

"I want my fair share of it," Amadi answered. "This is our empire, brother. What we build here will be our legacy. No generation from here on out will forget us."

"These things, too, shall pass away," Book whispered.

Amadi wasn't listening. Instead, he pulled his brother into that tall building, across polished floors, toward their private bar for a stiff drink.

"Shall pass away," the words floated through Book's mind like a doomsday prophesy. A strange thing had happened to him in the years since he'd started dressing like a preacher. He'd flipped through the pages of that book once in awhile, read the words. Over the years, he'd read it cover to cover. Not to say he believed it, but the words sat in his mind, weighed on his heart.

"Will you stop muttering to yourself and drink with me," Amadi charged, toasting with his whiskey. Book met the glass in the air and downed the drink.

"I want out," Book said after they drank again.

"You don't want your share?" Amadi asked incredulously, pouring the next drink

"It's all yours."

Amadi raised his glass with a joking smile. "May this empire never be wrested from my hand."

Book nodded, accepting the next drink. He looked around the room, wondering what he should take, if anything. He thought back to his home, mentally scanning the poshly decorated rooms devoid of life. The words floated through his head. "All these things shall pass away." What was the second half of that statement? What was the hope? The answer came: "The word of the Lord stands forever."

With hardly a second thought, Book picked up the black, leather-bound bible he was most fond of, and headed out of the office.

“You’re leaving now?!” Amadi cried in shock. “Where are you going?”

Book was heading toward the space port. “I don’t know.”

“Do you have a fresh clip?”

Book pulled the pistol from his shoulder holster. He’d almost forgotten it was there, it was so much a part of his body. Without a word, he handed the pistol to Amadi and walked on.

“Do you need money?”

Book shook his head. He hadn’t thought of anything except leaving this place behind. And since he’d just inherited the entire core, the only place left to run was the rim.

“Not now,” Book said. “When I figure out where I’m going...”

“I’ll make sure the doors stay open to you,” Amadi promised.

Amadi stopped walking, but Book kept going.

“Brother, think this through,” Amadi pleaded as the distance between them grew. “We built this place together. We took this place together. It is ours.”

“And now it is yours.”

Book didn’t want to turn back. He knew his brother’s eyes would be filled with fire.

“Fine!” Amadi yelled. “I’ll take it. I’ll take it all! And don’t even think of coming back here! From now on, it’s mine!”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 1

Book prayed silently as the Serenity fell asleep. Despite the quiet of the black, his heart was astir and God was calling him to pray. He had washed the dinner dishes, wiped the dining room table, and scrubbed the stove. The food stock and spices were neatly arranged. If he made it into town this port, he would buy a fresh supply of rosemary. Most of the footsteps echoed in the silence as one crewmember or another wandered occasionally to the toilet. Even Wash, satisfied with their course, had abandoned the cockpit to get a few hours rest. The engine hummed a quiet lullaby.

While meditating and praying against the deep foreboding he felt, Book’s mind fell to Psalm 27... “When my enemies and foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.” Why had God brought this to mind?

As he prayed for clarity yet again, Alegra wandered into the kitchen and set some water boiling for tea. Her long, dark hair fell softly around her face, her grey eyes ever squinted in deep thought. She leaned easily against the counter as she waited on the tea, lost in reflection and hardly noticing him.

“May I have a cup?” Book asked as she poured the hot water over a tea bag. She started, noticing him for the first time.

“Sure, Preacher. Can’t sleep?”

“I felt the need to pray tonight. What keeps you up?”

“Wei. He feels the need to disappear tonight.”

“And you? You seem perplexed.”

“Just trying to keep my mind busy so I won’t be tired.” She brought the two cups to the table, handing one to Book, and then started adding generous teaspoons of sugar to her own cup.

“Still pondering Gideon’s battle strategies?” Book teased. On Osiris, Alegra had tried to garner practical strategies from the Bible and since had engaged the Shepherd in discussions of its ‘counterintuitive life view’. He found her points challenging and it reminded him of the training he had received at the abbey.

“Faith is a pretty flimsy strategy, Shepherd. Would you rely on God working a miracle at just the right time?”

Book nodded, the words of the Psalm filling his mind.

A loud ka-chink from the cargo bay sent Alegra shooting to her feet.

“What could that be?” Book wondered.

“That’s Wei disappearing,” she informed, taking one last swig of tea before dashing out of the kitchen.

Book followed her toward the cargo bay, hopping over River who lay on the catwalk listening to the ship, then darted across the platform to Shuttle 2. Wei sat at the shuttle controls, initiating the take-off sequence, twiddling several small black devices in his hand as though they were worry beads.

“Wei, we have to wait till morning,” Alegra said firmly, reaching across him and shutting down the sequence.

“Can’t.”

“Yes, we can. We’re on an island. If we take this shuttle, Captain Reynolds will have no way to get it back.”

Wei ignored her, restarting the sequence and looking annoyed. “You should get Tyler. We must leave now.”

“No, Wei. We must do nothing.”

Wei looked at Book briefly. “You must get Tyler.”

“I can’t let you steal this shuttle,” Book said calmly, not moving.

“Don’t steal,” River interrupted tersely, entering the shuttle. “That’s what the Bible says. Don’t steal.”

Alegra froze a moment, her eyes adopting the squint of a new idea. With a calculated smile, she looked at Book and said, “Got no need to steal.”

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Jayne sat at the dining room table trying to write a letter, while letting the eggs burn. It was his day to cook breakfast—a task he always approached with a spirit of competition and a bottle of spirits. He had opted for green protein in today’s eggs, just because it would tick off Simon and Tyler found green eggs amusing as hell. It had not escaped his notice that Tyler and the other kids were already gone from the ship. Mal was sure to throw a fit when he noticed. Jayne stood briefly to scramble the eggs a bit with the spatula, then added the last of the rosemary to the mix. The flat-bread that Book had made the night before had gone missing, so he’d have to come up with another option.

With a frustrated sigh, Jayne considered again the letter that refused to write itself. He pulled out his last letter from home, hoping to remember how to make some of the characters, but in the end, it would just be a mixture of English letters and Chinese

kanji. Normally, he'd send a wave with the credits, but this time he wanted his family to leave for real. He couldn't count the number of times their house had been burnt on account of him, and now with Jantis getting closer, he wanted to make sure they took him seriously when he told them to get out. The only way he could think to do that was with a written letter. His mother would know by that.

Jayne found some canned ham, sprinkled a bit into the eggs, then sliced the rest and started frying. It was awfully quiet for this time of morning... or perhaps it was just awfully early for breakfast. Quickly, Jayne thought through his morning routine, wondering if in fact the whole crew was gone, not just the kids.

Wake up. Prowl about. Target practice. Breakfast.

That was it! He had been teaching Tyler how to shoot in the mornings. With the kid gone, he'd skipped ahead to making breakfast. No one would be up for at least another hour! With a heavy sigh, Jayne turned off the stove and returned to the letter. Maybe he should just send a wave. At this rate, his family would be caught and killed long before he finished writing all the words.

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Zoë rolled out of bed, feeling ill again. She padded barefoot across the cold floor and reached for a piece of flat-bread that Book had made using the last of their flour. The bread seemed to be the only thing that calmed her stomach... at least while she was eating it. That was her frustrating limit of choices: starving, eating bread, or ill. Taking the quiet moment to wash her face, she studied herself in the mirror. Despite the pregnancy, she was losing weight and the sleepless nights left dark circles of exhaustion under her eyes.

Wash rolled onto his back, mumbling, "You look beautiful, baby."

Zoë smiled, even though she knew Wash was barely awake enough to realize he was giving her a compliment. She admired his supportiveness even as he wrestled with demons of his own. Despite being physically healed, the memory of Prio's torture still plagued him. As Wash drifted back to sleep, his face contorted in pain and she couldn't help but wince with him. After a few minutes, he contracted into a fetal position and cried out so loudly he woke himself.

"Zoë," he choked softly, pressing his eyes shut as hot tears streamed down his face.

"Right her, baby," she whispered. He flinched as she took hold of his right foot, but he didn't pull away. Zoë found that by simply touching his feet, he would be anchored to the reality that he was not in any physical pain. She ran her fingers around every toe until Wash inhaled loudly and his body shuddered and relaxed.

"Good morning, husband," she cooed softly as his eyes opened to look at her. She set his foot down gently.

"Please don't stop," he gulped.

Raising an eyebrow, Zoë picked up his left foot and began to massage.

"Why do I suspect you're playing this up for a free foot rub?" she joked. She tickled his foot, but he didn't respond. He merely rubbed his eyes as though trying to get a clear view of the world. Wash's feet had been ticklish once.

Disappointed, she tried tickling his ankle, then his calf. Finally, when she hit the back of the knee, a smile spilled across his lips and he jerked reflexively.

“There you are,” Zoë giggled, tickling him again. Wash sprang into tickle-attack mode, going for her midsection. Zoë yelped playfully, dodging and going for his neck, then his side, then his knees again. She rolled happily, getting trapped in the blanket as she reached for his toes, and then he tackled her and the two rolled off the bed in a tangle of bed sheets and kisses.

“Wash!” Mal’s voice cut in angrily over the comm, bringing the two to a disappointed halt. “Where is my gorram shuttle?”

Wash threw Zoë a confused look as he extricated himself from the blankets and reached for the comm box.

“If I recall, we left it on Osiris,” Wash answered dryly. Zoë scooted over to his feet and kissed his ankles playfully, making him dance about.

“Not Shuttle 1, Shuttle 2! Where is Shuttle 2?!”

“Shuttle 2?” Zoë repeated, a shroud of seriousness falling on her face.

Wash shook his head, confused. “I’ll be right up, Mal.”

Zoë jumped to her feet and started looking for their clothes. She tossed him a pair of socks and dug out their boots from under the bed, not recalling exactly how they wound up there. When she stood, Wash was already before her, dressed, and surprisingly close. Zoë dropped the boots again as he kissed her softly.

“You’ll have to excuse me, wife, I have a mystery to solve,” he murmured hotly.

“The game is afoot.”

With a sly smile, Wash limped up the ladder wearing his fuzzy, blue and brown dinosaur slippers. Zoë sighed in disappointment, wondering when his gait would catch up to his healing. The doctor insisted that Wash shouldn’t be in any pain, yet he still hobbled about and refused to wear his boots. Disheartened, Zoë chomped on another piece of bread and pulled on her own boots. She needed to talk to the doctor anyway.

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Jayne opened the back door of Serenity, letting in a hazy mist and the first glimmer of sunlight on Three Hills. The abandoned space port had all the stark grayness of an Alliance facility, but weeds and mold crept in through cracks in the pavement, threatening to reclaim the place for nature. Jayne failed to appreciate any of this as he plopped himself on the ground, waiting for the fireworks to start. In anticipation of the show, he lit up a cigar and reclined against the side of the ship. He was not disappointed. Within five minutes, Mal stormed out the back door, kicking any bits of dust or gravel that were not firmly mounted to the ground, and muttering obscenities at the sky. Jayne always found Mal amusing when he was angry at other people.

Kaylee rushed out a few steps behind Mal all apologetic and such. Even Wash made the effort to hobble out of the cockpit and watch the show.

“Has he managed a word yet?” Wash asked, taking a seat next to Jayne, and slurping on a cup of soup. The mouth of the Stegosaur on his slippers hung open.

“In English?” Jayne laughed.

“Captain, I’m sorry,” Kaylee was pleading, following Mal as he paced in circles like a caged gorilla. “If I’d known they was leavin’, I would have waked you!”

“Kaylee, ‘sorry’ don’t bring that shuttle back any sooner,” Mal exploded. “We got no time to waste lookin’ for Caddock and that can’t be done on this godforsaken island!”

Deflated, but deciding not to take it personally, Kaylee let off a few choice words of her own before sitting next to Jayne and Wash.

Mal turned his cold stare at Wash next. “Why didn’t you notice the shuttle leaving?”

“Hey, I just land the boat. I’m not port control!”

“Don’t try and put this on him, Captain,” Zoë intoned, coming off the ship, Simon and River trailing her.

“I’m not putting this on anyone but Book! A Shepherd should know better than stealing!”

“Do you even care if he went willingly?” Simon asked harshly, running a hand through his close cropped hair. After Osiris, Simon had shaved his goatee and vowed never to cut his hair again.

Mal paced a bit more, not losing steam. He tried to channel that steam into plan formation, but alas, plan formation ran on caffeine. If only they had recovered the Inara’s shuttle!

“Zoë, as soon as he gets back, you and I go into town.”

Zoë nodded, not wasting words.

“Captain, I’d like to go with you” Simon stated, with more surety than Mal though he had a right to.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Mal corrected. “You’d like to stay here and make sure your sister don’t run away again.”

“It’s an island. Where would she go?”

“Oh, I’m sure she’d find some place of trouble.”

“Nevertheless, there’s some medical equipment I’d like to purchase.”

Mal stopped pacing, his anger at Book replaced by concern for Serenity. “Did something in the Infirmary break?”

“No, no, this would be new. I’ve already contacted a supplier in town.”

“You’ve contacted? You’ve contacted!”

“Yes, I’ve—”

“Does the name ‘Captain’ mean anything to you people?” He paused a moment and looked at his crew, who were all exchanging blank looks. Bunch of jokers! “You don’t buy things for the ship unless I say we need it!”

“Then as the ship’s doctor, I’m telling you we need this... and I will purchase it.”

Mal huffed, trying to contain his anger at Book and deal with Simon for now.

“What is this suddenly necessary medical equipment?”

“An ultrasound machine and an automated analyzer.”

That’s two things,” Jayne pointed out, holding up two fingers to demonstrate the accuracy of his count.

“And not one of them used for treating gunshot wounds. What’s in your head, Doc? Starting a clone farm?”

“No,” Simon said guardedly. “These supplies are practical for many purposes.”

Mal could tell he was hiding something and making up excuses. Simon could be such a terrible liar at times and this morning, Mal was up to the challenge.

“But you don’t have many purposes in mind. You have only one purpose. What is it?”

Simon hesitated and Mal could sense a lecture on doctor-patient confidentiality rising to Simon’s lips. Zoë spoke before Simon could.

“Prenatal care,” Zoë said firmly.

Mal’s jaw dropped in disbelief. He tried pulling the jaw up so he could speak, but it just dropped again.

“What’s that?” Jayne asked, thinking it sounded unpleasant.

“You’re gonna have a baby!” Kaylee squealed.

Wash beamed with pride, but Zoë stood, hands on hips, still in face-off mode with Mal.

Mal looked uncertainly at Simon. “Is she still fit to work?”

“Yes,” Zoë answered sternly, turning on her heels and heading back inside. Mal watched her go, but Kaylee jumped up excitedly and followed her in, pressing for news.

“A baby?” Jayne repeated, chuckling, and pulling out a fresh cigar for Wash.

“Nice work, little man.”

“Oooh! Smoky poison!” Wash mused, biting off the tip of the cigar and accepting a light from Jayne. “Shiny.”

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Inara wasn’t even sure what planet she was on, she only knew that Jantis wanted to see her. With a deep breath, she followed the guard down the long corridor toward the exit. She felt the pull of the first aid kit as it hung, hidden in the folds of her robe. She hoped the weight of it was not too obvious against the natural flow of the garment. With no idea of where she might be taken next, she could not leave the kit behind. At the moment, it was her only advantage and somehow, it would help her escape.

The corridor opened up into a spaceport hanger bay and she passed by many short range shuttles, including her own. Perhaps she could sweet talk her way aboard again, but to what point. Mal was dead, the crew was missing. No one would be coming for her here. With no idea of where she was, she didn’t even know who to call to mount a rescue. They followed a ramp that spiraled upward around the hanger bay, finally leading to a cage elevator that took them to ground level. What kind of man puts a hanger bay underground?

Inara knew as soon as they hit fresh air—a very wealthy man. She noticed the atmosphere was either thinner than Earth-norm or they were on a plateau at 10,000 feet. She saw no evidence of a plateau, but rather a large estate with acres of prairie land surrounding a sleek, modern building, coated with reflective glass.

The guard led her away from the building and toward the field. Through the glint of sunrise, Inara could see a herd of buffalo grazing. Noticing a single zebra among them, she did a double take. She had thought both zebras and buffalo were extinct, but there was no denying these were living, moving creatures. The man who owned them was not only a power on this world, but above Alliance law as well.

Two black men stood in the midst of the field, ignored by the roaming wildlife. They faced each other, feet shoulder-width apart, one hand folded in, the other snaking the distance between them in slow motion. The slow movement was occasionally

interrupted by quick hand motions, but in both men, their bodies were centered and firmly stable. Inara recognized the ancient martial art of Wing Chun—a technique designed to inflict maximum damage with minimal force.

Suddenly, the two men ceased their slow motion stance and engaged each other, their hands a flurry of motion, connecting often at the throat and face. As the taller one forced his opponent back, the shorter one went for more direct attacks at the vulnerable areas, all the while maintaining a firm stance. A moment later, fortunes reversed and the shorter man had the advantage. Inara realized that one of these men was Jantis and although she could not distinguish the skill of the two men, she wondered if Jantis was the master or the student.

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## CHAPTER 2

Book insisted on seeing Alegra, Wei, and Tyler off. Wei was shiftily checking out the quiet town as the sun peaked over the horizon. Tyler, having woken up on the way, complained of hunger, not getting to say goodbye, and his untied shoelaces. The shuttle seemed to tremble and loll in the same tired way Tyler did, but Book attributed that to his own mediocre flying skills. Once down, the four headed directly for the spaceport.

“It may not be good for you to be associated with us on security cam,” Alegra whispered as they approached the ticket terminal.

“You can’t just walk in there and buy passage,” Book told her.

“We can’t have been flagged already?”

“We have,” Wei said ominously.

Book motioned the three to stay back as he approached the ticket counter and checked the registry for ships taking passengers. Only three ships were leaving world today, offering limited destination options and an easy trail for any fed to follow.

“Three tickets, please,” Book told the attendant.

“I need to see some ID,” the attendant replied disinterestedly, in a rough Irish accent.

Book reached for his ident card.

“No, I need to see *their* ID.”

Book ignored the man and handed over his ident card. Irritated, the man scanned the card. Suddenly, his whole demeanor changed. Standing straighter, he nodded respectfully, almost fearfully, at Book.

“How many tickets, sir?”

“Three to New Melbourne. And no names.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said compliantly, handling the transaction.

Book accepted the tickets and ushered the three toward the appropriate space dock.

“New Melbourne?” Tyler asked, bleary-eyed, tripping over his untied shoelaces. “Can’t we go somewhere with less fish?”

“We won’t stay long,” Alegra assured him. “We just didn’t have much of a choice.”

“From New Melbourne, you should find port to just about anywhere. I recommend you go to Haven . It will be safe for you there.”

“Haven?”

“Find a disreputable ship,” Book told her. “They all know the way.”

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River sat at the edge of Serenity’s cargo hold as the morning rain covered the island. While most of the crew had retreated to the dining room to enjoy Jayne’s green eggs and ham, Mal still fumed and paced the cargo bay waiting for Book to return. River was monitoring rainfall and wind speed in effort to predict the end of rainy season on Three Hills. Statistically speaking, it should have ended at least a week prior to their arrival and she suspected the persistence of the rain may be correlated to a groundhog shadow, as science failed to offer any reasonable alternative.

River flinched as Mal kicked over a metal toolbox, sending a flood of nuts and bolts through the grating on the floor.

“He may not even come back,” Mal ranted. River met his eyes, heartbroken by the helplessness behind them.

“You’re brother is right. I don’t even know if he went willingly.”

“He did,” River assured. “He’ll come back.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Don’t steal,” River said simply, remembering the morning. “He wouldn’t let them steal.”

Mal stopped pacing and cast an angry stare on her causing her to shrink back.

“Did you see them go?”

How could she explain to him so he would understand? Book had been gone for almost two hours now. His absence was approaching her maximum estimate of elapsed time and in another fifteen minutes, she would start being concerned. River kept this to herself, not wanting Mal to become more upset than he already was. The rain pounded harder and harder, muddling her thoughts. Her vision crowded with dozens of flying shuttles, all descending on one location, throwing her backwards. Water filled her mouth and nose—she was drowning! The current pulled her under, but Wei still had her hand, anchoring her to the surface. Her face barely above the rushing river, she gasped for breath.

“River!” Simon called above the din of the rapids.

“I don’t know, Doc, she just fell over,” Mal was saying.

The past and future reorganized, leaving only the confusion of the present. River lay on the floor of the cargo bay, her clothing soaked with rainwater, Simon cradling her head. Mal and Kaylee looked down at her with concern, but she paid them no mind. The dozen shuttles had converged into one and she could see the tracking lights through the open door.

“He’s back,” River whispered softly, sitting up. The others followed her gaze. Book had returned.

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Inara stood, mesmerized by the duel playing out before her. She realized that she and her guard were not the only spectators. Two men in business suits watched impatiently, quietly discussing the work that lay before them. The spar came suddenly to a halt as the two fighters connected forearms in a narrow stance. The men gave a slight bow before breaking tension and reaching for bottles of water.

“Mr. Jantis,” the guard called. The taller of the two duelers looked over.

Inara’s heart jumped into her throat as Jantis approached her. He walked sharply, mopping the sweat from his brow, already engaging in conversation with his two lieutenants. She feared his interaction with her would be just as efficient and brief and, if she could not give him what he wanted, deadly. As he strode across the lawn, his attention on all the business taking place around him, Inara felt invisible. She found it increasingly possible that the man would walk right past her without taking a second look—a reaction she was unaccustomed to from men. When he did stop, he gave her only the briefest glance and spoke instead to the guard.

“Is this my gift from Jiang?” he asked, his deep voice pleasant, and his grandfatherly features disarming. His skin darker than Book, Inara guessed him to be at least as old, though his hair was dyed black.

“No, Mr. Jantis. This is the subject sent us from Prio.”

“Subject?” Jantis repeated, surveying Inara. “Stupid carbuncle has no eye for beauty. Send word he’s not getting her back.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said and took his cue to leave.

Inara relaxed, but only a little, and offered her best meek smile.

Jantis took little notice as he resumed walking back toward the complex, motioning Inara to follow. However briefly, she had held his interest... now all she had to do was keep him interested in not killing her. At the moment, he and one of his lieutenants were walking backwards, pointing at the sky over the field they were leaving.

“We need a third Firefly for this formation.”

“We don’t have three,” his lieutenant explained.

“Surely, there must be more nearby.”

“If we use the naught-two, we can do it.”

Jantis considered the sky as he walked backwards, then shot a question to Inara.

“You are a companion, no?” he asked.

“I am, sir. Mr. Jantis.”

Inara was nearly jogging to keep up, and her shoes were working against her. Whenever she fell behind, one of the lieutenants was right there beside her, bustling her forward again. Jantis didn’t seem to hear her response, having resumed his previous conversation.

“Keep looking for a naught-three, but go with the naught-two if you must,” Jantis said, turning to face forward again. His lieutenant made the note and turned to the next item of business.

“You are well-kept,” Jantis said to Inara. It took her a moment to realize he was talking to her, because a moment later, he wasn’t.

“We’ve found a Foxhound for your daughter’s birthday,” the lieutenant was saying.

“If I had wanted a Foxhound, I’d have ordered a Foxhound. I want a Beagle,” Jantis answered, curtly. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Inara.” Was he talking to her? Inara couldn’t tell. A fraction of a second later, his attention was gone.

They entered a cool, air conditioned building, walked up three flights of stairs, then crossed through layers of cubicles before entering a large, glass office. The office was sparsely decorated, arranged with the same practical efficiency as one would expect from a Wing Chun master. Were it not for the single posh chair and model airplanes on the book cases, Inara may have mistaken the office as a conference room. As Jantis continued to talk to his second, Inara browsed the book cases, hoping to find some insight into the man. The shelves were surprisingly dust free, the books lined according to height and arranged on shelves according to topic: Wing Chun, modern aviation, ship design, orbital mechanics. Then among the history of spaceflight, a Christian Bible. Surprised, Inara reached for the sacred text.

Jantis’ hand clamped down on hers so tight she feared her hand would break. Inara froze, unable to turn away from his glare, his eyes like hellfire.

“Inara, is it?” The disarming, gentle grandpa was gone, replaced by a cold, efficient killer. “These are not for you to touch. Dong ma?”

Inara wasn’t sure if she had gotten her head to move, or if she had merely blinked her yes, but Jantis let go. With a quick nod, Jantis dismissed his lieutenants and turned his full attention to Inara.

“I want Chelsea Halden,” he said evenly.

Inara braced her injured hand against her body, steeling herself as best she could. She was sure that whatever she knew of Chelsea Halden / Nia Stolte/ Elle was not enough to satisfy Jantis, nor was it safe to disclose. But it was her only bargaining chip.

“And I want to be released. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement.”

She noticed a slight twitch in his eye as he considered her counter.

“An arrangement?” he silked, icily. “Your pitiful possessions are not worth this information.”

“Then I can offer myself.”

“You are registered with the guild. I’d rather kill you than put a spot on your record.”

“I would rather the spot.”

Jantis considered her, darkly. “This isn’t about you, is it? You want your life, you give me Chelsea Halden.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. You see, she’s dead.”

“That doesn’t bode well for you.”

“I’m sure we can come up with a solution that is mutually beneficial. As you said, I am a registered companion. I am not without skill.”

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Book was hoping for breakfast, but foreseeing a fight when he returned. He hadn’t expected the trip to take so long, but was glad it was done. With the sunrise had come the morning post, and all three children had made the top as wanted fugitives. He tried not to worry for their safety, but failed.

Not bothering to dock with the ship, Book set down on the landing strip next to Serenity, hoping the wall of rain would be enough of a buffer to diffuse Mal's rage. By the time he opened the rear door of the shuttle, Mal was already there, staring him down.

"Captain, I apologize—" Book began.

"What the hell are you playing at, Shepherd? You're lucky I don't shoot you where you stand."

"It wasn't safe for them to be here, Captain. You know as well as I—"

"That doesn't give you the right to go spiriting off in the middle of the night with my shuttle. MY shuttle. Talking about unsafe, you could have been shot and then where would we be?"

