

That Went Well  
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*The crew is marooned on Perth and Mal learns that he's not as alone in the 'verse as he once thought. Canon pairings. About a year post-BDM. Thanks to AgentOmega for beta.*

PART 1:

They were marooned. Mal remembered that much right off the bat – literally. Consciousness found him flat on his back with Zoë cradling his concussed head (damn baseball bat!) while Jayne shouted obscenities at Serenity's silhouette disappearing into the sunrise. Immediately concerned for his crew, Mal pushed up to his elbows, ignoring the stars exploding behind his eyes. Inara and Kaylee watched him hopefully; Simon struggled to keep pace with a ranting Jayne who was bleeding from the shoulder; River sat tucked on a rock, her chin resting on her knees. Fortunately, she wore her boots today, but in general the group was not prepared for the weather on Perth this time of year.

"Report," Mal grunted. Zoë clasped his hand, pulling him to sitting. She looked relatively unscathed considering.

"Just the clothes on our backs, sir," she answered quietly.

"I've been left with less," Mal commented, though he was not encouraged by the memory. "Where's the nearest town?"

"Hard to tell in this light."

"I'm sure that was the point."

"If there is a city nearby, it's east of us. Thought I saw it just before the sun peeked. There's a wooded valley between us, but I'm sure we could walk it in a day or two."

Mal stood as quickly as his pulsing head allowed. "Let's get walking, then."

"Captain," Simon began, coming toward him, cloaked in his doctorly confidence. He must have been in the middle of something in the Infirmary when the attack started because he still wore a white apron over his clothes.

"Son, ain't nothing you can do but look me over and say I'm not dead," Mal dismissed, then raised his voice to address the others. "Let's move."

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Inara, Kaylee, Simon, and River walked shoulder to shoulder as much as possible, but still shivered whenever an icy breeze came through. Simon had wrapped his apron around River's bare shoulders. Mal led them between the trees, looking for the smoothest possible path. Zoë scouted ahead, making sure they kept direction while Jayne prowled in zig-zags seeking water, food, or anything else that might be useful. Unfortunately, it was winter and most of the plants were dead. Mal blinked, disheartened. Even his eyelids felt cold.

Kaylee had tried to cheer their journey with a walking song and River had joined her briefly. Simon seemed too distracted and tense with worry to sing and Inara just kept her