Book remained calm, fighting down his own defensive reaction. He knew that what he did was right and he knew that Mal was not likely to shoot him. Thus, he had nothing to fear from this conversation. His voice placating, he replied, "Just east of town, there's a hangout spot for the local teens. Land shuttles are coming and going all the time and no one is watching too closely."

"Don't—" Mal paused briefly, having not expected this turn in the conversation.

"Don't try to deflect my anger with valuable recon."

"Of course not, Captain. But there will be plenty of time for you to berate me later. Right now, you're wasting daylight."

Although Mal's eyes still burned with anger, the suggestion of a plan had given channel to his energy.

"Where's this hangout spot?"

\*~\*

Despite the fact that Serenity was not moving, nor planning to move anytime soon, Wash sat on the bridge, fiddling with his slipper. The mouth of the stegosaur was detaching from the "body" and walking out on the pavement that morning had not helped. Walking around all week on the ship's rough grate flooring had not helped either. The soft bottoms of the slippers were going threadbare, making visible the foam insulation. At the moment, the slippers were sitting on the console facing his scrutiny while he pressed his bare toes against the hard floor.

Zoë was out on a job, so he tried hard to worry about her rather than think himself into that same old trap—the memory of the torture. It was hard to think about Zoë with the slippers sitting here in front of him and with the cold floor sucking heat from his toes. As much as it irked him worrying about Zoë so often, he preferred it to this new circle of thought.

Wash dropped the dinosaur slippers to the floor, hoping to take his feet off his mind, then he picked up a pair of plastic toy dinosaurs sitting on the console. Caddock's men had stolen these, but Zoë had broken into his ship and recovered them. Zoë hadn't recovered everything they needed in that trip, but she'd managed to find all the things that made Serenity home—Kaylee's dress, his dinosaurs. Zoë would be a good mother.

Smiling at the thought of his unborn child, Wash coughed involuntarily. He had only smoked half of the cigar before he felt completely green... although he wouldn't admit that. Jayne had tried to light him up again, but Zoë had come to the rescue and if it

hadn't been for the smoke on his breath, they would have had a very nice intimate moment.

His feet getting cold, Wash slipped on his slippers and sent the Apatosaurus to chomp on the palm tree. The Raptor caught the Apatosaurus off guard knocking him to the ground and gnawing his leg. The Apatosaurus countered with a swipe of his heavy tail, sending the Raptor and the palm tree flying across the cockpit!

River giggled.

"Hello," Wash said, surprised at having company.

River picked up the dinosaur and the tree, contemptively carrying them to the copilot chair. She said nothing.

"It's pretty quiet in here today," Wash ventured, wanting his toys back, but not knowing how to ask.

River curled up in the chair, bringing her knees to her chest, setting the palm tree on one knee and the Raptor on the other. Frustrated, Wash started looking for his T-Rex. He needed a carnivore to finish off the ailing long-neck.

"Oh, so the party's in here," Book mused, coming in as well.

"Yes, all the fun," Wash agreed, sardonically. He found the T-Rex and tapped it against his palm.

River suddenly went rigid, her eyes wide. Wash tensed just seeing her and habitually checked all the proximity alarms at his disposal. He glanced out the window, but the rain fell too thickly to see very far.

"What is it, River?" Book asked.

"A shadow." Her eyes were alert, penetrating the rain. "Very hungry."

Wash could find no cause for her alarm and tried to relax, however the tension in River's body filled the room.

"Did we lock all the doors when the others left?" Wash asked slowly.

"I think so," Book answered absently, scanning out the front window and finding only the same wall of rain Wash had. "I think ... I'll just go check."

\*~\*

Mal and Zoë trudged through the torrents of rain, Mal occasionally consulting his GPS which was directing him toward the Neptune's nav sat. Since they'd left, the Neptune had been moved into town, presumably for repair, and he hoped that once he found it, Caddock would be nearby. Caddock had taken the Neptune through the war, hijacked her from the Alliance, and pirated the rim with her for half a decade. Mal knew that if it were his boat, he'd stop at nothing to get her spaceborn again.

As the rain soaked through his coat all the way to his undergarments and his boots sloshed along the paved road, he began to seriously wonder how the locals got anything done in the rainy season. It was a wonder the city was not enclosed with a giant umbrella. Zoë kept pace, at his side as always. He briefly wondered how long "always" might last. He knew he could never trust anyone to have his back as he trusted Zoë. With Jayne next in line as gun hand, there was a fair chance he could one day find himself left on a planet watching Jayne fly away with his boat. Would she leave the ship? After so many years together, he couldn't imagine a life without her. It was easier to imagine life without his

right hand and than without Zoë ... and Mal really liked having his right hand. He cast a sidelong glance at his first mate, and she completely misread the look.

Zoë ignored him so sternly, he cringed.

“Why didn’t you just come out and say you were with child?”

“Didn’t see how it was your business at this stage.”

“Not my business?! Zoë, our work ain’t exactly frilly. If you get shot, I need to know you’re fightin’ for two.”

There was that stern look again. Zoë always wanted to keep her private life private. Her stoic calm in the face of battle came from her ability to compartmentalize and store the stray feelings of her personal life and focus on the task at hand. However, a pregnancy is not so easily compartmentalized.

The rain let up and a breeze stirred through town. Zoë didn’t speak as they approached the position indicated by the GPS. It was the same back ally chop shop where they had rescued Kaylee on their previous visit.

“This must be the place,” Mal said, swallowing hard, suddenly worried that the Neptune would be in a million pieces when he found it.

Silently, Zoë led the way down the side ally, bordered with brick walls and a high, barbed wire fence. The old, rusted metal door had been replaced with a brand new, shiny, bullet proof door. Zoë tested the fence for electric charge and finding none, pulled a knife out of her boot. More by the strength of her movement than the sharpness of the knife, she detached the fence from its post and rolled it back so they could sneak through. Just behind the old building was the salvage yard with the whole ships. Mal spotted the familiar blue half-fish on the Neptune’s hull immediately. Again, it taunted him as though it were Caddock’s own ghost laughing at him.

Mal’s heart sank. Caddock had abandoned ship.

When Zoë strode toward the Neptune, Mal grabbed her elbow and pulled her back.

“I doubt anyone’s home.”

“I’m not looking for Caddock, sir. I came here to get Kaylee’s lucky wrench.”

Mal considered the derelict ship, then looked back at the chop shop. The wall of windows had been boarded up since their last visit... probably because he had broken half of them. He looked at the snide merman on the Neptune’s hull, and decided what the hell. There was a chance the ship’s log might have information as to the current whereabouts of its Captain.

“Alright, we go in. Thirty minutes.”

“Thank you, sir,” Zoë answered. As the two climbed in through the Neptune’s side hatch, Mal immediately brought his sleeve to cover his mouth. The weeks of moisture and poor air circulation had covered the inside of the ship with mold and Mal could only hope it wasn’t toxic.

“Ten minutes,” he told Zoë, through his sleeve, wanting to get out as quickly as possible.

Zoë nodded, pointed him toward the bridge, while she headed for the engine room.

“Sir,” she called, causing him to turn around. Had she found something disturbing already?

“I’m fighting for two, sir.”

“Thanks for saying,” Mal smiled. “Oh, and congratulations.”

\*~\*

Kaylee was enjoying her day out with Simon, despite the rain and despite Jayne’s pitiful chaperoning. At the medical supply store, Simon was completely in his element, knowing exactly what he needed. She felt especially helpful when Simon consulted her to make sure the devices would hook up properly to Serenity’s power supply. He was so sexy when he was confident.

With the machines safely boxed in waterproof containers, the three braved the rain, toting their goods on a rented dolly. Most of the sidewalks on this side of town were protected by long awnings, but it hardly seemed to matter. The morning downpour had slowed to an afternoon drizzle, punctuated occasionally by patches of rain-free mist.

As the curtain of water briefly lifted, Kaylee was surprised at the number of vagrants sitting on the street, soaked, and begging for food, work, or money. A few played instruments... some, having no instruments, used buckets and boards as drums. Most just sat, looking defeated. They hid their eyes as Jayne stared them down, hand on his gun, ready to draw. The locals walked by the vagrants with hardly a glance. Even Simon stepped around them without seeming to see them.

“How many do you suppose there are?” Kaylee murmured.

“How many what?” Simon asked.

“If they were any thicker, we’d be tripping over them,” Jayne grunted, maneuvering the dolly around a sleeping man.

“Do you suppose he’s just sleeping?”

“I’m sure the government sets up shelters for these people. But you can’t force them to go there.”

“Do you think we should help him?”

“Kaylee, we can’t stop and help every faceless vagabond on the street.”

“Simon, not stopping is what makes them faceless!”

Kaylee’s heart was breaking at the sight of so many vagrants and at Simon’s callousness. She looked around, frustrated that Simon was right. They couldn’t help all these people and given the chance, which would she choose? Would it really make a difference?

Biting her lip, Kaylee pressed on, wishing that the rain would pick up again and hide these people behind a wall of water. She stepped over a sleeping vagrant, nearly tripping over the woman’s long, black braid. The woman turned, her face burning a hole in Kaylee’s memory.

“Wait!” Kaylee cried to the others, stooping down to help.

“Kaylee, we ain’t got time for this,” Jayne complained, wheeling the dolly around.

“Saskia, wake up,” Kaylee pleaded.

“You know her?” Simon asked.

Kaylee looked pleadingly at the two men. Simon knelt quickly, evaluating the woman’s injuries.

“This is Saskia,” Kaylee said. “She took care of me on the Neptune.”

Simon suddenly pulled back, anger burning in his eyes. “They nearly killed you on the Neptune.”

“Nearly,” Kaylee agreed. “Jayne, give me the comm.”

Grudgingly, Jayne complied, knowing that next he’d be asked to carry the woman.

“Cap’n, we got a wounded friend here that needs to get back to Serenity right now.”

“It’s been less than an hour, Kaylee! Don’t tell me one of you got shot!”

“Not one of us, Cap’n. Her name is Saskia. She was on Caddock’s crew.”

\*~\*

### CHAPTER 3

Wash was grateful to see the shuttle return ahead of schedule. Ever since River’s premonition, the morning had become increasingly creepy. The rain had let up, but the loss of the constant noise had left only smaller, more infrequent noises crawling about the ship like mice. The sun broke through the clouds casting uneven shadows across the spaceport and the ocean visible around the island was filled with Reavers and Loch Ness monsters. Only this wasn’t Loch Ness, it was some other ocean, but the monsters were the same!

“Good to see you back, babe,” Wash radioed, waiting to hear Zoë’s sweet voice.

“We missed you, darlin’,” Mal answered.

Wash rolled his eyes.

“Can you bring a stretcher to the shuttle bay?”

Wash shot out of his chair at Mal’s request, fumbling for the comm button again.

“Zoë?” he called out in a panic.

“Just bring the stretcher.”

Wash dashed out of the bridge, his slipper ripping as it caught on the uneven floor grating. He ignored the tear, skidding around corridors to the medical bay, then running madly back to the shuttle dock. As he rounded the corner into the cargo bay and took the stairs two at a time, the airlock opened but nobody came out of the shuttle. His concern doubling, Wash dashed in and stopped dead. Zoë was fine. The others were fine. Everyone was fine except the tan-skinned woman on the floor.

Simon orchestrated the movement of the patient from the floor to the stretcher and within moments, Kaylee, Simon, Mal, and Jayne were carrying the woman away. Zoë stayed behind with Wash, her hands on her hips, sighing loudly, and looking at the floor the way she always did when she thought Mal was doing something stupid.

“Did Caddock get a sex change?” Wash asked, realizing that no one had explained the new visitor.

Zoë laughed softly, and touched his chest.

\*~\*

The rest of the afternoon, Jantis paraded Inara around like a new toy. When important meetings arose, he would lock her in a dark closet where she could see and hear nothing. At other times, he would display her proudly before his colleagues. He had

not spoken to her directly in hours. Inara had seen stray dogs treated with more consideration and she was beginning to doubt her decision to indenture herself.

As she huddled against the back wall of the closet yet again, fighting the vertigo that arose from waves of thirst and pain from her injured hand, she called on Buddha for mercy. With just a little light and water, she would be able to break into her kit, take a pain killer, and apply a brace to her hand. At the moment, her tongue was so dry that she wouldn't be able to swallow the pain pill even if she could find one. She let one leg slip and extend, but before it could extend completely, her foot hit the opposite wall. The darkness pressed in on all sides and she curled up again, trying to convince herself that she was not in a coffin.

The door to her closet peaked open and a stream of light invaded the space, making her squint. Jantis towered over her in silhouette, and with a tilt of his head, he motioned her to come. She despised the too-familiar pang of hunger that threatened to topple her.

Jantis lead her up a wide spiral stair case and she was sure it would have been beautiful had she been refreshed and dressed to the nines on the arm of a client. Instead, she felt dizzy as she gazed downward toward the lobby. Was this even the same building as before or had she arrived by magic? The skylight overhead glowed orange with the sunset. Inara gripped the railing tightly with her good hand, trying not to tremble. Jantis had brought her to a room and was ordering someone to make sure she was fed and bathed. Her mouth watered – or it at least became less dry – at the mere thought of food. A moment later, Jantis took his leave, remanding her to the care of the manservant.

“Come along, miss,” he ordered in a darkly gruff voice, gripping her arm.

From the fuzz of her consciousness, Inara saw a familiar form crossing the lobby. In a world filled with black folk, it was hard not to notice another fair-skinned person. “Who is that?”

“That is Ms. Stolte. She's not one of you. You will not address her directly.”

“I understand,” Inara said weakly, even though she didn't.

\*~\*

Simon could hear Kaylee tinkering away at the engine before he saw her. The familiar clanking of tools against the ship's surface was accompanied by River's melodic voice. He'd never known River to enter the engine room, but was glad he would find the two girls together. With Saskia stabilized and resting, he had taken a quick shower, changed into dry clothes, and now he wanted to get the new ultrasound installed.

“Here you two are,” Simon said warmly. “I thought you'd still be in the Infirmary with our new patient.”

“I... yeah,” Kaylee answered, halfheartedly, her eyes focused on a bundle of wires.

“Supper's almost ready.”

“Not hungry,” River answered tersely, handing Kaylee an ampmeter.

“The whole nav system is on the fritz. I gotta fix it,” Kaylee said distantly. Simon sensed a problem.

“Are you okay?”

“No.”

“River!” Kaylee cried, looking betrayed.

“It’s true,” River insisted.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing. I just need to get this working again and everything will be fine.”

Kaylee jumped back as a spark flew from the wires she was fiddling with.

“Well that one’s live,” she smiled wryly, trying to make light of the spark.

“Your hand is shaking,” River pointed out.

Assuming his doctorly manner, Simon took hold of Kaylee’s hand and checked for burns, but she pulled away quickly and resumed her work. Kaylee usually wasn’t so cold towards him until after he’d said something stupid, but he hadn’t said anything yet. Kaylee sighed heavily at the weight of his concern.

“You two just go eat and let me work.”

“Kaylee why are you so upset?” Simon asked.

Kaylee ignored him.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me.”

“Saskia,” River answered. “Now leave.”

Kaylee’s head dropped at the mention of the name, and Simon could see tears forming in her eyes. The image of her bruised and battered body on her return from the Neptune seared in his memory.

“Did she say something to you? What did she do?” he demanded angrily.

“It’s not her,” Kaylee whispered, wiping her eyes and looking again at the electrics before her. River sidled in and hugged Kaylee from behind.

“The Neptune...” Kaylee began.

“They hurt her.”

“Yes, I know,” Simon said.

“It’s so stupid... I mean, Saskia saved my life ...”

The wire bundle Kaylee had been working on sparked again, this time without prompting, and then the engine hiccupped.

“What was that?”

Kaylee replaced the tears on her cheeks with fresh smudges of grease. Standing assuredly, she cut power to a few different systems and headed out of the engine room.

“The problem isn’t here. I have to go.”

“Kaylee.” Simon started to follow, but River grabbed his arm.

“She’s awake.”

\*~\*

Zoë was tired of waiting for Saskia to recover. While it was possible that Saskia could point them toward Caddock, it was also very probable that Saskia knew nothing. According to the Neptune’s logs, the crew had disbanded shortly after Serenity’s departure, having no money to repair the ship. As time wore on, it seemed less likely that they’d be able to find Jantis, and if Prio was any measure, Inara would be dead before they found her.

Impatient for news, Zoë went to the Infirmary to check on the patient. A shadow flew past the window and disappeared. Suddenly alert, Zoë pressed against the wall outside the Infirmary and peered in. The bed was empty—Saskia was gone. Quickly, Zoë

checked the hallway and ceiling, but she was alone. Keeping low and out of sight of the window, Zoë crept to the Infirmary door and swiftly opened it, staying back. Nothing.

“Saskia?” she called, her voice a warning and a peace offering at once. Zoë backed away from the door, trying to get a visual on Saskia, her gun at ready. From the common area, she could see most of the Infirmary, but Saskia wasn’t there. She must have been pressed up against the near wall.

“You can come out now,” Zoë said to the silence, every hair on end. She wasn’t expecting obedience.

Within half a heartbeat, Saskia flew out the Infirmary door like a pouncing tiger, tackling Zoë to the ground. Zoë rolled quickly, holding back on her punches because she wanted Saskia conscious. Saskia had no such qualms and jarred Zoë against the table in the common area. With Saskia already gasping for breath, Zoë didn’t waste her strength. A quick jab later, Zoë had Saskia pinned to the ground.

“Oh my... what’s? ... Zoë, get off her!” Simon stuttered, as he entered the common area and rushed to Saskia’s side. “Calm down, we just want to help. Do you understand?”

Her dark eyes still flashing at Zoë, Saskia nodded. Zoë didn’t like the look on her face, and stood slowly, finding her gun. As soon as Zoë had cleared them, Saskia sprang into action. Whipping out a scalpel, she sliced Simon across the knuckles and knocked him backwards over the table. Zoë dove in hard, knocking Saskia across the jaw, but this time, Saskia jabbed back, catching Zoë’s cheek with the edge of the scalpel blade. Jayne came in a moment later and on seeing the tussle, plunged in and tackled Saskia to the ground. He pounded her wrist until she released the scalpel, but not accepting defeat, Saskia used her legs to roll Jayne over her head and grabbed his knife. Jumping over the table, she put her boot on Simon’s chest, holding him down. Both Zoë and Jayne had their guns pointed at her.

“What the tian xiao de is going on here?” Mal hollered and on seeing, he drew his gun as well.

“What do you want with me?” Saskia wheezed.

“I want you to put that knife down and let my doctor go.”

Saskia did neither, catching her breath, the knife at ready.

“Doc, you okay?”

“Not terminal, but I could be better.”

“Saskia!” Kaylee cried, entering as well. “Captain, what’s going on?”

“Kaylee, stay back.”

“Kaylee?” Saskia whispered, her face contorting in recognition and confusion. She stopped looking at the Captain or the others and looked directly at Kaylee. “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” Kaylee stammered. “I just wanted to help.”

Saskia ground her book harder into Simon’s chest until the young doctor cried out. Zoë and Jayne inched closer.

“What do you want with me?”

“I want Caddock.” Mal said quickly.

“Captain!”

“You tell me where he is. I patch you up and send you on your merry.”

Saskia glared as she considered the offer. “Can you take me off this world?”

“It’s possible. Can’t guarantee a destination.”

“What is your destination?”

“Wherever Jantis is.”

Saskia’s face twisted into an unsettling grin. “You won’t find Caddock here. Start at city hall. Talk to the mayor.”

With that, she lifted her boot from the doctor’s chest and nudged him with her toe until he was on his knees.

“Now patch me up.”

“Doc, you heard the woman,” Mal said evenly.

Kaylee’s hands reached out from across the room, wanting to help him, but afraid to cross in front of the guns. They met at the Infirmary door and she ushered him in, but Saskia waited.

“Take me off this world, Captain. But if you take me to Jantis, I will kill him. Do we have an understanding?”

Mal met her stare with a hard one of his own. “The only reason I let you on my boat is because Kaylee has some attachment to you. Don’t make her regret that choice or I will end you. And if you hurt any member of my crew again, your life is forfeit. Do we have an understanding?”

That unnerving smile playing across her lips, Saskia handed over Jayne’s knife. “I believe we do.”

As she entered the Infirmary, Zoë, Jayne, and Mal relaxed their trigger hands.

“Jayne, stay here and keep an eye on our guest. Zoë and I are going to check out city hall. We’ll make contact within the hour.”

Jayne nodded, tucking his knife in his boot. Zoë holstered her weapon, planning to grab some food before prepping the shuttle.

“Sir, are we really just going to waltz into city hall unannounced and ask the mayor about Caddock?”

“Well when you say it like that, it sounds so brassy.”

“No, sir. It sounds like we’re off to see the wizard.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 4

Finally alone and nourished, Inara fashioned a brace for her hand, wondering if it was in fact broken. Her room was decorated with soft, warm colored fabrics and a comfortable bed. Similar to her shuttle, it had all the elements of a place of union, though she doubted this place was consecrated. Through the barred and sealed windows, she could see the night sky and again she wondered what world she was on.

The room filled with the constant hum of aircraft flying overhead. Jantis certainly loved his planes and kept them close. She watched as the ships danced around low atmo, burning fuel that would have been so precious on Serenity. If she could get on one of these ships, it would be so easy to escape... only with no idea of where she was, she had no idea of where to go or how far she was from safety.

Although exhaustion tugged at her body, Inara forced herself to remain awake long enough for a cleansing ritual. Finding no incense, she resigned herself to kneeling on

a pillow, said a prayer, and then crawled under the bedcovers. Inara sank into the embrace of the silk sheets, feeling like a pampered prisoner.

As she drifted to sleep, an image wandered through her mind. Nia Stolte was here—Elle. Chelsea. Inara had told Jantis that she was dead. But if Elle had cheated death, there was still hope for her. Even with Serenity gone, Inara had hope. She would escape.

\*~\*

When Mal first stepped into City Hall, he longed for the expensive suit Simon had bought for him. The clean lines and spotless floors had all the starkness Mal had come to expect from a government institution. Determined not to blend in, Mal shook the folds of his browncoat, feeling the freedom. As it was after business hours, the building was empty, save for a security guard who boredly scanned the vid feed between bites of a large meatball sub. Mal and Zoë waited patiently outside the glass doors, and the guard only noticed long enough to chastise them for loitering.

“We’re here to see the mayor,” Mal informed the guard, who had spilled tomato sauce on his white collar.

“You got clearance?”

“We’re old friends. He told us to come.”

“Uh-huh. Lemme check.”

The guard left them outside, letting them enjoy the fresh torrent of evening rain. The downpour came so quickly, that water flooded up the steps. Mal was looking forward to leaving this planet and having dry boots again.

“You have to check your weapons at the desk,” the guard said as he opened the door again, letting them inside.

Shivering at the cool, dry air in the building, Mal and Zoë surrendered their firearms at the security station and were directed to an elevator across the hall.

“Third floor, second door on the right,” the guard told them. “And don’t wander off. I’ll be watching.”

Mal spent the elevator ride wondering exactly how he might ask the mayor for Caddock’s whereabouts. He noticed the paneling on the walls was light tan, supposedly soothing. The second door on the right was heavy oak with a fancy brass knob. Mal must have spent too much time considering it, because Zoë reached around him and knocked on the door. When they entered, he was surprised to find a familiar face in the mayor’s seat—Jie-rui, Caddock’s first mate!

“You had a quick rise to power,” Mal commented, surprised.

“Captain Reynolds,” Jie-rui hissed venomously. “You owe me a ship.”

“We didn’t break your ship,” Zoë said, harshly.

“Your little mechanic did.”

“And you borrowed her without asking. Didn’t you read the warning label?”

“Don’t think we attached one, sir,” Zoë interrupted.

“She has a bear sewn to her britches,” Mal pointed out, demonstrating his points by curling his hands into claws. “A bear.”

“Yes, there’s a hazard when you send pirates to find a mechanic... but you didn’t come here to settle the score on her, did you?”

“No, sir,” Mal said quickly, deciding that mock respect was better than no respect for his host. “We’re looking for a fellow named Jantis. I thought Caddock might be able to point us in his general direction.”

“Caddock wouldn’t know where his own nose was if it weren’t attached to his face. Why do you seek Jantis?”

“He has one of my crew.”

“You seem to lose your crew quite often, Captain.”

“I’ve tried cowbells, but it just doesn’t work.”

“What are you planning? To walk onto his world, in the midst of his army, and ask for your crewmate back?”

“That is the current state of the plan.”

Jie-rui laughed, making Mal’s innards twist uncomfortably.

“Captain, the moment you set foot on that world, every man will be watching you, not just the lawmen. You will stand out like a cadger at a coronation. Your mate here may get by.”

“Why? Is the planet populated by a tribe of fair Amazonians?”

Jie-rui snickered again. “Not exactly.”

“Can you at least tell us where he is?” Mal asked, hoping he wasn’t wasting time.

“Tell you? Oh, I can offer more help than that. Watching your foolhardy rescue will be far more entertaining than taking your ship. And I’ve heard Jantis is looking for another Firefly.”

“Not sure I want that kind of help.”

“Don’t be a fool. You won’t be able to land on that planet without just cause. And it just so happens that I have cause... if you transport my cargo to his world, then your cut of the job will be knowing the location of the world.”

“That hardly sounds fair,” Zoë countered.

“If I tell you where he is, you’ll be making the trip anyway. I may as well get some work out of it, otherwise there’s no percentage in it for me.”

“You fuel my boat, stock my galley, and give me a location. Then I’ll transport your cargo.”

Jie-rui’s lips curled into a sneer, but he seemed too excited at the prospect of Mal’s failure to refuse. Since Mal was not planning to fail, he figured Jie-rui would get the raw end of the deal.

“Agreed.”

Mal nodded curtly. “Now, what is this cargo?”

\*~\*

The occasional electrical glitches seemed to have calmed, though Kaylee had yet to trace the source. She was wary of hooking up the doctor’s new machines until she could find the problem, but still felt drawn to the Infirmary. Simon was off treating River, who had been too sick to eat most of the afternoon. Saskia, who had collapsed shortly after her duel with Zoë, lay resting in the Infirmary. Jayne sat on the side bed, tossing cards into a bowl, having grown bored with the task of guarding Saskia—especially since Simon had strapped the woman to the bed. Kaylee’s heart rate quickened at the sight of

Saskia, but swallowing her fear, she entered. *It's not her, it's the memory*, Kaylee kept telling herself.

"Wanna play cards?" Jayne grunted, sitting up straighter at the prospect of company.

Kaylee smiled and shook her head, glad for the familiar comfort of Jayne's presence. "I don't mean to stay long."

Jayne slouched against the wall and resumed tossing the cards.

Saskia's eyes fluttered open as Kaylee cautiously took her hand.

"Hey you," Kaylee whispered. "Do you remember me?"

"My little saboteur," Saskia smiled weakly.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"No, you're not."

Kaylee pressed her lips together, caught by the lie. She wasn't sorry for damaging the Neptune. Jayne's bucket tipped, spilling the deck of metal cards onto the floor. He mumbled in annoyance at having to move. A moment later, he took the cards and bowl and headed for the doors.

"Where you goin'?" Kaylee asked, irrationally worried about being alone.

"Can," Jayne muttered. He stopped at the door, catching the fear Kaylee's eyes. "You all right?"

Kaylee kicked herself for being so paranoid.

"Shiny," she said, unconvincingly.

"I'm comin' back," Jayne said, setting his cards on the counter as collateral.

Kaylee relaxed just a little and nodded, watching him go, then she turned back to Saskia. The woman looked so weak and worn compared to the fierce fighter face she'd had on less than an hour ago.

"What happened to you?" Kaylee asked.

"What do you mean?"

"All the injuries..."

On top of all the skin ailments that came from living on the street, Saskia had serious internal injuries and Simon was still working on a viable treatment option.

"They're ... from you. From back when."

Kaylee furrowed her brow in confusion. "But that was weeks ago."

"No medic... no ship, no coin. Can't work. Told you before. Hell."

"But ... your crew?"

"Not all crews risk their lives over one member. We stopped taking jobs—I stopped being needed."

Kaylee could feel her heart breaking as she watched Saskia struggle for breath. She hadn't understood the depth of Saskia's hell before—the isolation she must have felt.

Quietly, Kaylee whispered, "I needed you. Now you need me."

"What is it you want?"

"Shen me?"

"From me. What do you want?"

Kaylee struggled with the question, not understanding why Saskia kept asking it.

"I just want you to get better."

Suddenly, the Infirmary went dark.

\*~\*

“Sir, I thought we weren’t doing any more livestock,” Zoë muttered, grumpily as she loaded the yelping cargo onto the shuttle.

“Cows,” Mal corrected. “I said never again with cows. These ain’t cows.”

“I had noticed, sir. You think we’ll get them all back to Serenity in one trip?”

“That’s the plan.”

Mal picked up another cage of the yapping beagles, grimacing as they covered his hands with slobber. The stacking of the cages was less than ideal, but they didn’t have far to go. He and Zoë tied the cages to the wall as the frenetic animals threatened to topple the stacks and make a grand mess.

“Let’s just hope Jantis still wants one of these by the time we get there.”

Zoë sneezed as she walked through an over-density of airborne dog fur. “Why would he want one to begin with?”

“Come on, Zoë, look at ‘em!” Mal scratched the nose of one of the dogs and it licked his hand through the bars of the cage. “They’re so cute.”

“Must be one of those evolved defensive traits, sir.” She hoisted the last of the crates into the shuttle and tied it in. “They’re cute so you don’t kill them when they get into the garbage ... or eat your shoes, chew on your gun, defecate on the rug, vomit on the sofa—”

“You were bit as a child weren’t you.”

“—howl through the night—”

“Not all beagles howl through the night.”

“Right, sir. I’m sure we picked the fifty that don’t howl at all.”

As Mal closed the door, the shuttle filled with the smell of wet dogs. They lifted off, tipsy from the full load, and heard the cages shift slightly. All the dogs yelped at high alert in response to the movement and a few urinated in fear.

Mal cringed and glanced sideways at Zoë. “You think we’ll have time to air out the shuttle before we go?”

\*~\*

Jayne had to admit that Saskia was really hot, and that grappling with her earlier had turned him on. He admired a woman who could disarm him, and admired her more so knowing she wasn’t even fighting at a hundred percent when she’d done it. By Simon’s account, the woman had no right to still be breathing with the injuries she’d suffered. The doctor would try, but Jayne could already see the cloud of death hanging over that woman. He wondered if he might have opportunity to leave her satisfied before she kicked. He was grateful Kaylee had given him cause to leave the Infirmary because he had needed to pee for the last half hour and he was getting hungry. Perhaps he’d find those tapas Zoë had made for dinner last night.

“Zheng qi de gou shi dui!” Jayne shouted when the whole water closet went dark. Zipping up his fly and grabbing his gun, he stormed out of the toilet, expecting to find that brat, River playing with the light switch again. Instead found only darkness and silence.

Immediately cautious, he crouched tensely and listened. Every chink, tap, and clunk of the ship was familiar and present ... anything unfamiliar was either absent or quieter than the rain.

“Who’s there?” he called, edging cautiously toward a window, which let in a pool of grayness.

He thought he heard a response, but it was swallowed by the darkness. It may have been his own echo, for all the eeriness he felt. Jayne stumbled quickly through the corridor, keeping one hand against the wall, determined to get to the Infirmary again, sure he would find a flashlight there.

“Kaylee,” he ventured, as he approached the darkened medical bay.

“Still here,” Kaylee stammered through the darkness, her voice accompanied by the sound of rifling through drawers. Suddenly, Jayne was blinded by a flashlight, causing him to flail wildly at the air.

“Sorry,” Kaylee giggled, switching the light to lantern-mode and setting it on the countertop.

“Can I get up now?” Saskia asked. Jayne could see her body rigid, ready to crawl out of her skin rather than stay restrained to the bed.

Kaylee found another flashlight. “I need to check the engine.”

“You want I should go with you?” Jayne asked, concerned that this wasn’t a typical malfunction. Kaylee wasn’t listening to him – she was already jogging toward the engine room, the light she carried growing dimmer.

Jayne looked at Saskia, who had not stopped struggling against the restraints. In fact, she had worked both arms free and was in the process of unbuckling the straps across her chest and legs. Alarmed, Jayne drew his gun.

“Don’t move.”

Saskia rolled her eyes and kept moving.

“I mean it!” Jayne insisted.

“You don’t mean for us to sit here and wait for the lights to come back, do you?” Saskia countered, a deep growl in her voice. Jayne recognized the urge to move and do something and decided that whatever he ended up doing, it would be far more exciting than waiting here. Saskia stumbled slightly as she reached for her boots, but Jayne caught her arm. She shook him off like a bull would to an idiot who participates in rodeo events. He couldn’t suppress the leer rising to his lips as he imagined the taste of her. When she caught him staring, she nearly smacked the look right off his face.

“Where to?”

Jayne carried the lantern into the hallway, casting long creepy shadows about the common area. “To the kitchen.”

“What’s in the kitchen?”

“Tapas.”

\*~\*

Wash paced his bunk, casting hesitant looks at the boots lying on his bed. Just looking at them, he remembered lying on the floor in Prio’s torture room, tied up, maddening rhythmic pounding on his feet. The whole time, he could see his boots, sitting just a few inches from his face. Worse, he knew that nothing he could have said would

have stopped the torture. Why was Wash cursed to have encountered two of the most sadistically evil bastards of the 'verse? Heading up the social ladder towards Jantis, he could only imagine things getting worse.

Circling the room again, he angrily cursed the boots for their failure to protect him from Prio's torture. He cursed Prio for existing. He cursed his slippers for falling apart. The mad dash through Serenity that afternoon had sounded the death knell of the blue and brown, fuzzy dinosaur slippers. Sad as it was, he knew he couldn't walk through the rest of his life with slippers anyway.

Rashly, he threw himself onto the bed and pulled on the first boot and laced it up. It was time for him to take control of the memory and banish Prio's hold on him. At the very least, it was time to have proper arch support and a portable bug swatter. As he reached for the left boot, he saw a piece of paper shoved inside. Pulling it out, his anger melted at the sight of Zoë's lovely handwriting. "I'll hold you close to me," it said. His heart calming, Wash folded the note carefully and tucked it into the boot again, then climbed out of his bunk. The heaviness of the boots was unfamiliar after wearing slippers for so long. The sound of his footfalls echoed through the corridor.

Suddenly, his footsteps were accompanied by the rapid clunks of someone running up behind him.

"Wash!" Kaylee shouted, dashing towards him, wrench in hand.

\*~\*

Book took advantage of Wash's absence to access the cortex and send a message to Haven. His old stomping grounds was the one place he knew was out of reach of his past. Somehow, at Haven, he was free to be himself – whichever self he needed to be at the moment. The children may not stay there long, but at least they would be safe there for now. He couldn't believe that they had just left for New Melbourne that morning. It would be weeks before they reached Haven, if they did at all.

He looked into the rain, the children's ghostly faces dancing about his memory. Or was there something really moving out there? With a chuckle, he rubbed his old eyes, wiping away the tricks of memory and age. The dancing shadows were still there! Alarmed, he jumped to his feet.

"Shepherd Book?" Kaylee's questioning voice startled him even more. He turned to see Kaylee and Wash running into the cockpit, both very real and very concerned. Confused, he looked out the front window again and saw only rain.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Wash commented.

"Or a shadow," Book answered, closing his link to the cortex before the other could see. He noticed Wash go immediately rigid by his reference to River's premonition.

"What's going on?"

"The whole aft deck is without power," Kaylee answered, doing a quick diagnostic of the bridge controls.

"Do you think we have an intruder onboard?"

"A saboteur?" Wash asked. "No one was here when we arrived and no one has landed here since."

"We can lock out foredeck areas to keep him contained."

“Kaylee, why did you cut power to the Infirmary?” Simon asked, coming hesitantly onto the bridge.

“I’m workin’ on it!” Kaylee answered, grabbing a few tools and dashing out of the cockpit.

Book considered the nature of the problem, checking through the rain again. “Maybe we can relay a message to the intruder.”

“Like what? ‘Please stop sabotaging our ship. We promise we’ll escort you off without shooting you.’”

“You’re assuming his intentions are hostile,” Book intoned, even though he could not convince himself otherwise. “He may just be a vagrant looking for a hot meal.”

“He’s chewing through our electrical systems, not our food stocks.”

“Still, a peace offering is better than no offering.”

“Are you sure there is an intruder?” Simon asked. “This ship has been known to break down and fall apart of its own accord.”

“Right,” Wash agreed sardonically. “So we should just sit here and wait for the Captain. Feel free to dock, but there’s no power to the shuttle airlock!”

“Perhaps we should all be seeing to the safety of the ship.”

“Yes... yes...” Simon murmured. “Are you seeing this?”

The others stopped dead and followed Simon’s gaze, which was fixed out the front window. The curtain of rain lifted revealing an armada of vagrants, rising out of the shadows and approaching the ship.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 5

“Wo de ma,” Wash murmured, all debate about the intruder muted.

“Secure the ship?” Book prompted as the three remained frozen.

Just out the fore window, the rain let up, revealing dozens of people circling the ship as though gathering for Sunday masse. A few of them cringed and shrank away as the sun put in a brief appearance. Their clothing was worn and tattered in the manner of the homeless, their eyes eerily reflecting the glow of Serenity’s tracking lights.

Simon’s mouth hung open, hand on his cheek in startled surprise.

“Secure the ship,” Book repeated, his face going tight, his eyes meeting Wash’s.

“Find Kaylee. We need power ASAP!” Wash ordered.

“Can’t you just broadcast?” Simon mentioned, pointing at the comm.

“Aft has lost power,” Wash said slowly, the reality hitting home. “We can’t even control the door locks.”

Book paused on the stair as the severity of the situation hit him as well. Running back to the bridge, he grabbed a flashlight. “I’ll do a manual check of the external doors!”

Wash grabbed the comm, shouting, “Jayne, secure the ship! Kaylee, we need power!”

“I thought you said...” Simon began.

“Just in case.” Quickly, Wash ran a diagnostic of the navigation system, testing the thrusters. As each one fired, the shadow people backed off a little more. Although he seemed to have control of the thrusters, Wash dared not try any fancy flying until he was sure the back half of the ship had power. Loss of air pressure, differential gravity, not to

mention the myriad of navigational systems running through that section ... any of those problems could send them crashing into the island, or worse, the sea.

The shadow people moved like zombies... or like very curious, cautious, and hungry vagrants. Finally, one of them broke rank and charged Serenity full speed. Others followed suit and within seconds, he could hear their feet pounding on the hull, yanking at the ship's paneling.

"Now what?" he muttered.

Simon was still slowly processing the situation. Suddenly his wide eyes changed from surprise to fear.

"River!" he cried, and darted out of the bridge.

\*~\*

Simon found River in the dining room standing on a chair so she could reach the top shelf of the food cabinet.

"River," Simon sighed in relief. "What are you doing?"

"Is there food?" River asked.

Simon scrunched his nose in confusion, then reached out his hand to try and coax her down.

"Is there more?"

"Why do we need more?"

"This is not enough."

Both jumped at the sound of boots stomping on the hull. Simon saw a dirty weather-worn face looking through the window shouting. River screamed, pulling away from Simon and hiding under the table. Simon joined her as she huddled fearfully, arms around her head, peaking out either side of the table.

"Go! Go now!" River cried and ran to the aft deck, fading into the darkness. A moment later, Simon charged after her and nearly plowed right into Jayne.

"Doc!" Jayne called, as Simon bounced off his chest and fell over backwards. For his part, Jayne stayed solidly on his feet, hardly noticing the bump. "Are we under attack?"

Simon held his chest catching his breath, then took Jayne's outstretched hand. Saskia entered just behind him, her eyes fierce, her body tense.

"What's she doing up?" Simon asked.

"Going for tapas."

Simon felt his head, wondering if he'd suffered a concussion as well. Then he felt the ship lift unsteadily into the air and start to roll.

\*~\*

A burst of exhaust blasted against Kaylee's body when the ship lifted off. She was wedged into a service duct and she could feel the walls heating up around her. Her throat constricted and she worried she would be burned again.

"Kaylee!" River cried, reaching in and pulling Kaylee out by the shoulders. Desperately, Kaylee flailed her legs, trying to help propel herself out of the duct. Once free, she looked fearfully at River.

“It can’t be fixed from here,” she panted, feeling around for her flashlight. “Why are we taking off?”

“Stop, drop, and roll,” River revealed. “They come out of the shadows to consume all we have.”

“We can’t,” Kaylee shook her head, responding more to the rationalizations in her own head than River’s words. “We need to set down before we break the ship.”

“We must alter our gravitational constant.”

“We can’t control gravity in the aft section.”

“We must normalize it. Cannot divide by zero.”

“Of course!” Kaylee cried. “We kill the gravity!”

\*~\*

“All doors are sealed,” Book panted, running onto the bridge. “I see we’re already taking off.”

“No choice,” Wash muttered, struggling to keep the ship steady as he rolled right and left. Despite the little jerks he gave to the ship, the shadow people held on.

“Have you heard from Jayne?”

“I sent him with a radio to find Kaylee.”

“Radio,” Book repeated, sitting down to catch his breath. “I should have done that.”

The ship bucked on its own, and Wash fought to keep it from crashing. He couldn’t stay hovering forever.

“It’s not right,” Book murmured. “Shaking these people off like they’re nothing. Letting them fall to their deaths.”

“Maybe next time they should send an ambassador, not a mob.”

The comm crackled and Wash grabbed it.

“Kaylee!”

“Wash, what the hell is going on with my ship!”

Mal! Finally!

“Everything’s shiny here, Captain. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It looks like my whole gorram ship is covered with ants!”

“Oh, that. Yeah, well that’s not really our biggest problem.”

“Take the ship into high atmo and shake them off so we can dock.”

“We are working on this, Captain. Now if you don’t mind, I need to keep this channel open.”

“Wash, don’t you hang up on me!” Mal warned.

Wash dropped the comm as the ship shifted again. This time he felt more response from the controls and he hoped Kaylee was up to something. He looked skyward and saw the shuttle circling the island. The shadow people had noticed too, as some were looking at the sky. Wash tipped forward the nose of Serenity, sending a few of their attackers rolling off the front of the ship.

“Wash, is Shepherd Book with you?”

Finally, his angel had arrived.

“Kaylee, he’s here. What’s your status?”

“Strap yourselves in and break atmo at will!”

Wash didn't need to be told twice. A self-sustaining low orbit was the next best thing to being on land, and since land was covered with a mob of hungry shadow people... He pulled the comm again.

"Mal, meet us in the air. We are out."

\*~\*

Kaylee felt the unfamiliar strong g-force as Serenity rocketed into orbit around Three Hills. She heard a few strange noises eeping out of Jayne as the motion buried him in the seat. Being so tall, he had to support his head on his own. As soon as the ship stabilized, Kaylee felt herself go weightless, held to her seat by the harness alone. She had no intention of staying there.

"Come on," she urged Jayne and Saskia, unbuckling her harness and jetting herself to the shuttle airlocks. Aside from the nausea, she was grateful for the lack of gravity, as it meant the portable battery she had weighed nothing.

"What's goin'?" Jayne asked, strong-arming his way through the cargo bay like a champion swimmer.

"Just want to make sure the airlock has power."

Simon floated in, carrying a flashlight, while River danced through the air having no destination in mind. The whole cargo bay was pitch dark outside the reach of Simon's light and that worried Kaylee to no end.

"Wash, put the Captain on this channel," she said into the two-way radio as Saskia helped her open an access panel and hook the battery into the power supply lines.

"Little Kaylee, what's wrong with my boat?" Mal's voice came through a few moments later.

Kaylee's heart ached for Serenity, unable to bear the disappointment of her Captain.

"All's shiny. We got a plan," she replied, with more confidence than she felt. "We'll have you on board as quick as a cricket."

"Take your time, darlin'. Ain't no sense rushin' if it's to our deaths."

With a deep breath, Kaylee made a final check to be sure the docking clamps had power and said a quick prayer hoping the seal would hold. No reason it shouldn't. It's not like they'd been hit by lightning. They were just having power problems.

The radio felt cold and harsh in her hands, ready to betray her at any moment. With a click of a button, she spoke to her Captain again.

"We're ready here. Make your approach."

Through the window, she could see the shuttle lining up beside them. Zoë's voice cut calmly through the silence.

"Docking in three-two-one."

Clang! The whole ship rang as the shuttle locked into place, the docking clamps held and the seal extended. A moment later, they heard a familiar hiss as the airlock sealed and the space between the two vessels pressurized. The door on Serenity's side shifted a little. Was it supposed to do that? Kaylee had never been so close to the airlock during a docking procedure.

Quizzically, she unlocked the door and within seconds it nearly flew out of her hand. Air rushed around her, pulling her into the airlock right up against the pressure seal that wasn't holding.

"Kaylee!" Simon cried out, dropping the flashlight to grab her hand. She felt her body go numb, her left leg now the only thing between herself and the open space outside. The flashlight that Simon had been holding was spinning crazily about. Within moments, Jayne produced a temporary seal, but they would have to move Kaylee to apply it. Simon kept trying to pull her out, but to no avail. Finally, Saskia wedged herself between the top of the airlock door and the ceiling, locked her elbows under Kaylee's armpits and pulled upwards, perpendicular to the force.

Kaylee couldn't help but cry out as different parts of her leg were exposed to the extreme force of the broken seal, but she was grateful to be moving just the same. As soon as her boot was free, air rushed out through the tiny hole, threatening to blow out the entire side of the ship. Quickly, Jayne approached the leak from below and applied a temporary seal.

The calm that followed felt like the aftermath of a tornado. Kaylee curled up in Saskia's arms, her leg bleeding, the blood floating about, looking for a place to pool. She felt Simon applying a bit of gauze while River retrieved the flashlight and restored the steadiness of the room. Jayne panted in exertion, a black eye already forming where the two-way had flown at his face on its way out of the ship.

With no other way to communicate, Jayne finally knocked on the door of the shuttle, letting them know it was safe to come out. As soon as the door opened, the air filled with the scent of wet dogs and stale urine. Mal and Zoë emerged into the zero-gravity cargo bay, looking surprised, and followed by a chorus of yelps and barks.

"You bring us something fun?" Jayne asked, pushing himself off the floor so as not to appear weak.

"I thought you said we weren't taking on livestock anymore," Kaylee chirped, forcing a smile through the pain.

"I said no more cows," Mal pointed out, agitated. "Where's my gravity?"

"I'll get right on it."

"No, you'll get to the Infirmary," Simon corrected.

"Dogs?" Jayne cried out, peering into the shuttle.

"What's she doing up?" Mal asked, pointing at Saskia.

"Saving my life," Kaylee defended. "Again."

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 6

Inara laid in bed, trying not to breathe too deeply, sure that Jantis had broken her rib whilst ignoring her. She had tried everything to get his attention: being subservient, belligerent, indifferent. He had not spoken her name or looked at her directly in days. She wanted to cry, but every breath was accompanied by sharp pain, so she just laid on the bed and let the pillow catch her tears.

Had her eyes not been open, she would not have noticed the ceiling tile move. God knows, it made no discernable sound. She could not help but hope it was an assassin come to kill her. Or Mal sneaking in—

Her breath caught at the thought of Mal and her vision blurred with stars. He was dead and could not come. When the spots cleared, the ceiling tile had vanished and a familiar face peaked in.

“Elle!” she gasped. Elle pressed a finger to her lips, urging Inara not to speak. Inara wondered if she was dreaming, but decided she’d be glad of the company, even if only in her subconscious. Elle looked well for having been killed in a shuttle crash. In fact, there was no sign that she had been. The only blemish on her skin was a fading scar across her neck where it had been slit open. Her chestnut brown locks were secured in a ponytail. Without a sound, she tossed a dark green bag on the bed and lowered herself from the ceiling with practiced ease.

“You asked for a physician?” Elle said sweetly, opening her bag. Inara tried to meet Elle’s eyes and failed. Would she be ignored even in her dreams?

“Elle, Serenity is gone.”

Elle just nodded, pulling a wide, black cylinder out of her bag. Immediately flashing back to Prio, Inara panicked and ignoring the pain, she rolled off the bed and shimmied underneath.

Hiding under the bed? This had to be a dream!

Elle knelt down beside the bed and lifted the duvet, casting her face in silhouette. Inara squirmed toward the opposite side and froze when Elle spoke.

“Inara.”

Her eyes shot in the direction of the sound, hungry for more.

“Elle?”

“Come out, Inara. I can help ease the pain.”

Inara could feel her body tremble at the honey-sweet sound of her own name. She reached out her broken hand and Elle took it gently. Now that Elle finally saw her, she had no idea what to say.

“Come out, Inara. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize he’d gotten to you so much.”

Inara scooted out from under the bed, not letting go of Elle’s hand. In the light, she could see those hazel eyes looking directly at her. When Elle picked up the black cylinder again, Inara tensed.

“It’s okay,” Elle cooed. “This is a bone mender.”

“Jantis will know you were here,” Inara whispered, terrified.

Elle smiled mischievously, tending to Inara’s hand. “It’s easy to hide from a man who sees so little. But you must be careful not to cross him.”

“Shen me?”

“Now that I know where you are, I can find a way out. Don’t let yourself be moved from here. Don’t let yourself be buried.”

“What do I do?” Inara could feel the dread building up in her spirit.

“He wants you broken. Not subservient or compliant. Broken. Then he will see you.”

Elle stood quickly and put away the bone mender.

“Wait,” Inara cried. “It still hurts.”

“Of course,” Elle assured. “All I’ve done is stimulate the bone to heal faster. It’s not magic. But I must go.”

“Won’t you stay a little longer?” Inara pleaded, reaching out, despite the soreness in her torso, searching Elle’s eyes for mercy.

Elle had already tossed her bag through the hole in the ceiling.

“Please,” Inara added.

Her eyes filled with pity, Elle returned to the bed and helped Inara lay down. The companion had never felt so much like a sick child, but the days of neglect had left her in so much need. Elle sat next to the pillow and leaned against the headboard, gently touching Inara’s shoulder.

“Just till you fall asleep, Inara.

\*~\*

It had been a long time since they’d had a sit-down meal together, and Mal didn’t like it. The way everyone was so relaxed and carrying on, it was as though they’d forgotten Inara may be in mortal peril. The beagles had been in a tizzy all afternoon, even after Kaylee had re-engaged the gravity. Book had sent a private message that afternoon and had cleverly deleted all record of the destination. His secrets were not unusual, nor unexpected, but in light of his stealing off with the shuttle that morning, it made Mal wary. Saskia had joined them, putting on a brave face, but Mal noticed she gripped the table with one hand just to stay upright.

Despite Simon’s insistence that she rest, Saskia had been walking around most of the day, helping Kaylee track the electrical problem. For dinner, their visitor had constructed an artful meatloaf from rice, protein, and spices. While Mal appreciated the fine meal, he worried that Saskia may kill herself in effort to make herself indispensable. Jayne and Zoë had hosed off the dogs as much as possible, so while their persistent yapping floated into the mess hall, the smell was somewhat less and the food nearly covered that entirely.

Mal’s mouth watered at the flavor of fresh oregano, minced garlic, cayenne pepper, and a hint of Tabasco. His original crew plan had involved a cook. He already knew Saskia could hold her own in a gunfight. If the Doc could patch her up, she’d be a good addition to the crew. At the moment, her jaw was clenched shut in effort to hide her pain, and that made it hard for her to eat.

Simon’s eyes were constantly dancing around the table from Saskia to River to Kaylee to Zoë in doctorly concern. The Doc had been busy of late and Mal knew that this run to Siwa would only add to the patient list. Siwa was just far enough from the core worlds to be ignored by them, but too civilized to be a rim planet. It was the original headquarters for Blue Sun, and that worried Mal to no end.

The yowling from the cargo bay surged again, drowning out a story Jayne was trying to tell.

“You think they finally got wind of our delicious supper?” Wash asked, making sure to direct his compliment to Saskia.

“Gorram beasts ain’t stopped yapping all day,” Jayne complained. “You’d think we turned a cat loose on them.”

“A cat,” Kaylee repeated distantly.

“I thought we agreed, no more livestock,” Wash added, rubbing his temples and plugging his ears.

Zoë tugged his hand playfully. “That was cows dear. Weren’t you the one that suggested beagles?”

“I now veto any livestock not toilet trained. Size doesn’t matter. They all smell!” Jayne sniggered into his drink, but Mal ignored it.

“Did you send word to Siwa?” Mal asked.

“Yes,” Wash answered. “No word back. We’re still a week out.”

“Hungry,” River whispered a tear in her eye. Mal looked over uncomfortably, noticing Simon place a soothing hand on River’s back. Ever since they’d left Three Hills, ‘hungry’ was the only word River would say. She hadn’t even touched the plate in front of her – she just kept her hands neatly folded in her lap. Occasionally, the conversation sparked a smile that lit across her face, but mostly, she was quiet. Her sad brown eyes gazing more inward than out, she laid her head on Simon’s shoulder and waited for the meal to be over.

Mal realized that it was only Jayne carrying on with the story-telling. Everyone else was preoccupied and tense. Probably not thinking about Inara, but Mal appreciated the dour mood anyway.

“A cat,” Kaylee repeated, interrupting Jayne’s story just before the climax. The others looked at her in confusion, but with no explanation, she scooped herself a fresh helping of meat loaf and carried the plate out of the galley.

The others watched her go, silently willing an explanation from the doorway through which she had disappeared. A moment later, the cargo bay erupted in a fresh cacophony of barking dogs.

“She best not be wasting good food on them animals!” Jayne boomed over the din.

Unable to take the noise, Wash fled to the cockpit, closing the door behind him. River pressed her eyes shut releasing a fresh well of tears onto Simon’s shoulder. Mal continued eating his fill, trying to enjoy the medley of flavors dancing on his tongue. This was sure to be a trying week.

\*~\*

Kaylee hardly looked up as Saskia entered the engine room and plopped down on her hammock. Her plate of food sat next to her tool box, an integral part of her new plan to fix the ship. That afternoon, the aft-starboard landing strut had malfunctioned, giving Kaylee a much needed direction for sourcing the damage. She had a hunch for how to stop the malfunctions.

“I am so jealous of your hammock,” Saskia mused, one leg swinging over the side. “Caddock never let me have a hammock.”

“He was pretty strict I guess?”

“Everyone here is so kind.” This time, Saskia had picked up a role of duct tape and was tossing it in the air and catching it. “No wonder you took such a beating on the Neptune.”

“Don’t be fooled. Captain’ll shootcha right between the eyes if you get him on a bad day... Or a tight schedule.”

“So is that merc of yours a good ride?”

Kaylee was so startled by the question that she dropped her pliers. “Jayne?”

“Just a thought,” Saskia said dismissively. “What are you working on?”

Kaylee stammered a non-sensical response that ended in a request for silence. Her mouth still hanging open in surprise, she picked up the plate and started laying a trail of food right into a little cage. It didn't take more than a minute before the first bite.

"Kaylee, what in the hell are you doing?" Mal ranted, storming into the engine room.

"Shhh!" Kaylee held up her hand again, then pulled the Captain to the far side of the engine room to watch. Within a few minutes, a bristling brown hedgehog waddled into the room following the trail of food directly into the cage Kaylee had set up. With a quick snap, Kaylee closed the cage and the frightened creature tucked into a ball.

"What is that?" Saskia asked.

"A hedgehog. I recognized the bite marks on the landing wire."

"This is our saboteur?" Mal asked.

"Sure is."

"That explains why those beagles have been so stir crazy."

"Caged beagles are always stir crazy," Jayne interrupted, entering the engine room and seeing the prickly puff of caged animal. "Where'd that come from?"

"Must have stowed away back on Three Hills," Kaylee said, poking at the creature through the side of the cage.

"We gonna eat him?"

"Jayne! No we're not gonna eat him."

"What does hedgehog even taste like?"

"Captain!"

"What's going on?" Wash asked, curiously surveying the party in the engine room.

"These brutes want to eat my hedgehog!" Kaylee exclaimed, cooing the animal as it uncurled and looked around. "But we're not gonna let that happen are we Bristles, no we're – Ow! Now look, you scared him."

Both Mal and Jayne were laughing at her.

"Can't we just release it into the wild?" Wash asked.

"You mean the Black?" Mal said.

"No sense wasting good hedgehog," Jayne drooled.

"On Siwa."

Mal shook his head. "Not all wilds are the same. You release this little guy on a strange world, you have no idea what he'll do to the indigenous life. Or what that life will do to him."

"So we eat him?" Jayne persisted.

"Eat what?" Simon asked, crowding into the room. Jayne chose that moment to start picking up food crumbs off the floor and popping them into his mouth.

"Hedgehog."

"Did that thing bite you?" Simon exclaimed, noticing Kaylee's bleeding finger.

"He's just scared."

"Still, he could have ..." Simon searched for a word, while motioning Kaylee to come with him. "Rabies!"

With a sigh, Kaylee started following Simon to the Infirmary. Then, on second thought, she grabbed the caged animal and took it along. "Come on, Bristles. Let's get away from the savages."

“What’s with the trail of bread crumbs?” Book inquired, encountering them in the doorway.

Saskia chuckled from the hammock, surveying the collection of men. “Baiting animals.”

\*~\*

When Inara opened her eyes, Elle was gone. The ceiling tile was replaced and sealed as though it had never been moved, and her broken bones still felt sore. Had it been a dream?

On the side table, the manservant had left a fresh plate of food. Should she bother eating it? Perhaps if she let it sit, she would appear more broken and Jantis would stop abusing her. Perhaps.

Quietly, she whispered her own name and it filled her mouth like sweet water. Jantis had broken her—he’d made her forget she was human. She realized she didn’t even know the name of the man who brought her food, gave her clothing, and was responsible for her care. He was as much invisible to her as she was to him. She had to be better than that. Next chance she got, she would find out his name.

A deep breath sent pain rippling through her body and she decided to break into her first aid kit and take a pain killer. That would require water. Looking at the fresh food set before her, she decided to eat. She had gone hungry too many times recently to do otherwise.

\*~\*

With the saboteur safely encaged, Kaylee was able to repair most of the electrical systems and hook up the new machinery they had acquired on Three Hills. Simon nervously started the ultrasound machine, hoping desperately that he’d be able to interpret the results. He wished he’d taken a longer OB rotation because as of now, his baby delivery count was at “one” and he had not been responsible for prenatal care in that case. He missed core medicine. Between their recent bouts of starvation and the drugs he’d administered when Zoë was shot recently, it was a miracle that she hadn’t miscarried already. The old-fashioned ultrasound only spat out 2-D images, but it was all they could afford out here in the black.

Zoë was propped on her elbows, looking expectantly at the readout. Wash danced happily, holding her hand.

“That’s him!” Wash squealed, pointing at a blip on the screen.

“No, that’s...” Simon stopped. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure. Despite the wealth of texts he had downloaded from the cortex, the academic volumes could not speak experience into his eyes. At seven weeks, an abdominal scan was not the ideal method of imaging the baby, and he did not expect to make out much more than a heartbeat.

“That’s him,” Zoë pointed.

Simon paused the scan to consider her target. Regular pulsations. Position... it looked okay, but it was hard to tell. With no other obvious options, he decided to go with it.

“That’s it,” Simon confirmed.

“What? Where?”

Zoë pointed again.

“Oh, incognito. Right on, little Malcolm.”

Zoë’s smile disappeared. “What did you call him?”

Wash didn’t respond, his attention rapt on the tiny heartbeat.

Simon maneuvered a little, trying to get a better angle on the baby’s position in the uterus.

Zoë was adamant. “We are not naming our baby ‘Little Malcolm’.”

“We’ll we’re not naming him Little Hoban. Do you know how much I was teased as a child?!”

“Simon is an excellent name. Very little teasing.”

“What makes you so sure it’s a boy?” Zoë criticized.

“You’re right,” Wash nodded playfully. “Maybe we should start somewhere more gender neutral. Like Jayne!”

Zoë chuckled lightly. “I think you were closer with Malcolm.”

“Zoë, I know we’ve been through a lot, but I never expected you to name your firstborn after me,” Mal commented, entering the Infirmary.

“Talk to my husband. Is there a problem, sir?”

“Yes. No. Don’t let me interrupt. I just...” Mal held up his hands and backed away, but his eye caught the tiny heartbeat on the monitor and he froze.

“Ain’t that something,” he mused, enraptured. For a moment, they all just stared.

“It is.”

\*~\*

Simon was not surprised when River crawled into his bed that evening and snuggled up next to him. The new drug cocktail he was giving her had her sick to her stomach, though he hoped that it would pass in a few days. Along with that, the sound of howling beagles made sleep nearly impossible. Absently, he stroked his sister’s hair, trying to sooth her to sleep. His mind ran through a list of available sleep aids in the Infirmary, but the drug interactions would be too hazardous.

“I could eat before,” River wept. “I was well before. Why can’t I have what I had before?”

“Before what?”

“Last week. What I had last week.”

“Last week you were setting fire to everything.”

“Only when I saw fire,” River defended. “I saw clearly then. Saw things even before they were intended. I can’t see at all now.”

“That’s because your eyes are closed, silly.”

“Can’t see anything,” River complained. “Can’t be helpful.”

A little concerned, but mostly annoyed, Simon propped himself up on his elbows and turned on the bedside light so he could look at his little sister. “River, open your eyes.”

River opened her eyes and Simon immediately saw her pupils shrink in response to the light.

“Can’t see you,” River said with ghostly terror. She touched his face, then bit her finger. Simon was confused. She was looking directly at him, following his every move. In a brief lull of barking, he could hear her stomach growling.

“Can’t see you!” she declared furiously, turning on her side and taking all the covers with her. Simon rolled his eyes and yanked back, causing her to spin violently and fall onto the floor. She could be such a brat!

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 7

Wash could not have been happier to see Siwa through the front window, the glow from the twin cities – Shali and Aghurmi – framing the landing port. With Zoë sleeping soundly on top of him, he considered just entering a low orbit and circling the planet until morning. The cockpit being slightly more insulated from the barking in the cargo hold, the two had slept together in the pilot’s chair many nights over the past week.

“Zo-bug,” he whispered softly, shifting to disengage the autopilot and alter their approach. Gracefully, she slid off of him, stretched her body, and found her boots. She kissed his cheek as she took the blanket off his lap, folded it, and put it away. The planet was coming up quickly, but that just made landing more fun. He was surprised when Zoë headed out of the cockpit before they were down.

“Where are you going, babe?”

“Cargo bay. So help me God, I am getting those damn beagles OFF my ship tonight!”

“I may just hover over the landing pad,” Wash joked.

“Then I will open the damn door and throw them to the damn ground! But they are not staying on this damn ship one damn second longer than they damn well need.”

Furiously, she opened the storage locker and pulled out the blanket again.

“I’ll parachute the damn animals out if I have to. Xi niu, qing wa cao de liu mang...”

Wash laughed nervously, unaccustomed to seeing Zoë so testy, or to hearing her swear so many times in one sentence. He radioed Mal, to tell him they were landing and warn him that the dogs may be prematurely jettisoned. Mal was not amused.

\*~\*

When Mal met Zoë in the cargo bay, Jayne and Book were already there, helping move the caged animals to the door. In a few brief waves to their contact on Siwa, Mal had requested a direct meeting with Jantis following their delivery of the dogs. Apparently, Jantis was so excited to receive the cargo, he was coming to the space port that very night to pick one out.

“Let’s hose them down once more and make sure they’re fed,” Mal ordered, feeling the brief thump as Serenity landed. The door to the cargo hold opened and a gust of dry air swept through, ousting the smell of dogs with it.

Despite the pre-dawn hours, the Shali spaceport was aglow with constant activity – ships arriving, cargo moving. As soon as the door opened, a wiry black man peered in

and asked if they'd be needing a forklift. Zoë stopped yanking at the cages long enough to say "Yes, please," and then she followed the man out to get the vehicle.

Mal wiped his brow, wondering if there was any surcharge involved with using the forklifts, but decided he'd bill it back to Jie-rui. Briefly, he poked his head out of the ship and looked to the sky, but the stars were obscured by city glow. He glanced around the spaceport at the sea of blue jumpsuits, amazed at the perpetual motion, but also by something else.

"Shepherd, can you take a look at this?" he said quietly, pointing Book in the generic direction of the laborers.

After a moment of seeing nothing unusual, Book asked, "What is it?"

"Everybody we see. Everybody is black."

Book nodded, shrugging one shoulder as if such a sight were normal.

"Do you think it's just in the spaceport?"

"It's not an infection, Mal."

"Jie-rui said I wouldn't be able to walk around this planet without being noticed. I think this is what he meant."

Book stood straight and surveyed Mal, looking somewhat offended.

"Something wrong?" Jayne asked, coming to see what the others are looking at.

"Not wrong," Mal answered. "Just different than I expected."

Jayne peered out and smiled. "It's a sight, ain't it? Being the minority."

"Don't tell me you knew about this!"

Jayne scrunched his face in confusion. "How do you mean? Everyone knows. If you want a black woman, you go to Siwa."

Mal's jaw dropped at the crassness of it all, but Jayne continued.

"An Asian girl, go to Sihnon. Whities on Muir. Oh, sweet Latinos on Angel..."

"What is there a catalog?" Mal interrupted.

"Naw, I'm just saying. Don't mean you can't find a black woman other places, but you know you'll find one here."

"All this time and we still have segregation," Book mused.

"It's just people, Preacher," Jayne said, tightening his gloves as Zoë drove up the ramp with the forklift.

\*~\*

Shepherd Book's hand rested uncomfortably on the pistol tucked away in his belt. By the time Jantis arrived, Mal had decided to let Zoë take point in the handoff. Despite her protests, Book stayed nearby, blending in with the cages of dogs. Jayne and Mal were hiding just inside the ship, waiting to spring into action. Book worried that the howling dogs were attracting the very kind of undue attention they were hoping to avoid.

A silver car glided through the spaceport, its polished trim looking out of place next to the drab forklifts and cargo vessels. As soon as the car stopped, a gray-suited man hopped out of the passenger seat, letting loose a spry little girl with pigtail braids and a tall man in a dark suit that Book immediately recognized as his old friend, Amadi. Could it be? Could Amadi really have become Jantis?

Book started to step around the dog cages, but Zoë warned him back with a look. On edge, he wrapped his hand around the concealed pistol and waited. Amadi did not seem to notice the barking dogs, or Zoë for that matter. His eyes were fixed on Serenity.

“Mr. Jantis,” Zoë said, stepping firmly into Amadi’s path, but the man paid her little mind. When he spoke, Zoë wasn’t even sure he was speaking to her.

“I knew you were bringing beagles, but the Firefly is a surprise. How much for the ship?”

“The ship is not for sale,” Zoë answered sternly.

Amadi started, looking at Zoë for the first time with a sneer that twisted Book’s insides. Protectively, the Shepherd inched closer to Zoë, his heart quickening.

“Everything is for sale,” Amadi countered.

“Not this boat. You can rent space in her cargo hold, you can charter passage, you may even lease a shuttle, but you cannot buy this ship from me. So long as I live, I will live on this ship, and when I die, my ghost will haunt her hallways.”

“Your attachment seems a mite unhealthy,” Jantis chuckled darkly, surveying the ship again.

“Daddy, I want these three,” the little girl interrupted.

“Just one, baby girl. Make a choice. It’s one or none.”

Jantis did not look at his daughter once during the conversation. His greedy eyes had shifted from Serenity to Zoë.

“Do you have a good pilot?”

“Only the best.”

“Stay until Friday next, fly in my show. You will be compensated.”

“I will consider it,” Zoë seethed, evenly. Although Book knew they were on the same side, Zoë’s tone struck fear in his heart.

“You will do it,” Amadi assured, immune to intimidation. He strode over to the dog cages and placed a hand on the little girl’s head.

“This one,” she said, pointing to the runt. With hardly a glance at the dog, Amadi pulled out a wad of bills and handed them over to Book. Suddenly, Amadi’s grip tightened on the cash and his eyes scanned Book with disdain.

“Is this what you’ve become?” he snarled under his breath.

Book yanked the money from Amadi’s hand, their eyes locked in angry reunion.

“And you?” Book growled.

\*~\*

Inara knelt by the window of her posh prison, her skin parched and cracked from the dry air. She tipped open her first aid kit, willing a moisturizer into the mix. The various items, useful for dulling the pain of abuse, would not help her break out of this cell. But now, she had a different escape in mind. Even for that, the supplies came up short.

There was not enough of any drug in this kit to overdose. The peroxide concentration in the cleansers was too low. The instant cold pack... what was in that? Her fingers trembled and tripped as she turned over the packaged to see. She was weak and hungry, numb to human contact, convinced that her visit from Elle was naught more than a dream. She had dismantled her altar and eaten the food, having given up on prayer.

The sense of invisibility she'd felt when she first met Jantis had taken permanent residence in her soul. She was an empty vase, stored in a closet, waiting to be taken out and filled with flowers.

"Woman."

"Ren ci de Fo zu," Inara murmured, turning with a tearful smile. Jantis had come into her chamber and spoken her into existence. Would he say her name?

"Mr. Jantis," she stammered, trying to appear as though she expected him. What was he doing here, looking at her? "It has been too long."

"Don't let me interrupt."

Inara turned back to face the window, donning a cloak to conceal the bulge of her first aid kit. She dare not leave it in the room.

"Are you cold?"

"The air outside is brisk," Inara said glibly. "I cannot serve so well if I catch cold."

"I did not intend on going outside," Jantis said, clasping his hands behind his back and looking amazed. "But it is a nice day to walk the grounds."

Inara smirked inwardly, applauding herself for directing an action. A small victory, but empowering. In the most gentlemanly of fashions, Jantis held out his arm and Inara accepted it gracefully. By his kindness, Inara had to wonder if she were dreaming and why should wasn't dreaming herself back onto Serenity.

They walked across the soft green lawn where she had first seen Jantis sparring. The buffalo herd had moved to the far pasture and planes and ships darted through atmo, practicing formations and frightening the birds.

"Elias told me you shot a man," Jantis began.

Inara ducked her head, ashamed. Osiris seemed like a lifetime ago, but at the mere mention, the man's face haunted her. He had been unarmed, she was trying to escape. When she didn't answer, Jantis persisted.

"Why did you shoot him? He was going to die anyway. Why not shoot your captor?"

"Shooting Elias did not offer escape. He had me trapped. That man..." Inara trailed off, remembering the smell of the man she had killed... the fear in his eyes. "That man was suffering on my account."

"You don't like to watch people suffer?"

"Nor do you," Inara countered, searching for composure. "I've seen by your tactics."

Jantis laughed evilly and eerily. "You misread. My daddy once told me 'Don't play with your food—it may jump off your plate and bite you in the ass.'" He guffawed at his own reverie. "We steamed crabs that night."

"Did one of them bite you?"

"No, but one of them did manage to climb out of the pot. Made it half way across the kitchen before we caught it."

Inara smiled at the imagery, but feared also that she was no more than a crab to Jantis and he would boil her alive. The free air did her a measure of goodness and she could feel her face lifting in rejuvenation. Jantis led her back inside and took a meal with her in a private dining room. Next, he led her to what looked like a medical lab and Inara stopped dead.

“What is this?” Inara whispered sharply, flashing back to Prio’s torturous exam rooms. Jantis’ face changed immediately from calm to annoyed. Instinctively, Inara pulled her hands close to keep Jantis from breaking one of them.

“It’s the Medical Lab. You are to be examined.”

Inara’s face went white at the possible implications. Jantis rolled his eyes at the delay.

“Aren’t companions required to undergo routine medical exams? This is no different.”

Inara looked doubtful as a white-clad doctor approached her. Finally Jantis leaned in and whispered, “I intend to get sexed tonight. Should you have a clean bill of health, I will be sexed by you. Otherwise, we will revisit the terms of our agreement.”

Inara swallowed hard and forced a smile. Jantis was seeing her, talking to her, and wanted to have sex with her. This was her golden opportunity to find a way out. Mustering all her charm, she leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Of course, Mr. Jantis. I will be ready for you.”

\*~\*

River loved the daytime moon, if for no other reason than most people missed it. The sun rules the day, the moon rules the night. And surely when it’s up at night it dominates the sky. But the moon is not confined to the night the way the sun is to the day. The moon comes up whenever it damn well pleases. Today, it was pleased to be high in the sky in the early morning, glowing with pale elegance against a deep blue backdrop.

River crept to the rim of the ship, held in by Mal’s watchful eye. She wanted to be outside, away from all the tension happening in the cargo bay. Book, Zoë, and Mal stood in three-way face off. Jayne had retreated from the scene, intending to transfer his weight set back into the cargo bay, now that the beagles were gone. If she closed her eyes, River could still hear the yapping dogs being transported out of the space port. It almost drowned out the snarling argument behind her.

Zoë punched the preacher square in the face, and he didn’t even try to block.

“Zoë!” Mal grabbed his first mate and held her back.

“You know him!” Zoë seethed. “You know Jantis!”

“I do.”

Mal was suddenly not so keen on holding Zoë back. “And just when were you planning on telling us?”

“I haven’t,” Book paused, searching for the right answer. “I haven’t seen him since before I became a Shepherd. He wasn’t called Jantis then.”

“Does he have a grudge against you?”

“Didn’t seem to like you that much,” Zoë fumed.

“Let me go into town,” Book suggested.

“No rutting way. I ain’t letting you near that hun dan unless you’re coming back with Inara.”

“Like he’d let me close. But if he’s here, I know certain others will be nearby, and I have some old favors I can call in.”

Mal looked doubtful and Zoë looked ready to clock him again.

“I’ll send some waves around, see who’s still alive. Give me a couple hours. We’ll find Inara.”

Zoë cast a side-long glance at Mal, knowing he was being defeated by emotion. River hummed silently to herself, but could not drown the turmoil of the room. Suddenly, a strange rhythm played counter-melody to her humming. Wash entered, his body astir, his eyes wide and fixed to a handheld capture.

“Mal. Mal. Mal. Mal.”

“Wash, I’m kinda in the middle of something here,” Mal said evenly, his gaze firmly on Book.

“Mal, look at this.”

“We leave in three hours,” Mal said icily to Book, glaring daggers until the Shepherd left. Taking half a breath to change task, he turned to Wash.

“What is it?”

“It’s Nia Stolte.”

His body still tense, Mal took the capture and considered the picture. The angle was familiar, a woman on Mr. Stotle’s arm at a party. Only the face was wrong. “That ain’t her. This is... who is this?”

“I... according to the caption, it’s Nia Stolte.”

“Where did you get this picture?” Zoë asked, taking the capture from Mal.

“From our own memory banks. This is the very same image we downloaded from the cortex a month ago.”

“Doesn’t look the same to me.”

“Sir, do you think someone is hacking our computer looking for Elle?”

Mal shook his head in concern. “I don’t know what to think. But I know who to ask.”

\*~\*

As Wash bolted upstairs to wave Mr. Universe, Mal took a moment to collect River and close up the ship. Ever since Prio had wandered through his back door, he’d taken a strong disliking to strangers dropping in. Jayne dragged the weight bench noisily through the cargo bay, taking care to put it back just so. Jayne liked to work out in such a way that he could easily reach his gun and had a clear view of the room. Damn distrustful...

Mal trudged to the bridge, wearied by the prospect of his day, he heard a quiet clamoring in the weapons locker. At first, he thought Zoë might be in there, but that didn’t make sense. River, Jayne, Kaylee... Saskia!

Mal was startled to find the tan-skinned woman standing upright, rooting through the weapons locker, arming herself to the teeth.

“How did you ...” Mal stammered.

Wordlessly, Saskia tossed him a lock and key and continued arming herself.

“Those ain’t yours! Put ‘em back,” Mal demanded uncertainly, wondering if the woman would follow his orders.

Saskia gave him that same stupid smile Jayne did when he wanted to bring more grenades on a job. “I can’t face Jantis unarmed.”

“You’re not facing him at all. Doc says you should be tied to a bed.”

“Your doctor exaggerates.”

Mal didn't want to agree, and he didn't like that he was losing this argument. He was the Captain! “Still, I have half a mind to strap you down myself, just to save me his yammering.”

“Like that'll work,” Jayne snorted, having taken a short break from moving things to eavesdrop. As Jayne retreated again to gather bar weights from the common area, Simon brushed past, heading upstairs to the galley. On seeing Mal and Saskia at the weapons locker, he completely misread the situation.

“Captain, you're not taking her with you, are you?”

“Nothing is decided,” Mal said, rubbing his temples, trying to decide how to silence both Simon and Saskia on this matter.

“You need another gun hand,” Saskia countered.

“Not one that'll keel over mid-fight.”

“I won't wait for death alone in a bed!”

“Bi zui!” Mal said, looking to the bridge and not wanting to deal with the next problem any more than the current one. After a moment of consideration, he turned to Saskia. “We leave in a few hours.”

“Captain!” Simon protested, but Mal held up a hand to silence the young doctor and continued his order to Saskia.

“You take to bed now. Rest till then, and I'll consider letting you come along.”

“You'll consider?” Saskia repeated, unconvinced.

Mal held out his hand. “And give me the guns.

Angrily, Saskia disarmed, slapping the weapons into Mal's hand one at a time while he returned them to storage. When she held back a shotgun, Mal gave her a stern look, not wanting to waste words.

“I sleep better with a gun.”

Firmly, Mal pulled the weapon out of her hand. “You'll just have to do without.”

Saskia huffed like a child, but didn't protest. She glared at Mal just long enough to chill his bones, then headed down the stairs back to her quarters. As she passed Jayne in the hallway, she swiped his pistol.

“Hey, that's my...” Jayne began, but stopped when he saw the look on her face.

Saskia's gaze floated defiantly from Jayne to Mal, then back to Jayne again. With an insolent smile, she tipped her head to Jayne and said. “Come on.”

Mal could feel a headache rising as he watched the exchange. His condition didn't improve when he turned and saw Simon still frowning fiercely at him. Mal closed his eyes, wondering if it were possible to control Saskia at all. He knew that he could at least rein Jayne in with coin. He hadn't yet found the bit for Saskia. Still, he had to try.

“Captain, you can't let her go with you,” Simon protested.

“No room in this plan for a loose cannon. She means to kill Jantis with or without us. I just hope to delay it till after we find Inara.”

\*~\*

Mal was too bitter to enjoy Mr. Universe's wild black curls and enthused smile as he rambled on about his love-bot. He looked at the capture again, wondering why Wash had called up the picture to begin with, but felt concern just the same. He didn't like the

idea of someone playing with his memory, or his mind. When and how had the picture changed? Were Jayne and Elle manipulating the crew? Mal felt his control on Jayne slipping, ever since Ariel. But Mr. Universe had recognized Elle by her face and called her “Misty.” That, at least, was real.

“What can you tell us about Misty?” Wash asked, interrupting Mr. Universe’s gleeful story on the latest violence from the cortex.

“Ah, mysterious,” he sang.

“Shen me?” Mal asked.

Mr. Universe looked surprised at Mal’s surprise. “Misty... the mysterious.”

Mal closed his eyes, wishing he could smack the man through broadwave. He had no time for games.

“I found this photo. It’s the same one I had of your “Misty” a month ago, but her face has changed.”

“Yes, that is one of Misty’s talents. It’s as though she can break into your personal photo capture. She can become and unbecome a person in the blink of an eye.”

“So who is she? Who am I dealing with?”

“Oh, not to worry Mal. She can change a digital photo, but she can’t change your memory. Whatever name she gave you, she’s the real Mysterious. I can almost guarantee your photo is what reports the name in error.”

“But how?”

“Face recognition software. She has some worm in the works that recognizes and modifies her face so security software can’t match it.”

“Can’t they just trace the worm?” Wash countered.

“I’ve tried.” Mr. Universe smiled in admiration. “She’s in too deep, has too many decoys. You can’t track her by machine.”

“No sense tracking her now,” Mal said, satisfied that the problem was not likely to blow up in his face. “She died on Three Hills.”

“When was that?”

Mal paused, wondering why a man would ask when, but not how. Why didn’t he look concerned? “A few weeks ago, why?”

“No reason,” Mr. Universe stammered. Mal exchanged a doubtful look with Wash. “It’s just always fun seeing where she’ll pop up and disappear next.”

“You’ll let us know if she pops up.”

“Of course,” Mr. Universe assured with a tight, lying smile, before closing the connection.

“He’s seen her,” Wash said confidently.

“I gathered that too. But I don’t think he’s free to talk.”

“Do you think Jantis...”

Mal nodded gravely. “I do.”

\*~\*

The bright afternoon sun cut through the wide-open streets of Shali, casting light in the shop windows, and highlighting the sky scrapers at the city center. Every ten feet, a young sapling was planted in a circle of green grass in effort to integrate nature and development. The air was dry and thinner than it should have been at this altitude. Every

now and again, fighter jets zoomed over the city, drowning out all sound. Mal's coat flapped in the soft breeze and he held it down with his hands in effort to keep his gun concealed. With all that was in him, he tried clear the swirling gou shi floating through his head and focus on the task at hand.

Book was half a block ahead of him, Zoë and Saskia across the street, Jayne a block behind. Mal was accustomed to turning heads with his brown coat, not his white skin. As much as he tried to be discreet, he couldn't help but feel uncomfortable with the number of disdainful looks he garnered. Were their whispers about him or was he paranoid?

Book walked the streets confidently, sidestepping automobiles, a placid smile drawn on his face. They crossed through a residential district – a place with families and children – and Mal knew he'd think twice before firing his gun. The Shepherd had not been forthcoming about their destination and it made Mal edgy. Truthfully, he'd always expected Jayne to betray him before the Shepherd. Now Mal was waiting for both at once. Jayne Book... Saskia as well. Zoë was the only one he trusted now and they were in the all-too-familiar disadvantage – outgunned and outnumbered on a foreign world.

The Shepherd stopped in front of a public library and surveyed the recommended reading selection in the window. Mal stood a little straighter, pretending to read a restaurant menu and see what happened next. A caramel-skinned, Q-tip lady stepped out of the library, shook Book's hand, and the two conversed. The woman was at least as old as Book, if not older, thin as a rail, with a shock of white hair gathered in a ball on top of her head. Mal stayed by his restaurant, letting Zoë inch closer to try and get an ear on the situation. If only those beagles hadn't been yapping all week, he could have come up with a better plan!

"My, my, it's just raining white-folk on Shali today," a deep, gruff voice commented.

Mal turned to face the man who smelled of rotting fish and refuse, knowing that things had gone from bad to worse. His hand on his gun, ready for the draw, Mal tipped his head in a sinister greeting. "Caddock."

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 8

Caddock had a hacking cough and exuded the smell of sweat and smoke, his hands clinging tightly to his patched up coat. The old garment, mixed with purples and browns, had gone threadbare at spots and the pockets hung out like little stringy purses. Mal looked for a sign of the Cofer Caddock was prone to carrying, but he needn't have worried so much. He had hardly blinked before Jayne had covered the block between them and had a pistol trained on Caddock's head.

"I don't think it's wise for a bunch of white-folks to start a gunfight in the middle of the shopping plaza," Caddock wheezed between coughs.

Mal gave Jayne a look, but the mercenary did not holster his weapon. Jayne merely adjusted his position to more discreetly hold his gun against the back of Caddock's neck. Baby steps, Mal told himself.

"Why are you here?" Mal asked in a low growl.

"Same as you. I'm here to kill Jantis."

“NOT same as me,” Mal emphasized. “I’m just here for my crewmember. I have no grief with Jantis.”

“Oh, you soon will have grief with Jantis. And you’ll wish you’d killed him before he noticed you were trouble.”

“Why do you keep thinking we’re the same?”

Caddock placed his right hand under his beard before putting his left hand over his mouth for a particularly large cough.

“He took your woman, didn’t he?”

Mal glared angrily and didn’t respond. Jayne shifted uneasily, his trigger finger getting anxious. Caddock continued with evil superiority.

“You come against Jantis, there is nothing you can offer. There’s nothing you have that he wants. Not even your life. Unless you’re a woman. He’s a collector of women. He took mine.”

“Word on the street is she left you,” Jayne sneered.

“Oh, I’m sure she went willingly,” Caddock agreed, stepping away from Jayne to get the gun off his neck. “Offered herself even. May have bought her a little life before Jantis killed her. But Jantis took her and he had no right. I will kill him and I won’t let you get in my way.”

In a flash, Caddock dropped to the ground, drew his weapon, and shot Jayne in the thigh. Mal was quick on the draw, catching Caddock in the gut and knocking him down. Blood spouted from Jayne’s wound, and Mal could see consciousness leaking from his face, but Jayne shot off three rounds, hitting close enough to the same spot to finally pierce Caddock’s armor on the third try. Wounded, but not defeated, Caddock found cover behind a news stand. Book snuck in from nowhere, pulling Jayne into an ally. Mal ducked behind a sapling, which offered the most pathetic cover and looked for Zoë.

His first mate charged across the street into the fight, Saskia hot on her heels shouting Caddock’s name at the top of her voice. Caddock fired again, catching Saskia in the chest and Zoë in the shoulder. Mal’s world became slow-motion, black and white, back-dropped by the muted screams of schoolchildren, running into the library for cover. Her armor should have held, why did he see blood?

“Zoë!” he shouted, but she did not answer.

\*~\*

Inara waited in her new cell, her breath coming in short gasps. Something was not right – something that doctor had given her. Her skin felt cold, her senses dulled. What had he done to her? What might he do? A companion chooses who she is to be with. A companion is always in control. She offered herself to him! She chose this indenture to save her life!

Did she choose?

Inara had never been puritanical about sex and tried to convince herself that tonight with Jantis would be no different than any of a dozen other clients. She could perform her rituals, she had time to prepare herself. She knew this was coming from the time she indentured herself to him. No tea for a greeting ceremony. No restriction on

their time together. No incense. No prayer. No cleansing. She was losing everything she held sacred. Her soul was dying; her body was not far behind.

This room was white and vacant. Her red and purple gown was the only color there and the color seemed to eat at her. The small little closet was like a coffin to her. Uncertainly, she tipped open her first aid kit and wrapped her fingers with gauze. The door knob jiggled as a key was placed in the lock. Time was short. She grabbed the peroxide wipes and taped them over the gauze. The door opened.

With a shrill battle cry, Inara charged the door, tackling the manservant as he came through. She pressed the peroxide into his eyes, burning them, then she shoved the gauze into his mouth. In the confusion that followed, she leapt over him and dashed out of the room. The hallway was crawling with employees. A security guard just down the way said something into a radio and came towards her.

Inara pressed through the crowd into a stair well and headed for the ground floor. She shed her clumsy shoes and lifted the skirt of her dress, freeing her legs to run. Almost free.

A door burst open half a flight below her. Inara jumped over the side of the well, landing squarely on the first guard's shoulders, sending him toppling into the next one. A swift blow to the neck later both men were down and she was on her way again. Ground floor. Lobby. She could see the front door! Where to now?

Thinking quickly, Inara headed back into the stairwell, going down one more flight to the underground hanger, hoping her shuttle was still there. Even if it wasn't there had to be a million places to hide and all of them provided some means of escape.

The ground floor was quiet when she burst through the stairwell door, the workers there obviously uninformed as to her escape. She took cover next to a puddle-jumper, trying the hatch, but it was locked. Would her shuttle still be here? She knew how to break into her own shuttle. Cautiously, she peered across the bay. Workers milled about here and there – engineers mostly, maintaining the vehicles. A few pilots were pompously posturing about who had the superior equipment. Inara crept over to a fighter jet, knowing she looked out of place in her red and purple gown. She tip-toed to an antique propeller plane. Jantis loved his ships.

Serenity's Shuttle One gleamed across the bay, freshly polished. No time for sneaking. She could feel the strange drugs wreaking havoc on her system, threatening to topple her. Taking half a heartbeat to steady herself, Inara charged across the bay, tunnel-visioned on her shuttle.

She didn't even see Jantis run up and tackle her from the side.

Had she been hit by a man or by a plane? The weight was so extreme, her bones felt ready to shatter. Still, adrenaline surged through her body and she kicked him. Viciously, he pinned her down, yanking her arm behind her back until he nearly broke it off.

"Seems that Pax doesn't work the same on everyone," he muttered.

"Qu ni del!" Inara raged, not caring if her arm broke. She felt his knee in her back and he laid an arm across both her shoulders to hold her down.

"So this is how it must be..."

Inara couldn't see straight. The world was a confusion. She wasn't herself.

"I will bury you," he seethed, his voice dripping with malice.

Inara twisted until she felt her shoulder pop. The pain only fueled her fury and desire to escape.

“I will never choose you!” she shrieked.

\*~\*

Zoë was down. Jayne was down. Saskia had tackled Caddock and was whispering something conspiratorial. Mal aimed his pistol at Caddock’s head.

“No! Don’t!” Saskia shouted, shielding her former Captain with her body.

Mal hesitated. Caddock struggled.

“He can still be of use to you.”

Angrily, Mal walked up to the pair and knocked Caddock out cold. As soon as the man was out, Saskia jumped to her feet and grabbed the comm from Mal.

“Serenity! Wash! Get here as fast as you can! And bring that Doctor!”

Mal stood, dazed for a moment, then surveyed the situation.

“Zoë!”

Zoë groaned, trying to roll onto her side. Mal skidded to his knees, coaxing her down, placing pressure on the shoulder wound.

“Hardly a scratch, sir,” she grimaced.

Saskia circled like a trapped animal. “We need to get out of here!”

Already, the police sirens filled the air.

“Where’s Jayne?” Saskia asked frantically.

They needed to leave the scene! Zoë tried to get up, but fell heavily on Mal.

“Shepherd Book?”

Mal hardly listened. Zoë was his concern. As consciousness leaked out of her eyes, she whispered painfully, “Fighting for two, sir.”

\*~\*

Jayne’s world fuzzed in and out rhythmically and the dirt ground into his body, searing pain from head to toe. Was he crawling to safety or being dragged? He could hardly see, but a small part of him rejoiced in the hope that Caddock was dead. Shepherd Book floated across his vision. Pressure on the wound. Stars. Jayne bit his tongue so he wouldn’t cry out. It might not be safe.

Floating next to Book, he saw his cousin’s sweet, concerned face, a scar gracing her neck, concealed by a flowing, purple scarf. They were speaking, their words not making sense. His cousin pulled out his knife and cut his shirt.

“Does your crew suspect?” she whispered.

Jayne searched for context, but found only pain. Book answered her in a low tone.

“Not a thing.” What was Book talking about? He was asking her about Inara. His cousin answered.

Jayne grunted as his cousin cinched the tourniquet around his leg. He felt the sharp burn of alcohol on the wound. Her cool, soft hands touched his lips, muffling the cry of pain that wanted to escape. She wanted him quiet. He could feel his skin go cold as shock set in.

“You have a meeting in half an hour,” his cousin told Book. Jayne wondered if he had enough blood left to function. Every inch of his skin tingled with sensation, each point of pressure turning his stomach.

“Cousin,” Jayne gasped. “Jen—”

She pressed her finger to his lips again, shushing him. “No names here, cousin.”

Jayne swallowed hard against the bile rising in his throat.

“Are you here?”

“No. I’m just a dream.” She swam in and out of his vision, fuzzy around the edges, backlit by the noon-day sun. Her loose hair glowed like a halo. He felt an injection in his arm and a short burst of strength. Leave it to his cousin to travel with a stash of drugs.

“You came here to kill Jantis.” Jayne remembered his cousin’s vow to find and kill Jantis. If she was so close, why had she not yet done it?

His cousin smiled sweetly, helping Jayne to sit. “I know. I decided it would be better if he handed Blue Sun to me on a silver platter first. I’m close. Very close.”

“Don’t play with your food,” Jayne warned, fuzzily.

His cousin laughed softly. “Hush and let the blood flow to your brain.”

Jayne would have nodded if his head didn’t feel like an anvil.

“Crawl out, your ride is here.”

Slowly, Jayne inched his way out of the ally. When he looked back his cousin was gone. Book was gone. The world spun in a mixture of dream and reality. Pain shot through his body. His vision went white and then he collapsed.

\*~\*

Wash whizzed through the streets of Shali, pushing the hover mule as fast as it would go. Simon held on for dear life in the passenger seat, clutching his medical bag, but he dared not tell Wash to slow down. They needed to beat the sirens closing in on the scene. Wash’s face was tight with concentration. The hover mule handled differently on the open road than in the cargo bay. As he came around the last corner, the street was packed with onlookers.

“Zoë!” Wash cried, hardly waiting for the mule to stop before he jumped down.

“We got her! Get ready to drive!” Mal ordered as he and Saskia loaded Zoë onto the mule. Simon’s attention was immediately on her. Next they pulled Jayne up and loaded him on.

“Go now! We’ll meet you there.” Mal commanded.

“What about Caddock?” Saskia protested, her former Captain already on her shoulders.

“We’ll have to carry him. Mule won’t run with five.”

“But he’s been shot!”

“It’s too much weight!”

“Who are you to decided who lives and dies?!”

Mal looked at the unconscious man draped over Saskia’s shoulders, blood still streaming from his front. He knew it was the right thing to do.

“I can handle it, sir,” Zoë said weakly, her hand resting lightly on her pistol.

Against his better judgment, Mal helped pack Caddock onto the mule and sent them off. He and Saskia ducked into around a corner as the police arrived on the scene. This was exactly the kind of attention he did not want to draw to himself on this planet. He looked at Saskia, who held her chest where the armor had caught Caddock's bullet.

"You okay?"

"Not really."

"Let's get back to Serenity."

Saskia looked at him quizzically. "We aren't going after that preacher?"

Mal shook his head. "No. Not now."

\*~\*

Book circled the small office, distracting himself by remembering the names of all the model planes, half of which he had given to Amadi, or at least helped him build. He saw, on one of the finely dusted shelves, the Bible he had sent to Amadi the first year he had been away at Seminary. Book could not help but think ... if he had not become a Shepherd, this was the kingdom he would have inherited. He could have easily become Jantis. Instead, he'd left that fate to Amadi.

The slip of paper Elle had given him was disintegrating on his sweaty palm. His heart pounded loudly and he felt his Shepherd's clothes cling to him like a thousand tiny leeches. "Though an army besiege me, I will not fear," he whispered, uttering a constant prayer, requesting a hedge of protection around himself and Serenity's crew.

As he waited, Elle entered the office brusquely, clad in a functional business suit, wearing a beaded necklace. Though he looked, Book saw no scar on her neck, and wondered at the quick change. She greeted him by the door, with a firm hand-shake, introducing herself as Nia Stolte. When had she gotten here?

Amadi stormed into the office a few paces behind her, his lip bleeding, hardly noticing them. His tailored suit was disheveled and scuffed, one of the cuff links torn off.

"Mr. Jantis," Nia said, announcing their presence. Amadi's scowl deepened when he turned, sloughing off his jacket and smoothing his shirt.

"Nia, when did you get back?"

"I've been here since my husband's funeral. My stepson is handling the estate."

"Never trust anyone with your money. Especially family."

"Yes, sir."

"I need you to put out some fires for me: Osiris, Whitefall, Bellerophon."

"The latter two are already out, sir. The first -"

"Get on it."

"Sir, I was hoping to stay for this meeting."

"This is business between old friends, Nia. You're not needed here."

Grudgingly, she nodded and backed out of the office, closing the glass door behind her. Book marveled at the smoothness of their interaction and the trust Amadi instilled in her. Seeing how easily Nia lied to Amadi, he started to doubt his own interactions with her.

"You always did like to dress up in that costume," Amadi commented, dabbing his bloody lip with a handkerchief and circling warily behind his desk.

"It's not a costume anymore, Amadi. I am a Shepherd now."

"I don't see your flock."

"I'm looking for a woman," Book said, cutting to the chase.

Amadi laughed sharply. "How strange for a Shepherd."

"She was brought here a few weeks ago. A man named Prio sent her."

Amadi's face twisted into something unreadable, but his eyes twinkled with sinister delight. "So she's one of mine? Thou shalt not covet, Shepherd."

"She belongs to no one."

"On the contrary, she is indentured to me."

"Then I will pay the debt against her."

Amadi snorted. "Didn't you take a vow of poverty?"

"I am not without means."

"The arrangement is not fiscal. It is her life that I possess."

"Let her go."

"Or what?" he taunted. "You'll steal her? That's two commands, Shepherd."

Amadi stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor. Book tensed, ready to defend himself against physical attack.

"You stole those subjects from Osiris too, didn't you?" Amadi continued.

"They are children, not animals," Book seethed.

"Who hired you? Who is undercutting me?" As he stepped closer, Book backed up, being careful not to back into a wall. Amadi continued, his voice dripping with evil. "I know where you've hidden them."

Book clenched his jaw, trying to keep the alarm off his face. "Please, let them go."

"Her or the children? How many free passes do you need?!" Amadi mocked, stopping his predatory advance. "Invoke the name of your God and I will hand over my entire empire!"

Book found this posture even more disturbing than the possibility of attack. He searched Amadi's flaming dark eyes for any sign of his old friend. Amadi stepped behind his desk, pulled a gun from the top drawer, and pointed it at Book.

"You did not come here for a woman. You've come to collect your cut."

Book's mind raced. "I forfeited that cut the day I left. I only want Inara."

"You will not find your whore. She is buried."

"You killed her?" Book stammered, his breath catching fearfully.

Amadi cocked the gun, his face twisting scornfully. "Thou shalt not kill, Shepherd."

Book nodded slowly, backing out of the office. "Thou shalt not."

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 9

Inara awoke in a cell very similar to the one Prio had had her in and it stirred torturous memories of the man she had killed back on Osiris. As soon as she realized she was laying on a mite-covered foam mattress, Inara shot out of the bed shaking with revulsion. She could feel the grime and decay all over her skin and hair, like crawling ants. As she tried to slough off the filth, her dislocated shoulder screamed painful warnings to her brain, threatening her consciousness.

“Is this all you have, Jantis!” she screamed. “You can’t bury me forever!”

Ignoring the protests in her shoulder, she ripped off her cloak and threw it against the door. The momentum of the move, combined with pain and dizziness from her injury sent her reeling into the back wall and she slumped on the floor. Her cloak was unsatisfyingly soft for such violence and fell short of the opposite wall, clunking and rattling on the floor. Her first aid kit!

Inara ripped through the fabric, trying to find the pocket where the little box was hidden. The box had burst open, its contents filling the folds of the robe. Microbicides, instant cold packs, antibiotics... most of the painkillers, the gauze, and the tape had been used up. After swallowing the last pain pill, she pulled out one of the instant cold packs, popped the seal, and held it to her injured shoulder.

Time passed. Inara had no idea how much time, but by the time she came to herself again, the pack on her shoulder was lukewarm. What had come over her? The anger, the fire, it wasn’t her. She could only remember bits and pieces of the afternoon, after Jantis had left her with the doctor. The burn on her fingers from the peroxide, the jolt in her wrist from when she knocked out those guards. The weight of Jantis crushing her rib cage. The loud, echoing pop in her shoulder.

And now she was here. Buried. No windows, no posh bed, no food.

Her stomach growled at the thought. Would they still bring her food? Or did they just bring her here to die.

\*~\*

Simon hadn’t had this many critical patients at one time before. Caddock had taken a low-impact shot to the chest, but the wound was shallow and he’d only need a few stitches. Jayne’s tourniquet seemed to have saved a fair bit of his blood from leaking out, and Simon did his best to stabilize the merc as they were driving back, knowing Jayne was too heavy for them to move. Although Zoë was the only one conscious of the three, Simon worried for her most because she was also the only one pregnant. As Wash pulled into Serenity’s bay, Kaylee ran to meet them, stretcher ready.

“Zoë! Jayne!” Kaylee called, jumping onto the mule to help load Zoë onto the stretcher. She stopped dead when she saw Caddock crumpled on the floor by the back seat. Rage welled within her at the sight of the man who had brought her into so much suffering.

“Kaylee,” Zoë called weakly, fumbling her pistol unable to grasp it. Wash helped her pass the weapon to Kaylee who held it awkwardly. “If he wakes up, make sure he doesn’t go anywhere.”

Kaylee nodded as the others rushed to the Infirmary. She sat next to Jayne’s slumped form, wishing him awake. River gazed down from the catwalk, keeping watch. The smell of Caddock overwhelmed her senses and she wondered if Simon might clean him off when he patched him up.

Jayne groaned painfully, startling Kaylee and making her drop the gun. Jayne’s hand was on the weapon before his eyes even opened, as if his fingers were magnetically drawn to it. He looked uncertainly to Kaylee, his face pale.

“Why are we sittin’ here?”

Kaylee shrugged. “Zoë’s first in line.”

Jayne's hand rested limply on the pistol as he surveyed Serenity, his eyes landing on Caddock. He raised the weapon and sighted.

"Is that hun dan dead?"

"We're not supposed to kill him, Jayne. Just ... keep him from goin' anywhere."

Caddock's eyes shot open and locked on Jayne and the pistol.

"So it's down to you, little girl," Caddock taunted Kaylee. Jayne shifted testily in response to the threat. He released the safety on the weapon, but Kaylee placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

Caddock laughed. "You honestly believe you can tame this beast?"

Jayne growled angrily. "Give me a reason to shoot you."

\*~\*

Mal was worried by how often he had to stop and steady Saskia on the way back to the ship. She was like Zoe, not wanting help, not acknowledging her weakness, able to push herself to the brink of death just to get the job done. Mal had seen people hit with cotton swabs react more than Saskia had to the bullet she'd taken. Now, the fierce woman pressed on quickly toward Serenity, such that even he was winded trying to keep up.

Mal felt his allies spread thin and worried what state he might find his ship in on his return. Both Jayne and Zoë were down, Simon taking care of them. A herd of wild horses wouldn't draw Wash from Zoë's side. Book had disappeared into the city. Inara was missing. Kaylee couldn't hold her own in a gun fight. He could not trust Saskia to guard Caddock, he could not leave Caddock alone on his boat. What had she been telling Caddock before? Were they conspiring? Mal shifted uncomfortably at the thought that Saskia was heavily armed ... with weapons from his own armory!

Saskia paused again at the entrance to the spaceport, placing one hand against the wall for support. Mal could see his ship just up the ramp, back door gaping open, as beautiful as the first day he saw her. He didn't wait for Saskia to catch her breath. He trotted into his ship, right into an unpleasant situation.

Jayne and Caddock were awake, slouched in the hover mule, guns pointed at each other. The only thing that eased his mind was Kaylee's apathetic, relaxed posture. Still, taking nothing for granted, Mal drew his gun.

"Put the gun down, Caddock," Mal ordered. Caddock complied grudgingly without even considering Mal. His eyes were firmly fixed on Jayne.

"Saskia," Caddock rumbled evenly. "Take this liu mang de fei fei's gun away."

Saskia flinched at the order, but recovered quickly.

"Of course, sir," she answered smoothly, gliding to the hover mule. Mal tensed. Kaylee sat straighter, her eyes dancing from Saskia to Mal, wishing she'd kept hold of the gun herself.

"Kaylee, why don't you run and fetch that stretcher so we can start moving to the Infirmary," Mal suggested.

Kaylee didn't need to be told twice. With hardly a second glance, she hopped off the mule and backed out of the cargo bay. Mal was glad to have her safe, but worried that Jayne didn't seem to be following much of the conversation; he seemed to expend most energy on keeping his gun steady. As Mal watched Saskia, he realized he needn't have worried. Saskia ran her hand down Jayne's arm, brushed her cheek against Jayne's, then

tossed the gun over to Mal. Surprised and troubled, Mal recognized that Saskia was merely asserting herself, not declaring her loyalty.

“You traitor,” Caddock barked.

“You shot me.”

“You betrayed me first.”

“You left me for dead on Three Hills.”

“You –”

“Bi zui!” Mal interrupted. “Much as I'd like to resolve who stabbed who in the back first –”

“Stay out of this,” Caddock hissed, then brought a hand to his scruffy beard and coughed loudly.

“Uhh... my ship,” Mal hollered. He holstered the gun Saskia had tossed him, then picked Caddock's discarded weapon off the floor. “Saskia, stay here with Jayne. Caddock, quit playing up that cat scratch. On your feet.”

Mal grabbed a tape roll and some rope as he led Caddock out. When he looked back, Saskia had settled in next to Jayne, holding him steady as blood drained from his wound. Mal did not expect her loyalty. He just wanted to know, when push came to shove, if she was still loyal to Caddock.

\*~\*

Wash grunted as they hefted Jayne on the stretcher and carried him to the Infirmary. It took all of them to carry the burly gunman through the hallway and once in the Infirmary, no one wanted to leave. Wash resented the flood of people as Simon's attention was no longer focused on Zoë. She was worse off than Simon initially thought, having lost consciousness as soon as she had handed off her gun. The wound was not through-and-through and the bullet was nowhere to be found. Wash didn't understand everything that Simon was saying, except that the bullet had entered Zoë's bloodstream and could be on its way to wreak havoc anywhere in her body.

“Kaylee, did you finish cleaning up after that rodent?” Mal asked.

Kaylee shook her head and left unhappily, anticipating the order to follow. Wash steeled himself, waiting for Mal to order him out as well, but the order didn't come.

“You should leave as well,” Simon began, but Mal cut him off.

“I'll tend to Jayne, you fix Zoë,” Mal said, washing his hands.

Simon looked uncertain.

“I may not be in the top 3%, but I was taking bullets out of my crew long before you signed on.”

Simon hesitated, his jaw moving as if he wanted to speak.

“Don't worry, Doc,” Mal assured. “You'll be right here.”

Unable to conjure words on that subject, Simon turned to Saskia and diagnosed her quickly. “You need a bed too.”

“I'm fine,” she protested.

“Go, lay on the couch out there. I'll be there shortly. If you start feeling any sharp pain, just holler.”

“Start?” Saskia asked. They all looked after her as she went to the couch in the common area and lay down. Simon looked a bit lost for a moment, gave Jayne a cursory

look, instructed Mal briefly, then returned to Zoë. She was still unconscious, her hand growing colder. Wash could feel the slowness of her heartbeat and see the shallowness of her breathing. Her lips were blue like a corpse.

Mal was hollering something fierce and Simon ran back to Jayne. There was blood everywhere! Jayne was seizing. Zoë went critical. The baby was in distress. Jayne may lose his leg. Wash couldn't hear through the alarms. Was there time anymore? Any sensation aside from panic?

"I can't save them all!" Simon shouted angrily at Mal. "Assist me or get out."

The screaming and the alarms mellowed. Back to work. Zoë was stable. Jayne. The leg. Surgery.

"Wash, I need your blood."

A needle.

"Zoë, are you okay?"

Irrigation, sutures, bandages, more drugs.

"Little Malcolm, keep fighting."

The IV dripped.

"Wash?"

"Wash?"

"Wash?"

\*~\*

How many times had Simon repeated his name? Wash didn't know. His own blood poured out of his arm into Jayne's body and he cursed himself for being O-negative. How many pints had he lost?

"Wash," Simon was saying. "I'm not sure I can save both Zoë and the baby."

"What? What do you mean? She's okay isn't she? Zoë's okay?"

"They're okay for now," Simon began, his eyes deep and mournful, teetering on the brink of bad news. "I'm worried... if we don't terminate the pregnancy ... she only has a three percent chance to live."

"Terminate?" Wash repeated, not believing his ears. "You want to take my son."

"It would greatly increase her chance of survival."

Wash's eyes glazed, frosting Zoë in an eternal snapshot. He could see his son's heart beating on the monitor, right next to hers. "Hers, not his."

Simon nodded.

"You're asking me..." Wash's heart bled.

"If she goes ... if her heart stops again, I'm not sure I can bring them both back. If you ask me to, I will try. But then, we may lose them both."

Wash couldn't handle the stress. The world swirled about. He should not be giving blood. When Simon came into focus again, he gave the only instruction he could think of.

"Save her. Save Zoë."

\*~\*

Eight hours later, Simon finished the final suture, closing Zoë's body one life short. He hated frontier medicine. In the core, he would have had at least five treatment options to save both Zoë and the baby. Not to mention a team of doctors, so he wouldn't have been distracted by Jayne. As Mal washed his hands, Wash rested his head against the wall, so exhausted from stress that Simon considered giving him a sedative. Jayne was recovering quickly, having already requested two meals in the last hour. Simon's next concern was Saskia, who had been asleep on the couch since the chaos began. River entered the Infirmary slowly, a dark blue dress hanging loosely on her wiry frame. As she touched the fresh stitches on Zoë's body, her brow furrowed intensely.

"He's gone," she said.

"Mei mei, you shouldn't ..." Simon began, pulling River's hand away before she could spread any germs.

"I can't heal her. Only Wei," she whimpered. She looked at Simon with those sad, soulful eyes. "He tried to show me, but he couldn't. I have to help."

"No, you can't help her. Not now."

"I can!" River insisted. "Wei could."

"You don't have to."

"But I –"

"River, you aren't him!"

River stopped talking, her eyes locking on Simon's as though she saw him for the first time. "I'm not him."

"No."

"Not like him. He can do what I can't."

"And I'm sure you can do things he can't."

"He can't fly."

Simon smiled. "No one can fly."

River looked cryptically at Zoë. "I can."

\*~\*

Wash left the Infirmary in a daze, unsure of where to go – just needing to get out. His insides trembled and churned at the loss of his son. Or was it the smell oozing out of the passenger quarters. Caddock sat haughtily in a room, the door tipped open. His hair was thick and knotted like a halo, so matted it could not be coaxed over the bald spot fighting its way to the surface. His beard was so thick, Wash doubted the presence of a chin. Dirt clung under his long, pinky nails, which were not subject to the nail-biting that kept the other fingernails in check. Every time Caddock coughed, he turned his head into his shoulder, raising his elbow as high as his restraints would allow.

"It was your boy, wasn't it?" Caddock hissed as Wash walked by.

Wash froze at the mention of his son.

"I heard the yellin'. Terrible thing to happen."

Caddock waited, but Wash said nothing.

"I lost a son once. My fault. My wife never forgave me."

Wash's heart pounded with a fresh burden of fear and guilt.

"Then she left me."

His mind suddenly screaming, Wash looked desperately to Caddock hoping for preventative wisdom. Was Caddock trying to warn him? Caddock snarled evilly, making Wash go cold inside and out.

“Was it your fault?” he asked.

“Wash!” Mal called from behind, making him jump.

Wash could feel his face hot with emotion. He needed to escape. Mal easily saw the fresh burdens laid on his shoulders and pulled Wash away from the door.

“Wash, did Caddock say something to you?”

“No, he... yeah, he...”

“Do not listen to him,” Mal warned. “Not a word.”

“I killed my son.”

“No, Wash. Listen to me. Your son gave his life to save his mother. To save Zoë.”

Wash nodded, his eyes not meeting Mal.

“Say it, Wash. Say it.”

Wash shuddered at the well of emotion. “To save Zoë.”

\*~\*

Book returned late, and figured he'd better bring a fine meal as a peace offering for disappearing in the middle of a gunfight. The spaceport glowed with light and activity in spite of the late hour. The corporate world that headed Blue Sun could never sleep. The back door of Serenity was closed to the stir of workers, and as Book approached he was intercepted by a young port control worker.

“Excuse me, sir, but is that ship scheduled to leave tonight?”

“We have not scheduled a departure yet,” Book answered smoothly. “Our business here is not yet finished.”

“Sir, long term parking is across the way.”

“Our stay is unexpected,” Book answered, not wanting to move. He knew that the long term landings were held in the Aghurmi port, over 100 miles away. “Mr. Jantis invited us to stay for the air show on Friday next. He asked us to stay close.”

The worker's eyes widened at the mention of Jantis and after mumbling a few apologies, he ran back toward the port offices. Book took a deep breath, hoping he hadn't brought too much attention on Serenity. But Inara had to be in Shali, and he had no intention of leaving her.

Mal opened Serenity's back door before Book even had a chance to knock. The fresh roast Book had brought found few takers among the crew and little more than the look on Mal's face was required as explanation. The Captain sat at the dining room table while Book salted and seared the meat, filling in Mal on any bit of information that was helpful and not deadly.

“I thought I could call in a favor,” Book explained. “But he's changed. He's paranoid about being overthrown ... our involvement with Osiris marks us as conspirators.”

“And Inara?”

“He said she was buried. But I don't think she's dead.”

“If she's not dead, she's hidden.”

“Hidden where?”

“Depends,” Mal said gravely. “Is she garbage to him or is she a treasure?”

The smell of cooking food drew Jayne from his sickbed and the mercenary hobbled in, using a broken broom stick as a cane. Saskia was not far behind, and each took a generous helping of food, retelling the story of the afternoon. Book was grateful that Jayne did not seem to remember seeing Elle. Simon wandered in a few paces later, staying just long enough to hand out doses of painkillers to Jayne and Saskia, having given up on ordering them to bed rest.

“How is it I always get shot in the gorram leg!” Jayne grouched, swallowing the pain meds.

Saskia laughed, “It’s because you’re a damn giant!”

Kaylee sulked through, picked at a plate of food for half an hour, then just sat there and stared into the empty air. River sat at the stairs between the dining hall and the bridge, looking like she had taken an emotional beating. Book sliced some bread and made a sandwich for her which she ate without noticing.

The guilt overwhelmed him. Book should have stayed with the crew that afternoon. He should have done something. As the dining room cleared out for the evening and Book cleaned the dishes, Kaylee remained in her chair, staring at her half-eaten plate of food.

Book placed a hand on her shoulder, pulling her back into the present.

“I wish I could have helped,” he said slowly.

She looked up at him, large hazel eyes brimming. “I wish I could have helped too.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 10

The next morning found Kaylee at the dining room table, lacing wires through the cage watching Bristles nibble at them. The critter seemed to have more interest in gnawing cables than he did any of the food Kaylee offered. The ship was stirring, but there was no breakfast prepared. Book wandered in, pulled out a few mugs, and started boiling water for tea. Jayne hobbled in as well, sat at the table, and propped his leg up on one of the chairs. He looked hungrily at Bristles, but made no request for food. As the animal curiously pawed at a bundle of cables in the corner, Mal entered, heading straight for the teapot. Instead of his usual mug, Mal drank out of a dainty, floral cup – the one Inara always liked to use.

“Kaylee, get that rat off my table before he pees on everything,” Mal snapped as soon as he’d taken his first gulp. As the others filled their cups as well, their minds seemed to awaken.

“Are you feeding him wires?” Book asked incredulously.

“He likes to chew on them. He only goes for the thick ones... more so if they got power in ‘em.”

“You think he was trained as a mole?”

“I thought it was a hedgehog,” Jayne grunted.

“I mean trained to sabotage,” Book clarified.

“They can do that?”

Kaylee shook her head, still tired. “Don’t know that he’s trained, but he certainly mucked up our ship.”

“Trained or no, get him off the table,” Mal ordered again, pouring himself a second cup.

\*~\*

Mal needed a show of strength if he was going to get anything out of Caddock. The pirate had no fear of brute strength of physical harm, so Mal decided to bring Book along. The Shepherd could outwit Caddock and hopefully Caddock would respect that enough to help them find Inara.

Book came armed with a tray of food and a quiet demeanor. Caddock lay face down on the bed, his arms and legs securely tied behind his back, lice crawling through his thick mangle. The stench in the room was worse than some corpses Mal had been unfortunate enough to encounter, but the steady wheezing made Caddock’s persisting life obvious.

“Go away, Captain, you are disturbing my zen,” Caddock grouched, not bothering to look at his visitors.

“If you want this food, you better be a whole lot more accommodating,” Mal warned, adjusting the restraints on Caddock’s hands so he’d be able to handle his food.

Caddock sat up and surveyed Mal and Book. “Do I need a preacher today, Captain?”

“You shot at us. What’s in your head?”

“I don’t like you.”

“How do you intend to kill Jantis?” Book interrupted, steepling his fingers.

“I know a place he’ll be. Wild horses couldn’t drag him away.”

“You mean the air show?” Mal interrupted.

“That show covers the entire grounds of his estate. You can’t possibly pinpoint a single location,” Book countered.

“But that shouldn’t matter to you, should it?” Caddock said. “You’re here for the woman. And I know where he buries them.”

Book and Mal both flinched at the word ‘bury.’ Mal steeled himself while Caddock haughtily devoured his plate of food, little crumbs of protein caught by his beard.

“Where is she?”

“Help me kill Jantis, and I will give you a map.”

“And have Jantis’ army chase us out of town?” Mal finished wryly. “No, we get Inara first.”

Caddock laughed into his drink. “No sense ruining a good assassination attempt trying to rescue a woman who is already corpsified.”

Mal shoved the cup aside and grabbed Caddock’s collar. “You talk like that again, you’ll be corpsified and I’ll pry that map from your cold, dead fingers. Dong ma?”

“Captain,” Book warned, though he was smart enough not to get involved.

Caddock found his feet and laughed, unaffectedly. “Ego, Captain. Ego will get you killed.”

“You’re on my ship,” Mal seethed. “Ego gets you killed.”

\*~\*

Zoë awoke feeling hollow and numb. She should not be this heavily medicated. It was not good for the baby. Instinctively, she touched her hand to her stomach, but felt nothing. Was it her hand that was numb or her body? Had she failed to move her arm? She could just barely see past the bandage on her left shoulder to her fingers and though she could not feel them, she saw them wiggle at her command. At least she could still fire a gun with that hand.

Simon came in, a relieved smile falling over his features when he saw her awake. He said a soft greeting, checked her pupil response, then compared the strength of her pulse in her right and left arm. Zoë's gaze fell sideways to the monitor, watching the rhythm of her own pulse. There was only the one.

"He's gone, isn't he?" she murmured with sinking realization.

"Yes," Simon answered. "I'm sorry."

"Where's Wash?"

"He's ... probably resting. I can call him."

"No," Zoë answered.

Zoë watched her heart rate, letting the numbness in her body reach her mind. A part of her wished she had died with her child. But then, a part of her had. And it was her own fault too! She clenched her fists angrily, cursing her stupidity. The pregnancy – her armor was no longer fitting properly – and there she went charging into battle as if everything were in place. How could she be so foolish? How could her son die from her shoulder wound? She wasn't strong enough to save him! Zoë could understand why Wash wasn't here. How could he forgive her for this?

"Zoë," Mal's voice interrupted her anger. Quickly, she suppressed it, focusing on the job they'd come here to do. She lamented that she could be of little help in her current condition.

"Sir. What's the job?"

"Wash will be fancy flying us straight into Jantis' hanger in about a week. We find Inara, find the shuttle, and meet Serenity in the air before the show is over."

"Plan sounds simple enough."

"Best to plan it simple. Things get complicated enough of their own accord."

"Caddock? Saskia?"

"That's why I'm keeping it simple. I'll handle the plan. You get better, so you can come rescue me when everything goes south."

"Yes, sir."

Mal stood to leave. "I'll send Wash down here. He'll be glad to know you're awake."

\*~\*

Inara reclined in wooden chair of Serenity's dining room, sipping tea from her favorite floral cup. It always delighted her how the chairs were mismatched, so that everyone could manage to find one that suited their body perfectly. Elle sat across the table from her, adding lumps to her tea and stirring thoughtfully.

“You look familiar to me,” Inara mused politely, searching her memory.

“It’s the scar throwing you off, isn’t it,” Elle joked, shifting the scarf on her neck to cover the wound. Inara hadn’t even noticed the scar. She recognized the gentle smile.

“Should I call you Elle?”

“I’ve gone by many names of late. No one has called me Elle for years.”

“I just can’t imagine where I would have met you.”

“I’ve had my place in high society. Still do on occasion. After awhile, it all seems very plastic, don’t you agree.”

Inara furrowed her brow. “It’s ordered. And there are certain expectations.”

“Yes, well, I suppose that’s why you like it here,” Elle smiled, waving her hand to encompass the ship. “Not the chaos, I mean. But at least on Serenity, the people are real.”

Inara nodded uncertainly into her tea, perplexed by Elle’s presence on Serenity. Elle was dead. For that matter, she was perplexed by her own presence. When she looked across the table again, Mal was there.

“Seems your prince wasn’t what he seemed.”

“Gavin?” Inara asked incredulously, squinting her eyes as though trying to see into a past life. “He was trying to protect me.”

“I would have protected you. You should have stayed on the ship.”

“You died! Port Authorities towed the ship!”

“You think I’d let a little thing like death stop me?”

“It’s probably your arrogance that got you killed,” Inara huffed crossly, standing up so quickly that she knocked over her chair.

“You were angry at me when you left.”

“I’m still angry at you.” Inara crossed her arms and tucked her chin to hide her tears. He reached out for her, but there was a barrier between them. She couldn’t feel anything but the burn of her anger.

“You kept stalling,” she cried. “One more job, then we’ll drop you wherever you want. You always wanted to keep me around for one more job!”

“You had no idea where you wanted to go!”

“You’ve fixed it so I can’t go anywhere now!”

“Inara!”

“No! You’re just as fake as the rest of them! Only twice as complicated! Completely unordered! You got yourself killed and now I’m dying too! I’m dying... too...”

Inara awoke in the cold dark cell, the fluorescent light down to half power. Her face was hot, but she was too dehydrated to cry. She forced her eyes to stay open and her mind to think on things not related to the crew of Serenity. How was it that she managed to fight Mal even in her dreams? Her stomach growled, but she dared not move for fear of falling over. She had not seen food or daylight since she’d woken up in this prison. The only marker of the passage of time was the slowly fading light from the fluorescent bulb. That and the lingering beat of her heart, which grew weaker each day.

She wished her heart would stop. She wished she had water so she could swallow the bitter agony on her parched tongue. With the last of her energy, she rolled onto her stomach and examined her assets. There had to be some way to quicken her death.

\*~\*

In the days since their arrival on Siwa, the ship had fallen into dreadful melancholy. Kaylee stood next to Wash, staring out of the cargo bay into the space port, the slightly fuller spectrum of sunlight being the only factor delimiting time in the city that never slept. Wash chewed his nails nervously, the way he always did between planning and executing tough flying. This was the point that Zoë was supposed to take his hand and hold it till he was calm. He never bit his nails around Zoë.

“Why are they coming here?” Kaylee complained as they waited for the pilots that would be flying with Wash Friday next.

“Check out the ship,” Wash answered, turning his attention to the hedge hog gnawing at the side of its cage. “See how she flies. See how I fly with her.”

Kaylee crossed her arms, resenting anyone who dared doubt Serenity. “Maybe we can release Bristles on their ships and see how fast they recover.”

Wash harrumphed. “I am not flying close formation with a sabotaged Firefly.”

“I never heard of anyone formation flying a Firefly.”

“Firefly isn’t meant for it – not in atmo. It’s a stupid thing to do. But we’re the diversion. We gotta keep their eyes off the ground and blow enough smoke so we’re gone before they even realize the show is over.”

Wash circled the cargo bay impatiently, climbed onto the hover mule, revved the engine, and climbed off again. Kaylee watched him, worried.

“Simon told me that Zoë’s doing well. He released her from the Infirmary,” Kaylee ventured.

Wash ignored her. He jumped up to the rungs Jayne had set for chin-ups, attempted one, gave up, and dropped to the floor.

“Have you talked to her?” Kaylee asked as Wash circled the cargo bay again.

Finally, Wash paused. “Call me when they get here,” he whispered, and dashed upstairs toward the bridge.

\*~\*

Mal insisted that Wash and Kaylee meet with Jantis’ pilots in the galley. He’d prefer they not meet on Serenity at all, but since he couldn’t have his pilot and mechanic gallivanting about town unarmed, it was the galley. He’d made it clear to Wash that the bridge and engine room were off limits to their two guests. Kaylee was listening, but Wash was distracted, and Mal worried that his pilot would not be up for an air show in two days time. He also worried that they would not be up for a rescue. Zoë was not fit for walking, Jayne still hobbled about on that gimped leg, Saskia had taken a turn for the worse such that Simon was willing to try a life-threatening surgery. Caddock was being tight-lipped about this map he had and Mal was itching for any intelligence he could acquire. But it looked like he’d be going in blind. Book would be of some help, but when it came to Jantis, Mal could sense the conflict of interest.

He headed to the catwalk overlooking the cargo bay hoping for a quiet moment and a little sunlight, but was met with the loud clatter of falling guns from the armory. Had he replaced that lock after Saskia had broken it? Had Caddock gotten free?

Mal dashed across the ship and found Zoë, standing as much inside the locker as her frame allowed, pale as porcelain, yanking guns out irately and lining them up on the

floor. Her eyes flamed furiously and she muttered to herself in a language Mal didn't even know she knew. He slowed his approach, not wanting to cross her while she was angry and armed.

"Zoë, why are you rearranging the weapons locker?"

"Doc told me to get some bed rest."

Mal nodded slowly. "I can see how those two might sound the same."

"This gorrám locker has always been poorly arranged. Things we use most are in the back."

"That's because the things we use most are illegal."

Mal tried to remain calm and get closer, but Zoë pulled out a very threatening slug launcher with a tommy-gun style magazine and he stopped dead. That gun could blast a hole the size of a hover mule right through the side of the ship.

"I forgot we even had this thing." Zoë mused. "Do we even have ammo for this?"

"I think it's better we don't," Mal answered.

Zoë set the gun down and reached in for a few more rifles. When she emerged, Mal grabbed her hand and stopped her, then found his most threatening voice.

"Doc told you to get some rest, Zo. I suggest you do it."

"We got a job to do, sir," she said evenly. The only thing keeping her upright was that fire in her eyes. That immeasurable, all-consuming fire.

"Not you. You are off this job. Now either return to your sickbed or I will tie you to it."

Zoë glared daggers at him, but he recognized and appreciated her obedience. He wished again that she would be well enough to go by Friday, but if that were to happen, he'd have to get her to rest now. She handed over the last bunch of rifles, the fire in her eyes still raging.

"Yes, sir," she muttered with icy slowness, then stormed away. Mal's thoughts turned to their *gou shi* of a plan. He couldn't even be sure Inara was on this planet.

River crept up the stairs, her bare feet making no sound. She leaned against the railing of the catwalk, her arms spread out like she was soaring. Mal noticed her just as her balance was tipping. He rushed over and grabbed her around the waist.

"Whoa, little one, what are you doing?"

River looked back at him, confused. "Can I fly?"

"Ho, ho!" Mal laughed. "Not since Kaylee fixed the gravity. How about you just stay on two feet for now."

"Two feet," River nodded, her brown eyes looking deeply into Mal's soul. "She's not here."

"Who? Inara?"

"Zoë."

Mal looked after his first mate. "No I don't suppose she is."

\*~\*

Zoe stormed through the dining room to the foredeck, kicked open the door to their bunk and climbed down. Wash wanted desperately to follow her, but ducked his head quickly studying the flight plan he'd been given. A few chirps escaped Kaylee, but once Zoë disappeared, she went back to uncertainly preparing a plate of food for their

guests. The two men, Jared and Walker, were his wingmen in the coming show, but so far as he could tell, neither had much experience with a Firefly.

“Whew! That is a fine looking woman,” Walker hooted, staring after Zoë.

“She's got a fire in her,” Jared agreed, walking over to the galley door to follow Zoë. “Is that her bunk?”

“No,” Wash reproved irately. “That's our bunk, and I'd appreciate it if you not look at my wife like that.”

Kaylee smiled as she set the plate of food on the table, pleased to hear Wash speak so protectively of Zoë – or speak of her at all.

“Wan nao!” Walked guffawed, slapping Jared on the shoulder.

“That's your wife?”

Wash ignored the men sternly, trying to see the flight plan through the visions of Zoë floating in his mind.

“It's true,” Kaylee verified, when Jared looked to her for confirmation.

“She got a sister?”

“These maneuvers look pretty basic,” Wash interrupted, desperate to change the subject. “The formations you have are pretty conservative.”

“Conservative?” Walker repeated.

“Is this a dance recital or an air show?” Wash challenged.

“You want to fly closer? In a Firefly?”

It occurred to Wash that these idiots would be terrible wingmen and that whatever vessels they were flying would have none of his special modifications for maneuverability. Serenity would out-fly them in a heartbeat. Still, he wasn't about to waste a handful of nail-biting on a pansy run.

“You normally fly a different ship?” he asked, hoping he didn't sound too disdainful.

“In atmo, I usually don't fly a spaceship,” Jared answered, taking a mouthful of Kaylee's cookies.

“This is hardly earth norm,” Wash balked, grabbing a pencil and going to town on the formations. “With the air as thin as it is, we could push some real tight moves out of this. Lock into the triangle here, peel-off, roll, buzz by the main building, give the people on the top floor a real rumble.”

“Are you trying to break your ship?” Jared interrupted.

“Mr. Jantis won't like if you change his plans,” Walker added.

“But he asked for a Firefly. We may as well show off maneuvers that only a Firefly can do.”

\*~\*

That evening, Simon climbed down the ladder into the darkness, hoping to find Zoë resting in her bed. What he found was a mess. The small bunk she shared with her husband was tossed and torn, the contents of the tables swept violently to the floor, the lamp broken, the mattress tilted precariously on the bed frame.

The one corner of the room untouched by violence held a small crib that Kaylee had fashioned from an old engine casing. A blue blanket rested over the side of the crib, a mural of miniature spaceships dangled overhead. The area they had set aside for their

baby was a surreal calm in the midst of the storm. Zoë's bloody handprint was smeared on the bureau next to a broken mirror.

Zoë was gone.

As Simon climbed out of the bunk, he noticed the dried blood on the rungs. He'd alert the crew and return to the Infirmary. Hopefully, Zoë would find him there.

\*~\*

The next morning, Kaylee found Wash buried under the control console on the bridge. He'd no doubt been there since the two pilots left the night before. He hadn't even returned to his bunk to change his clothes. Nor had he showered. Kaylee couldn't imagine what was in his head, but from the look of the flight plan, her Serenity was in for a taxing ride, a hard burn out of the system, and a mid-black refuel so they could keep running to whatever their next destination happened to be. She'd spent most of the previous afternoon trying to secure enough fuel for their plan without looking conspicuous. Today, she would be micromanaging as some service team from the air show washed the blood and clay from Serenity's hull. Her blood, from when that hun dan Caddock had kidnapped her.

"Kaylee!" Wash called happily upon seeing her. "Can you help me with this?"

Kaylee laid down next to him and surveyed his wiring job. Fool loved taking power from the grav system.

"You can't cross these wires here."

"We'll be fine."

"Until we break atmo. Wash, we still need to escape the planet when this is over."

"I'll conserve fuel."

"I'm not worried about ..." Kaylee hesitated. She actually was worried about fuel, but she worried about Wash even more. "Are you trying to kill us?"

"Those bien tian sheng de sha gua don't deserve a Firefly."

"Wash."

"That show they came up with was a first year training practical. No one would watch that! We need to do the unexpected. Keep the eyes on the ships and off the ground."

"Wash."

"This is second year stuff. I can do it in my sleep!"

"Wash!"

"It'll be fun."

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 11

When Friday came, Mal, Jayne, and Caddock wove through the crowds collected on the main grounds, heading towards the main building. The convex arc of the windows captured and reflected the masses of people under the perfect blue sky. The cold, thin air took his breath, but affected Jayne and Caddock more severely – Jayne still limping from his injured leg, Caddock wheezing incessantly. It would be difficult to creep quietly with

those two. Out in the midst of the air show it didn't seem to matter -- though Mal was realizing that this event was more than a simple air show.

Cars had been tailgating since sunrise, horns blasting, accompanied by cheers of jubilee. The air was thick with the smoke from firecrackers, and a few more illegal pops whistled through the sky, waiting for the show to begin. Barely audible in the mix were the sirens of medics rushing to those already injured by the fervent festivities. The cacophony had persisted for hours already, and the grounds were littered with drunks painted in the town colors.

An announcer in a tinny voice blasted out of speakers hidden everywhere, requesting a cessation of the firecrackers so the first planes could safely take off, threatening bodily harm and jail time to those who disobeyed.

The doors to the main building were closed, with signs indicating that they did not have a public lavatory inside, though Mal noticed a few employees entering and exiting, taking advantage of their keys. As one man exited and rejoined the masses, Mal palmed his key and then he, Jayne, and Caddock entered the main building.

The doors ominously sealed out the noise from the celebration. For a moment, Mal thought he'd gone deaf, but soon enough the sound of Caddock's wheezing filled the space. There was no receptionist, no security visible. Still, Mal motioned the others to take cover quickly behind the welcome desk. The room was built like a vase, the walls curving inward. The rotunda of the main lobby was an open cylinder all the way to a skylight seventeen stories up. The hallway was a mixture of ramps and stairs spiraling upwards, and all rooms faced the outside. Anyone, from any floor, could look over the side of the spiraling staircase and line up a good shot for any battle in the lobby. This was not the place for a final stand. There were two hallways out of the rotunda leading to wings on either side.

"Which way?" Mal asked Caddock as they crouched behind the desk.

Caddock nodded his head toward the ramp, going up.

\*~\*

The world spun around Inara as she propped herself up on her elbows. She needed water. Her skin felt dry and shriveled, ready to fall off of her body. Her hands trembled as she opened the first aid kit and rooted through the contents. That last instant ice-pack called to her. The liquid bit sloshed around, but she knew it wasn't water. Still, it may moisten her tongue long enough to let those bits of poison crystals slide down her throat. She bit at her overgrown fingernail, trying to get a raw edge so she could cut through the plastic without spilling the precious liquid. Just to be sure, she emptied the contents of the kit onto the bed and placed it under the pack like a bowl.

The first drop of liquid on her tongue caused her to gag and she spilled the rest into the bowl. She forced another drop on her tongue, then another. Then she placed the nitrate crystals in her mouth and tried to swallow. She gagged again, but with no water in her body, she had as much trouble coughing up the crystals as swallowing them. This was not easing her passing. This was not a way to die.

It occurred to Inara to pray. For death, for life, she wasn't sure. Her faith lingered over her shoulder like a forgotten ghost. She could feel the drugs she'd managed to swallow starving oxygen from her system, but for the moment, death was not an option.

She looked at the puddle of liquid filling the first aid kit, then at the closed door with no handle on the inside. The fluorescent light flickered maniacally, as though measuring what life she had left in her. She would not go out this way!

Harvesting the final remnants of her strength, she dragged herself to the door, pulling the bowl of liquid beside her. She did not trust herself to carry it. The door was electric. The seam visible. Electric things and liquid things always managed to agitate each other – like her and Mal. Agitate. Mal. No! She needed to keep her wits about her. Just a little longer. *Take your time. No one is coming to interrupt you.*

\*~\*

Jayne could smell her. The scent was cold, but she had been up here at one time. Faint, probably because she hadn't had access to her perfumes in weeks, but it was definitely Inara. He moved faster, this injured thigh on fire. He didn't like sneaking about with Caddock wheezing as deafeningly loud as he was. Caddock had to be lying about something and the sooner he exposed the lie, the sooner he could kill Caddock.

A loud echo from the hall below froze Jayne in his tracks. The others froze as well. Mal peaked over the side, scoping out the threat, then deciding it was nothing, made a quick nod, sending them forward again. They circled around the fourth floor, then the fifth. Jayne paused, but Caddock passed him, leading the way up. Mal followed Caddock and the two disappeared around the next half flight of the circle.

Jayne waited for Caddock's odiferous stench to defuse, then he smelled the air again. He had never been good at tracking by smell, though a woman like Inara made it a little easier. How far back had they lost her trail? Why was Caddock still leading them upward?

"Mal!" Jayne hollered, his voice echoing through the corridors. He galloped up the ramp, rounding the bend to the next level. Caddock had Mal in a choke hold and was pulling him toward the edge of the railing.

\*~\*

Book used a keyless entry code to enter the main building from the side door. Amadi had three trusted pass codes that apparently had not changed at all in thirty years. The side-wing he had entered through was a single story atrium with twenty foot ceilings. His footsteps were swallowed by the soft red carpeting, and the airshow was clearly visible through the arch of windows. Though he knew the windows were tinted, he felt exposed by all the masses who had set up picnics just outside. For the umpteenth time, he felt uncomfortable in his Shepherd's clothes, walking into his past as though he owned it.

By the door, he found a note posted by the fire marshal, declaring that the room's maximum occupancy was 814. Book felt like a speck in the open air. Today, the room's occupancy was one. There were six posted exit signs, but no posted layout of the rest of the building. Wash had seen Inara's shuttle in the hanger bay. All Book had to do was get to the bay, get it out, break atmo, and meet Serenity in the air. Right. No problem.

But then, that was second on his to-do list. Book tugged at his white collar and shifted the pillowcase slung over his shoulder. The pillowcase kicked and wriggled as Bristles fought to get out.

“Not yet, little dai ren,” Book whispered. “Not yet.”

\*~\*

Zoë curled into Kaylee’s hammock, doubled over in pain, but trying to appear nonchalant. Kaylee hardly seemed to notice, her attention firmly on the drive manifold. Wash’s voice echoed over the comm, takeoff in five minutes. Simon was in the cockpit next to him, playing co-pilot, or rather making sure no communication was lost between Wash, Kaylee, and those two sha gua wingmen. Zoë couldn’t be on the bridge just now. She was starting to think she shouldn’t be anywhere right now. She’d been angry at Mal for not taking her on the job, but at the moment, her innards were cramping and muscles were on strike.

“It will pass in a moment,” River told her, peaking into the engine room. Kaylee glanced up from her work to see River and noticed Zoë laying on the hammock. Zoë resented the concern on Kaylee’s face. She could feel the intensity of the pain subside, but she couldn’t even help Kaylee in the engine room. She felt useless.

“Sweetie, maybe you should strap yourself into something,” Kaylee said to River.

“Fancy flying,” River said with a smile. “Somewhere with a view.”

“Honey,” Zoë grunted, forcing herself to sit. “Why don’t you take your brother’s seat. Send him down here.”

“I can fly?”

\*~\*

“I’m a little busy now,” Mal grunted at Jayne, then flipped Caddock over his shoulder and drew his gun.

Caddock kicked the gun and sprang to his feet, throwing a punch that Mal blocked. Mal dove for his gun, but Caddock pounced on top of him and the two started rolling down the ramp toward Jayne. Caddock pulled a knife and flailed wildly as the two spiraled downward, stopping when they hit the curve of the wall.

Mal came up first, but Caddock tackled him quickly, knife at Mal’s throat. Neither of them heard the bullet that caught Caddock in the forehead. When Caddock collapsed on top of Mal, the Captain looked up to see Jayne holding his perfectly aimed pistol, elongated by the silencer.

“Good thinking,” Mal complimented, throwing Caddock off of himself. “Only now, we don’t know where Inara is.”

Jayne holstered his gun and walked over to Caddock, rolled him onto his back, and started searching up the sleeves of his coat.

“She weren’t up here anyhow,” Jayne assured. “We lost her scent a little ways back.”

“Are you looking for loose change, Jayne?”

“No, this.” Jayne produced an etched metal card with an LCD screen from the folds of Caddock’s coat. “Saw him checking it earlier.”

Mal turned it over in his hands, then activated the screen. “If he’s buried her here, she has to be on the lowest level... this place goes deep. If I go up half a flight, I can access the service stairs.”

“You go there,” Jayne grimaced, half-limping. “I’ll see if I can pick up her trail where we lost it before. See you at the rendezvous.”

\*~\*

Book tread carefully out of the atrium into the main lobby, ducking behind the empty security desk. This was where the “show” security resided, uniformed, making clients feel secure. The real security was elsewhere, and that was the place he needed to find. Once Bristles made his way through their systems, they’d have a hard time mounting a defense, and Serenity needed all the chaos it could get.

He ducked lower as a man stormed into the lobby, speaking irately at into a radio. Book recognized Amadi’s voice immediately, bellowing about missing the air show for minor breaches. Certainly, someone was being fired. He dared peak up for a moment to get a sense of the situation.

When Book saw Amadi across the room, he suddenly wished we were wearing a cup. Although one could spar indefinitely with Wing Chun, the idea in combat was to cripple your opponent quickly, so that you could get away. Maximal damage, minimal force. And Book was sorely out of practice.

He pressed through his fear, focusing on the fight at hand. He needed to prevent Amadi from calling for reinforcements – buy Mal the precious time he needed. Caddock would certainly be stalling. Either Inara would be sprung or Amadi would be killed. They weren’t likely to accomplish both before the alarm sounded. And if Book could help it, they wouldn’t accomplish the latter at all.

Jayne circled the ramp on the fourth floor, looking down into the lobby, weapon ready to strike. Book feared that Jayne would kill Amadi, and forget Inara. Why had Jayne climbed four flights anyway? Inara was buried. With an injured leg, what had compelled him to go up?

Book tensed as Amadi’s posture changed. His old friend knew something was wrong – knew they were there. He had to pounce before Amadi sounded the alarm.

\*~\*

“Serenity to Control Tower, Bob Squad seeking clearance for take-off.”

“Control to Bob, you are cleared for take-off.”

“Bob?” Simon repeated doubtfully. Wash smiled and nodded, continuing his preflight checks.

“You can’t name your squad Bob,” Simon continued, skeptically.

“Oh, so now you’re the Captain of Bob?” Wash jested.

Simon let it drop when River entered and whispered something in his ear. Simon dashed out so quickly that Wash wondered if Saskia had died. Just before the others had left, she’d been curled up with Jayne on the couch in the lounge. Jayne had been eating heartily while Saskia warned him of all Caddock’s tells. Much to Simon’s chagrin, even after the surgery Saskia’s condition failed to improve and she consistently refused any bed she wasn’t tied to.

He also worried about Zoë. He'd only been to their bunk briefly since last night, but had half a mind to move out after seeing everything broken and strewn about the way it was. She was angry at him for what had happened and he couldn't blame her.

"Serenity, this is Bob 1, ready for take-off," Jared called. Wash adjusted the volume on his earpiece a little.

"Serenity, this Bob 2, ready for take-off," Walker said.

"Acknowledged Bob squad. Straight-hover to 4000 feet. Right into the lazy eight."

Wash had taken lead, on account of his experience. It turned out that Jared and Walker were both very experienced wingmen in larger aircrafts and cargo ships, and apparently Jantis enjoyed displaying the chunkier, mothballed vessels. Jared had described it as watching a rhino turn on a dime. Wash had never seen a real rhino or a real dime, but he got the idea. It was all he could do not to throw a Crazy Ivan in the show, but that was more of a solo stunt.

River took over the copilot chair and stared, awestruck at the open sky, her mouth a constant "O" as Wash pulled an easy lazy eight, sideways to the horizon.

"Up," she commanded, softly, so easily that Wash nearly obeyed before he checked his screen. Focus! River was not ordering him, but warning him.

"Serenity to Bob 2. Close formation, ascend to 6800."

"Acknowledged Serenity, ascending to 6800."

Walker was flying stiff and the opening moves weren't loosening him up. Wash flipped a few switches, adjusting the sensitivity of the yoke as he gripped it more tightly. He cast a sidelong glance at River, then at the screen showing the position of the three ships, then back out the window.

"This is where the fun begins," he muttered.

River smiled happily.

\*~\*

Zoë slouched on the side bed of the Infirmary, looking at Saskia, who was unhappily bound to the middle bed. River had been right – the pain had subsided quickly, but Zoë knew she wouldn't be pulling her weight in this fight and it irked her immensely.

"Always figured I'd die in battle," Saskia grouched. "Never figured I'd sit one out."

"This ain't a battle. The war is over," Zoë countered, just to be contrary. Saskia craved the action, just as she did and Zoë figured she'd be out of her restraints soon enough. Although Jayne had cuffed Saskia to the bed, he'd made the mistake of leaving the key with Simon and Zoë guessed that Saskia had already palmed it off him. She knew because that's what she would have done in Saskia's place.

Simon skidded into the Infirmary, fully expecting to see one or both women dead, but resumed his composure quickly. He questioned Zoë as to the nature of the pain she was in, assured her that such 'minor' pain was normal considering what she'd been through, and Zoë told him where he could shove his diagnosis. Then Simon administered his usual prescription of rest, gave an added dose of painkillers for good measure, and before he could stop her, Zoë was stalking out again.

"Got another pair of cuffs?" Saskia asked, yanking on her own.

“I could definitely use them,” Simon answered. “How are you feeling?”

“Fit as a fiddle. Can I go now?”

Simon could only afford half a laugh as he redressed her bandages and changed the IV drip on her arm. His stomach dropped as Serenity looped through atmo.

“Why are you dumping resources on me, Doc? You know I’m a lost cause.”

“I don’t know,” Simon answered quickly. “I guess I’m not the type to take the horse out back and shoot it.”

“Bullet is cheaper than all your fancy drugs and I’d be much less trouble to you dead.”

Simon shook his head in confusion. “Are you saying you want to die?”

“Not saying I want to. I just don’t understand you folk. I attack your crew, break into your weapons, bed your shipmate, countermand your Captain on the field, shield Captain Caddock from your bullets ... and I take every opportunity to ignore the doctor’s orders.”

“Yes, you really are a gem,” Simon replied, sarcastically.

“So why do you throw all your resources at my recovery?”

Simon considered Saskia a moment, not knowing how to answer. “I suppose it’s because of Kaylee. When Kaylee sees you, she sees the woman who saved her.”

Saskia’s head rolled in disbelief. “The men wanted a sex toy. We needed a mechanic.”

“Motive aside, you did save her,” Simon pointed out. “She believes you’re good, and when Kaylee believes, it’s hard to see things any other way.

\*~\*

Mal made it to the second basement and hit a wall. Something wasn’t right. This map showed two more basements below. He turned the map over in his hand, making sure it was oriented correctly. He’d made that mistake before and it was never as funny when it was actually happening. There was a single door at the end of the well, also not as indicated on the map. Was this even a map of the right building? Was this the day Jayne would take off with Serenity and leave him in the dust. He tried his radio, but he was too deep to get a signal.

He checked the map again. There was another stairwell on this level. Perhaps it would take him down. Carefully, he eased open the door and stepped into the hallway. It felt like a submarine on this level – damp, metallic, harshly lit. This was certainly a place to bury someone. Mold and slimy things covered the walls, eating up the lamplight, and making squishy sounds as he stepped across them. His insides turned and his lunch threatened to revisit.

“Inara?” he whispered as loudly as he dared. She wouldn’t be on this level. The doors to the rooms were rusting off their hinges. He peered in the first and saw a decomposing skeleton, still dressed in a synthetic gown. He wretched at the callousness of it, and started running toward the second stairwell.

He found the electronic door rusted shut, mold growing through the cracks. With all his might, he yanked and pounded on the door. Bits of mold broke off in his hands, releasing spores into the air. He coughed and backed away. Checking the nearest room to

make sure it didn't hold a corpse, he started scavenging for anything he could use for leverage.

Suddenly, all the lights on that floor sputtered and died. Mal waited in the darkness a solid minute before they flickered back on, but he was done wasting time here. Stripping a falling sheet of metal from the wall, he charged the door and wedged it open. The door protested the movement, the electricity faltered again, and this time, Mal felt a surge of current go through the metal sheet and into his body. As the world turned to spots, all he could think about was Inara, the corpse, the squishy, moldy floor that would break his fall.

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 12

"Serenity to Bobs, slot for the S-loop," Wash ordered.

"Bob 1, acknowledged Serenity," Jared answered

Wash started pulling ahead for the slot formation, expecting Walker to echo the acknowledgement as well. Nothing came. He switched vid to a rear view ... Walker was a bit wobbly, but fine.

"Bob 2?" Wash tried. Nothing. "Bob 2, this is Serenity, please respond."

"Down!" River cried, then grabbed the yoke and sent Serenity into a nose dive.

"River!"

Wash panicked at the break of formation and checked the position of the other Bobs. Walker has zoomed into the front position and was now chasing them.

"Bob squad, Immelman and regroup at 7000 feet," Wash ordered.

"Serenity what the tian xiao de!" Jared cried.

"Jared have you heard anything from Walker?" Wash asked. Walker was hot on Serenity's tail, swaying like a Reaver ship.

"Negative, Serenity, but it sure looks like he's kissing your pi gu."

"Serenity to Control Tower, Bob 2 is not responding."

Wash waited again. No response.

Walker suddenly pulled up and leveled out at 7000 feet and Wash decided to pull above him, top to top, so he could look down into that cockpit and see what was going on. Walker was dead set on the path in front of him. Could his ship have malfunctioned? Wash hailed again.

"Serenity, this is Bob 1," Jared said. "If it's okay with you, I'm going to set down and wait this one out."

"Acknowledged, Bob 1. I think we should give Walker his space."

Wash looked up again, his bones chilling as Walker met his eyes with a steely glare. River and Wash pulled the yoke together sending Serenity into a roll just as Walker pulled up into an intercept.

"Bob 2, this is Serenity. Please confirm that you are trying to kill me."

"Jantis has requested to see your ship crash and burn," Walker's scratchy voice growled through the comm.

Wash laughed nervously. "I know that trick, Bob 2. I don't need the assist."

Wash dodged as Walker tried to ram them again.

“Kamakazi,” River said. Wash was not amused. He dove down, buzzed the crowd, and circled the main building.

“Wash, I thought we were conserving fuel,” Kaylee yelled over the comm.

“Change of plan, Kaylee, go with it.” Wash switched comm channels. “Mal?”

No response. He swore.

“Why do we bother having radios?”

\*~\*

Amadi was reaching over the counter for the security alarm when Book stood and shouted his name. His former friend was nonplussed, pressing the alarm before turning to face Book. Book prayed that Bristles had already chewed through that particular bundle of wires.

“I thought I chased you away.” Amadi came slowly to face off with Book in the middle of the lobby.

“You wanted my Firefly.”

“And you wanted an excuse to stay and find your whore.”

“That is all I ask.”

“Today it is. What will you ask tomorrow, or the next? I have worked too hard to build this empire to have you snatch it away like some birthright. She will not leave this planet.”

Reason did not seem to be working. Book searched his memory for other leverage, came up blank, and decided to lie ... improvise.

“Don’t get in my way,” Book threatened. “I can expose you.”

“And I can expose you,” Amadi returned easily. “I am not afraid of your tiny little voice. I can squash you like a bug.”

“You have no idea how loudly I can speak.”

“Did it ever occur to you that the only reason people hear you at all is because of me. Your power derives from mine. I am the government. It would take a nod of my head to cut you off and I can make that nod from the grave.”

Time for a new tactic.

“Brother –”

“Oh, now we play the ‘brother’ card. But it’s too late for that... Brother.”

Amadi added the last word like an afterthought and it caught Book so off guard that he immediately glanced around to see if anyone besides Jayne were watching them. Amadi took advantage of the distraction, attacking down the centerline and catching Book square in the jaw, knocking him down. With Book down, Jayne finally had a clear shot, and caught Amadi in the shoulder. Amadi in turn spun around, found a gun, and let off three shots towards Jayne before Book was able to kick the weapon from his hands. With all his might, the Shepherd sprang to his feet and began the attack, unsure if he was willing to strike a deadly blow, but determined to subdue his old friend just the same. His rusted joints protested the quick sharp movements required to defend himself. He could taste the blood in his mouth, felt the snap of his kneecaps when Amadi’s kick connected. His old friend had become a master and Book could not defend himself. He prayed fervently, when a blow connected unexpectedly to his neck and he fell. As the stars spun

above him, beyond the blurry face of his former friend, he searched for Jayne, waited for the shot, but the help never came.

\*~\*

“Captain Reynolds, get up! We have to go!” a familiar voice called from the beyond. Mal could feel the cold, squishy, mold on the floor like a waterbed, threatening to drown his coat. He opened his eyes and the familiar voice was accompanied by a familiar face.

“Ta-whubba-Whoa! Ain’t you supposed to be dead? Elle/Nia/Chelsea...”

“Misty will do,” the girl answered, pulling him to sitting. Mal held his head, trying to recall the electric current that had knocked him out to begin with. “Come on, the boss is coming!”

“I mean it,” Mal continued, trying to sort dream from reality. “Dead. I saw your shuttle go down.”

“Yes, well, that’s the last time I pilot by remote,” she answered dismissively.

“But you didn’t call back. You just let us think you were dead.”

“Death lends itself to a very convenient mobility,” she pointed out.

Mal became incensed. “Do you know how hard it’s been living with Jayne since you died?!”

“Enough chatter. Come on!” She ushered him to his feet and pulled him toward the stairwell at the end of the corridor. Mal yanked his arm free and protested.

“I just came down these steps. I ain’t goin’ up without Inara.”

“Another minute and we won’t be going up at all. I’ve been trying to track Inara all week. What makes you think she’s here?”

“I got this map,” Mal said defensively, pulling out the device for Misty to see. She grabbed it out of his hands swiftly.

“Where did you get this?” she mullied. “These tunnels ... they shouldn’t exist.”

Mal reached for the map again, but Misty turned away quickly, pulling out a comm.

“Nia—”

“What? Now you’re talking to yourself?” Mal jeered.

“Mis, get out of there, now!” a strikingly similar voice responded. Startled, Mal’s jaw dropped. The voice on the other end of the line continued. “Your exit’s gone in two. Is Reynolds hurt?”

“He won’t leave without Inara. I gotta get to the control room and open some doors.”

“We’ve looked down there!”

“Apparently we missed a false wall at level two.”

“Jing chang mei yong de Arrgh! Never search tired!”

“I’ll be up in a mo,” Misty said, then closed the comm and turned to Mal. “Go halfway down this hallway, take the stairs down two levels. Your map picks up here!”

“That door is locked,” Mal protested.

“It won’t be,” she promised and darted off.

“Where are you going?”

“To open some doors!”

\*~\*

Book lay on the floor, feeling the sharp pain of repeated kicks to his rib cage. The stampede of wild horses trampled him and he prayed without hope of rescue. Only death could lift him from the circumstances, he knew. But the prayer could change him.

“How can you say the Lord has not seen your troubles?” Book quoted, blood spilling from his mouth.

Amadi circled him disdainfully, trying the security alarm again, then the phones. Nothing worked. “Seeking help from on High, brother?” he mocked.

“He gives power to those who are tired and worn out; he offers strength to the weak.”

“Why do you work against me? Trying to take what is mine?” Amadi raved, kicking him again. Book groaned and rolled away slowly. The movement made him choke on his own blood.

“Those who wait on the Lord will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles.”

“Bi zui!” Amadi shouted running up again to kick Book. This time, Book found his strength, rolled out of the way, caught Amadi’s foot, and tipped him over. Holding his bruised rib cage, Book attacked with one arm, fighting to maintain his balance, but fighting nonetheless. His strength kept coming.

Amadi found his gun again and took aim, point blank. Suddenly, the room exploded with the sound of gunfire and the weapon flew out of Amadi’s hand. Book pounced, putting Amadi in an immediate choke-hold.

“Out of the way Preacher!” Jayne hollered, scooting himself around the last bend of the spiral stair case. The merc laid on his side, bleeding from the arm, but his aim was sharp as ever.

Amadi laughed mirthlessly. “Thou shalt not kill, brother.”

With a quick head-butt, Book rendered Amadi unconscious and dropped him on the floor. “Do unto others, brother.”

Book ran to Jayne’s side and used his belt as a tourniquet to still the bleeding from his arm. He noticed Jayne’s leg was also bleeding and that Jayne hadn’t sat up since the battle ended.

“Can you walk?”

“Like a seal,” Jayne answered.

Book prayed for strength once again, and again it came to him. Despite his bruises, he pulled Jayne up, draping one arm over his shoulder, and they made their way like a three-legged race back to the shuttle.

“We can’t leave him alive!” Jayne protested.

“I can’t kill him.”

“Dumbass, he’d kill you in a heartbeat, clear as day.”

Book pressed on, telling Jayne as much as trying to convince himself, “If you can’t do something smart, do something right.”

\*~\*

True to her word, the door at mid-corridor was now open and Mal climbed down. As he skipped the last few steps he landed right in front of an unexpected person and drew his gun.

“Gah!” Mal cried on recognizing Misty. “I thought you were going upstairs to open some doors.”

“Of course,” she smiled pleasantly. “Where to next?”

Mal consulted his map and began directing, his confusion mounting. He would be very disappointed if this entire rescue were a dream and he had to wake up and do it all again tomorrow. His confusion lifted momentarily when his companion radioed Misty about opening a door.

“You weren’t on my ship were you?” Mal asked.

“What makes you say that?”

“You don’t have a scar on your neck.”

“The medicine of the core is much more advanced than the rim. Scars are a thing of the past.”

“You’re Nia. The one Misty was talking to,” Mal realized. “How many of you are there?”

“That I know of? Six living.”

Shocked, Mal’s feet stopped moving, causing Nia to walk into him.

“A fertility clinic on Greenleaf was cutting corners,” she explained, righting herself and continuing down the corridor. “Got a little overzealous with this particular genetic mix. I tell ya, it’s great for crime. But there’s at least two of me that I haven’t made contact with yet... I figure I should at least warn them that they’re wanted dead on a few worlds.”

“Are any of you Elle?”

Nia furrowed her brow in surprise. “Elle is one of the few that isn’t real.”

“So she is dead?” Mal clarified. “When the shuttle crashed.”

“Elle was never living,” Nia clarified. “But Jayne’s partner—she is.”

“Does she have a name?”

Nia laughed mysteriously. “You know too many of my names already.”

They entered a new level, somewhat dryer and better maintained than the one before. The last hallway actually appeared well used, and the doors strongly sealed. Lights flashed indicating that an electrical malfunction had compromised the locks and only mechanical was working.

Nia grabbed the radio. “Mis, I see a door at the end of this corridor. Where are we?”

“Ai ya!” Misty replied. “I think I’ve found our new exit strategy. You’re ten feet from the shuttle bay!”

“I’ll clear it out for you,” a new voice cut in. Nia dropped the comm in surprise and had to pick it up again.

“Jen? Is that you?” Misty asked.

“Jen, what are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be planet-side!” Nia cut in.

“Arjun called in sick.”

Nia rolled her eyes. “That’s it. I’m taking away your minor poison privileges.”

“Mis, which door is it?” Jen asked, ignoring Nia.

“The utility closet in the southwest corner.”

Mal stopped listening to the conversation and considered the line of doors in front of him. He smelled something strange and unclean, out of place in this well-kept corridor. Following the scent, he found a clear liquid leaking out from one of the doors. The door itself had fresh finger prints on the outside. This had to be where Inara was. He pressed on the outside of the door, hoping it would just give way.

“How do we get in?” Mal grouched. “You got an electronic key for mechanical locks?”

“The old fashioned way,” Nia said, grabbing the gun. She let off two rounds at the top and bottom of the door, hitting the hinges exactly. The two levered their weight against the door and forced their way in. Mal did not see the various items strewn about the room nor the spilled liquid at his feet. He only saw Inara, collapsed on the floor, pale as death, her lips and fingers blue.

\*~\*

The engine pulsed so loudly, River could feel the vibrations inside herself, like her own heart beat. The conflict of ship’s gravity with the worlds turned her stomach as Wash corkscrewed trying to shake Walker. The force of Walker’s murderous intention raked her body. The smell of Zoë’s hair relaxer floated in from the hallway. Why wouldn’t she come inside? A new intention joined the others.

“No more stalling,” River told Wash.

He ignored her, but she expected it. The radio came to life.

“Serenity this is Shuttle 2—”

“Hold please,” Wash interrupted, dodging a particularly tall mountain and pulling into high atmo.

“Everyone with you, Shuttle 2?” Wash asked.

“Just myself and Jayne,” Book answered.

“Go to the farside of the planet and wait for me there,” Wash ordered curtly, checking the landscape. Having fled the twin cities, Wash found himself crossing near a tall mountain range and decided to take the pursuit low.

“He can’t do it,” River said, her hands gripping the arms of the chair, tensely. “He can’t do what you can.”

Wash’s face glowed with excitement. For once, he understood what River was trying to tell him. Flipping a switch to adjust fine control on the wire, Wash dove into the nearest canyon and threaded Serenity through the formations. When Walker didn’t follow, he eased up the throttle and waited. Transport ships didn’t have weapons. If Walker wanted to kill him, he’d have to turn his ship into the wrecking ball. At reduced speed, Wash wove easily through the landscape, familiarizing himself with every escape route. Then he back-tracked a bit, wondering if simple distance would be enough to break atmo. He needed to hear from Shuttle 1 before he could run.

Finally, Walker took the bait, diving into the canyon after Wash. It wasn’t hard after that, shifting close to the walls, sudden changes in direction... he knew that a standard Firefly didn’t have half the maneuverability of Serenity. It didn’t take long. Walker lost the first extender on a sharp curve, then spun, the nose bouncing off the

canyon wall. Although the ship pulled up, control was lost and Walker skimmed to a halt on the dusty ridge of the canyon.

Wasting no time, Wash broke atmo to meet the shuttle, releasing a few decoy navsats along the way. He figured they had less than two orbits before they were found. Reinforcements were sure to come. Two orbits before Mal and Inara got left. Where was Zoë? As first mate, this was her decision to make.

\*~\*

“Inara!” Mal choked, running to her side and checking for sounds of breath. His heart pounded so loudly in his own ears he couldn’t hear, but she felt cold and no part of her moved. “No, Inara!”

“Nia, what’s going on down there?”

“She’s blue,” Nia said into the comm, stepping carefully over the strewn crystals and syringes in the room. “Looks like she’s ... Jen, did you happen to bring your poison kit?”

“I thought you were revoking my privileges!” Jen yelled. “Start CPR, get some air in her.”

Mal rolled Inara onto her back, hot tears streaming down his face. He began CPR, looking for Nia to second him, but she was already gone. He was alone in the room. How many beats? How many breaths?

“No Inara, don’t,” he whispered as his lips touched hers and he forced air into her lungs.

Nia ran in again. Or was it Jen. He noticed that this one had a scar.

“What the hell?” he muttered through tears.

“Keep her heart going. Oxygen deprivation will kill her,” Jen ordered, taking stock of the syringes, spilled crystals, and other items dumped about the room. “Which one?” she muttered, squinting at the side of the syringes. “Labels, people! You need to label your toxins!”

Jen pushed Mal aside, touched Inara’s lips, felt the lack of pulse, and reached into a small, dark green bag she’d carried in. She tilted Inara’s neck to the side, inserted a needle, then set an IV drip on the bed, letting gravity do it’s work.

“What is that?”

“Methylene blue,” she answered, pulling out a portable defibrillator. “About how many pumps to get from the neck to the brain?”

Mal looked at her blankly and she smiled, trying to lighten the situation.

“Step back, let’s try this.” Abruptly, she ripped into Inara’s gown, placing the two paddles around the heart. Mal’s chest ached at the sight of Inara’s shriveled, pale skin. He reached out to touch her, but was held in check by Jen’s whispered command: “Clear.”

Jen checked the heartbeat. Nothing. She tried again.

“She’s breathing!” Mal cried, noticing immediately.

“Heartbeat.”

“Word to the wise,” Nia broke in over the comm, “The boss is on his way to meet you.”

“She’s not stable!” Jen protested.

“We don’t have a choice!” Mal wrapped Inara’s ripped dress around her chest, affording her as much dignity as time allowed, then scooped her up and began running for the door.

“Wait! Take this!” Jen hollered, scribbling a note and putting it in Mal’s coat pocket.

“You’re not coming?”

Jen shook her head. “I’m already there. Now go!”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 13

Time was ticking. They were orbiting still. From her position in the hallway, she could see River throwing occasional glances in her direction. Zoë listened as Wash guided Shuttle 2 in for docking. Jayne would try to take charge and tell them to forget Mal and run. That plan was as natural to Jayne as breathing. How long did they have before they had no other option? Wash would know.

They’d circled the planet once. Zoë could see the moon rotating back into view. River looked at her again, encouraging her onto the bridge with a raised eyebrow and a tilt of the head. Zoë didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. Just prayed.

Her prayer was interrupted by a burst of static from the radio. Shuttle 1 was calling in!

“Mal, we got about half an orbit before they notice us gone,” Wash informed.

“Shuttle’s being a bit sluggish. Can you slow down?” Mal answered.

“Shi a, Captain. Mission accomplished?”

“Not till we’re docked and running. And make sure—”

The line suddenly went dead. The hair on Zoë’s arms stood on end. She pushed herself to her feet, tipping her head in to listen more closely.

“Make sure what?” Wash asked, fiddling with the comm. “Mal? Ai ya! Huai le. Talk to me. Shuttle 1, Serenity, respond.”

She couldn’t stop herself. Zoë dashed in, relieving River of the copilot’s seat and grabbing the comm from that side.

“Sir?” Zoë called desperately.

Nothing.

“They hit?”

Wash checked his readouts. “They’re not falling, just ... drifting. Can you access their controls.”

“Already on it,” Zoë said, her hands a blur on the controls in front of her. If you’d asked her later, she would not have remembered what keys she hit, but in that moment of desperation, her fingers knew exactly where to go. She hit the comm again. “Shuttle 1, this is Serenity, I’m taking flight control.”

“Nice and easy,” Wash coached. “Bring her in.”

Zoë grimaced as she tried to control the shuttle with paddle commands rather than a yoke. “That left thruster is out.”

“Just hold her steady,” Wash soothed. “I’ll do the work.”

Zoë steadied the shuttle, trying to keep it from pinwheeling from the uneven thrust. She cast a sidelong glance at Wash, whose face was sheer concentration.

“There is a reason we don’t dock big to small,” Wash muttered to himself. Zoë couldn’t help but smile, proud of his skill.

“We have contact,” Zoë informed as Wash expertly brought the ships into alignment. A moment later, the shuttle bounced and was nudged off. “No capture.”

Zoë steadied the shuttle as Wash tried the dance again.

“Clamps ready?” he asked. This time, the shuttle locked in easily.

“We have capture!” Zoë exclaimed. “Kaylee, how’s that seal?”

“Looks shiny from here,” Kaylee answered.

Zoë afforded herself only a brief sigh of relief before standing up and heading for the docking port to see what had happened to Mal.

“Get us out of here,” she ordered as she went.

Wash watched her go, staring wistfully after her.

“Nice flying baby,” he whispered.

“And me?” River asked, still standing behind the copilot’s chair.

\*~\*

The Infirmary had become so crowded that Simon was outsourcing to the neighboring quarters for beds. Inara, being mostly dead, was his first priority; then Jayne with his fresh bullet wound, Mal who was unconscious for reasons he had yet to find, Book with his bruised ribs ... Saskia had broken out of her restraints, but had only made it as far as the couch, pretending that was as far as she wanted to go. Zoë was on her feet assisting him in nursing the crew back to health. He expected to see Kaylee peaking in once they were on their way, but figured that she was busy conjuring methods to multiply their fuel stores for the journey.

River wandered into the Infirmary, making it far too crowded to work. Simon was perplexed by Inara’s condition and wished Mal were awake to tell him how he found her.

“River, you need to leave,” Simon said, taking a moment to bandage Jayne while he pondered Inara. River ignored him, reaching into Mal’s coat pocket.

“River, leave,” Simon repeated.

She said nothing, merely handed him a slip of paper with a few pale blue crystals in it.

“To help with Inara,” River explained. Simon furrowed his brow, read the note, examined the crystals, and knew how to help.

“Thanks mei mei,” he said, rushing to start an IV drip. It would take days for Inara to recover, but at least he knew she would.

\*~\*

That evening, Saskia sat on the couch outside the Infirmary strumming Jayne’s guitar. Jayne lay on the couch beside her, doped and deliriously happy about the music, leg elevated, arm elevated. Kaylee laughed, imagining he was doing the hokey pokey. She’d just come from Shepherd Book’s bunk, where the preacher was busy recuperating with ibuprofen, an ice pack, and some fresh hot cocoa. Kaylee offered a cup of cocoa to Saskia who declined. Jayne was drooling too much to drink.

Just inside the Infirmary, Mal was sitting up, smoothing his tousled hair. Simon had determined that Mal had suffered a mix of hallucinatory drugs and electric shocks. Inara lay on the center bed, her ripped dress replaced with a conservative hospital gown. Though it was difficult to see Inara like this, Kaylee was just glad to see her friend at all. How many weeks had it been since Inara had been kidnapped? Kaylee resolved to wash Inara's hair that evening and keep her face clean, because Inara had done that for her.

"When's she gonna wake up?" Kaylee asked Simon as he and Mal exited the Infirmary.

"Hard to say," Simon answered. "A few days. A few weeks."

"But she will wake up," Kaylee asked hopefully.

"Yes, Elle saw to that," Mal answered.

"Elle was there?"

"I think so... it's hard to hallucinate a note."

"The note the Captain had told me the antidote she used and what she suspected Inara had taken. She meant to prevent a harmful drug interaction."

"Funny," Mal commented. "She didn't strike me as a medic-type when she was here."

Simon instinctively put his hand on his neck – something Kaylee noticed he always did when Elle was mentioned.

"She struck me," Simon said. "She definitely had expertise."

"She was a field medic during the war," Jayne slurred from the couch. "Independents."

The three looked at him in surprise. Even Saskia stopped her strumming to listen.

"So my girl is alive?" Jayne asked.

"Seems to be. Though it could just be in name."

Jayne rolled his glazed eyes up to see Saskia again, requesting a song. Mal looked back into the Infirmary at Inara's still form.

"Doc, can we let her recover in her own shuttle?"

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 14

The trip to Persephone took forever, what with the way they needed to conserve fuel. Serenity had nearly fallen out of the air, but less than five hours later, they were back on the move again, fueled up, and with a fresh course laid in. Wash reached into his boot and pulled out the note Zoë had written him a world and a lifetime away. "I'll hold you close to me," it promised. Where was she now?

He stared vacantly into the Black, searching for pieces of himself. In his mind's eye, he had been chewed up and torn apart. His heart was missing, most of his torso, and his left arm. He wasn't sure he'd survive. He wasn't sure his marriage would survive either. Zoë always seemed to be puttering about the ship up to something. She never spoke to him anymore. It tore him up inside to see her face every day, to be so close, but to feel a million miles away. It seemed as though she were a stranger to him and his true wife was dead. He couldn't handle it. He'd stopped going back to their bunk. He ate and slept on the bridge and she never visited. She only ever came up when following Mal and even then, she never stayed long. Wash didn't mind. Every time he saw her, cold and

stoic as she was, it was as though he were watching her die all over again. The light of life—the glow that had first made him suspect her pregnant—had gone out.

Mal wandered into the cockpit and took a moment to look into the sky. It was as empty as Wash felt, but he saw in Mal's eyes that love for the black and for the freedom it represented.

"You're up late," Wash commented, checking the time.

"Thought I might give you a break."

"I'm fine."

"Go see to your wife."

"She's fine too. Just ask her," he grumbled, bitterly. "Do the job."

"That is what she says," Mal acknowledged. "But I know for a fact that neither of you are fine and I got a whole crew full of folk can't do their jobs because they're so busy watching you two. They're all worried sick because you two are too stubborn to worry about each other. Pretty soon, the whole ship will be useless and I aim to prevent that. Now take the night off and tend to your wife."

\*~\*

Saskia's head rose and fell softly to the rhythm of Jayne's breathing, her silky black hair cascading over his bare chest. As she slept, Jayne traced the lines of her face, thinking she must have at least half Chinese ancestry behind those exotic features. Every few breaths, her body shuddered from pain. She was too weak for sex tonight and Jayne wanted to leave her bed in case she died.

Accustomed to more frilly trim, Jayne had enjoyed Saskia's raw power and energy and was intimately aware of her waning strength. Her words had been simple. A turn of the head. "Come on." She understood his motives, his rules – no kissing on the mouth. God, he wanted to taste her lips! More than anything, he wanted to leave her alone so she could die in private. He didn't want to wake up under a stiff.

He was surprised to feel the flutter of her long lashes against his chest hair. Saskia lifted her head and planted a row of kisses across his clavicle, up his neck, to his chin, stopping just short of his hungry lips. Jayne held to his principles, arbitrary as they seemed.

"Once more?" She murmured, rolling so that Jayne could be on top.

"Bao bei," Jayne whispered, surprised at his own gentleness. "I'm not sure you have the strength."

"If I don't now, I never will again."

Jayne considered again, plagued by the prospect of her imminent death. She noticed his hesitation.

"Will you leave me so unsatisfied?"

Jayne started at the poetical challenge. "Unsatisfied," he repeated, a smile spilling on his lips, leaning in for a kiss. Suddenly, Saskia's body went rigid and her eyes clouded over.

"Sask!" Jayne cried, jumping up and shaking her shoulders. "Sask?"

"Maybe not tonight," she gasped through a grimace.

Not now! Jayne's mind cried. Don't die now!

Thinking quickly, he cinched her robe shut, scooped her up in his arms, and darted for the Infirmary.

“Doc!” he hollered, kicking Simon’s door as he ran past. Simon stumbled out a moment later, shirtless and bleary-eyed, but quickly sprang into action. A fast shot of dopamine later, Saskia’s body relaxed and her eyes fluttered closed. Seeing her at peace, Jayne left the Infirmary, retrieved his own shirt from Saskia’s room, and headed for his own bunk. He refused to watch her die.

\*~\*

As per Mal’s orders, Wash climbed grudgingly into the bunk he technically shared with Zoë. The room had been straightened up considerably since he’d last been down, though the mattress was still tilted at an odd angle. The crib, though not dismantled, was covered with an old tarp.

Zoë sat on the bed, wearing a silky, lilac pajama top, holding the bottoms, having been distracted by a thought before she’d finished dressing. Wash couldn’t remember the last time they had ever worn pajamas to bed. He searched his heart for what to do, but his heart was still MIA. Trembling with trepidation, he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, Zoë, how are you?”

Zoë jumped up immediately pulling away, busying herself with dressing, brushing her teeth, turning down the covers.

“Captain got us a job.”

Disappointed, Wash just stood by the bed and let her whirl about like a leaf on the wind. “I heard. How are you doing?”

“A little sore. Doc is taking the stitches out in a few days.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We’ll get a decent take on the next job.”

“Zoë, I’m not interested in the next job,” Wash interrupted irately. “I’m interested in you.”

Zoë stopped fluffing the pillows, looking at him without seeing. “I’m shiny.”

“That’s what you’re telling the rest of the crew. I’m your husband. You can tell me the truth.”

Now it was Zoë’s turn to be irate. “The truth is I’m fine and I don’t need you telling me who you are.”

“Yes, you do!” He hadn’t come here for a fight. Why was this happening. “You are pushing me away, treating me like just another ship mate. And not even one you care about! Like Jayne! You’re treating me like Jayne!”

“I don’t need your counsel. I’ve seen worse loss than this!”

“Worse than losing your child?! Zoë, listen to yourself! It’s hardly been a month and you are running around the ship, buried in the next job.” As soon as he said it, the memory of their lost child deflated him.

“I’m focused on the task at hand.”

“You haven’t talked to me at all,” Wash cried. “I can’t imagine what you’re thinking. I can only hope it’s the same thing I am. I’ve lost a child too! And it hurts like hell! You carried this baby, you must feel something!”

“So long as those feelings don’t get me killed next time I go out,” she answered icily. The words welled within him now. He was responsible. But instead of being angry with him, she was stone.

“Fine. Don’t feel.”

“I—”

“Baby, I want to be here for you, really I do, but I’m not nearly strong enough,” Wash whispered. “If you’re strong enough, then I need you to see me through this. I need you here. Really here. You and not some plastic warrior woman who feels nothing. I need my wife! The one who loved this baby as much as I did...”

He was in tears now, still standing beside the bed. She was by the wall, as far from him as she could be and still be in the same bunk. Her face was turned away, her body rigid as merciless marble. Her voice was cold and hollow as the black.

“You may not see me crying, but don’t think for a second that I didn’t care about this child.”

When he didn’t answer, she started rearranging the pictures on the bureau. He searched the statue before him for signs of his wife. Finally, she paused and in the broken mirror, he was a single tear roll down her cheek.

“It’s my fault,” she whispered. “I wasn’t strong enough to save him.”

Overwhelmed, Wash rushed to her side and wrapped her in his arms. There was nothing left to do but cry together.

As he held her, he sobbed, “I’ve missed you, wife.”

\*~\*

Mal entered Inara’s shuttle without knocking. Seeing as she was unconscious at the moment, it didn’t seem to make much difference. River lay on the bed next to Inara, painting fresh rouge on her lips. Mal smiled inwardly at the care River and Kaylee had showered on Inara. He knew the companion would hate to be underdressed for the crew’s daily visits, even if she was unconscious.

“Hey, little one. How is she?”

“Just sleeping now,” River assured. “She’ll wake soon.”

“That so?”

River nodded and skipped out of the shuttle.

Mal circled the bed, wanting to touch Inara, but he restrained himself, instead he picked up a book and started reading one of the poems inside – Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Seemed that life on the blue and out in the black were similar enough ... he only hoped he’d do better than the Mariner of protecting his crew.

Suddenly the book slipped out of his hands and clattered to the floor. As he bent to pick it up, Inara stirred.

“Hey there. Welcome back to the land of the living?”

Her beautiful brown eyes were hazy, unaccustomed to seeing. She coughed and he gave her a sip of water.

“You see me...” she murmured as soon as she could speak.

“I do.”

Confusion clouded her face. “Are we dead?”

“You were dead. But you ain’t anymore.”

“Am I?” Here head tilted side to side, her memory still fuzzy. “Where?”

“On your shuttle,” Mal said, hoping he was answering the right question. “I thought you’d prefer to recover here. Plus, all the beds in the Infirmary were full for awhile.”

“My shuttle?” she repeated. “You came for me.”

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“I thought you were dead. I watched for you on Osiris. You didn’t come.”

“It was a trap.”

“I didn’t think that would stop you.” Her voice was returning. The decorum, the charm. The irritation whenever she spoke to him. Mal smiled broadly, as though the last pieces of the puzzle were coming together.

“Tell you what. Next time someone uses you to bait a trap for me, I’ll be sure to walk right into it.”

There was that graceful, superior laugh on her lips. “That won’t be necessary.”

Mal let her collect herself for a few moments and busied himself finding the shelf where he’d picked up the book. He finally just laid it horizontally across the top and turned back to Inara. Her eyes had the squint of perplexed concentration.

“Prio?” she asked.

“Dead.”

“Jantis?”

“Less than dead, but it’s on my to-do list. You up for company?”

He nearly laughed at the alarmed look that crossed her face. He wondered if he could prolong that hilarious look of angst. “I mean, well everyone has been coming through anyway, but they’ll probably come much more quickly now that you’re awake.”

\*~\*

Inara had been staring at the unlit incense for hours. The altar had gone fallow, her faith but a hollow memory. She had been invisible, unseen, uncared for. The deep spiritual peace she’d known since her youth seemed contrived now – as though it had never been more than an imaginary friend. She considered removing all the old religious icons from her shuttle... or packing them away until she decided whether she wanted to try her faith again.

“Am I interrupting?” a soothing voice asked.

“Shepherd Book ... not at all.”

“Were you praying?”

Inara gave a short, uncertain laugh. “Hardly. I’m afraid my faith is still in recovery.”

“I’m sure a faith crisis is common after the trauma you’ve experienced.”

Inara nodded, wanting to ask him if he’d ever wandered far from faith and if so, how had he found his way back.

“Did you come just to visit?” she asked politely.

“Oh, no,” he said, remembering his purpose. “We’re cooking the last of the fresh food tonight. I know the young doctor still has you on the liquids, but it’s going to be protein mash for the next two weeks till we get to Constance.”

“Thank you, I’d love to come,” Inara smiled.

As she walked beside Shepherd Book, Inara felt herself praying for the first time in a long time. They saw her. They all saw her. And they'd risked everything to come for her. It made her heart rejoice.

As she stepped over the doorway into the dining room, dinner was already in full swing. Jayne reclined in his chair, plate already clean, telling stories about the days he and Elle ran together.

"Is her name really Jen?" Mal asked.

"Depends on the year."

River argued with Simon about the proper placement of the silverware on the table. Zoë and Wash held each other a little tighter than usual, but were up for the good cheer. Kaylee's eyes were red with old tears, but brightened when she saw Inara. Two candles burned on the table in honor of Saskia and Little Malcolm.

"So Jayne," Kaylee interrupted as Jayne was telling about a particularly cold night on Greenleaf. "Did you and Elle or Jen or whoever ever get together?"

"No, that'd be sick!" Jayne balked. "She's my cousin!"

"You're cousin!" Zoë repeated incredulously.

Inara took a seat next to Mal and smiled. "That explains so much."

"Not enough," Mal shook his head, shoveling more food into his mouth.

"How could you not know it was winter?" Wash asked, returning to the story.

"Not everyone sits on the cortex all day checking the weather channel, Little Man."

"I don't sit on the cortex all day!"

"What else would you be doing up there in that chair all day?"

"Hello! Pilot!"

"I can think of a few things," Zoë mused.

"Not at the dinner table, please," Mal warned.

"Why did you wait till now to tell us now that she's your cousin?" Simon asked.

"What are you mad at me for? Preacher knew Jantis and kept his mouth shut."

Book offered a placating smile, but said nothing in his defense.

"Got nothin' to say Preacher?" Jayne challenged.

"Are you looking for a fight?"

"We can take this outside."

"Put your space suits on, it's a mite cold out there," Wash interrupted.

"Weather channel," River giggled and the whole table burst into laughter. Inara watched, listened, and prayed again.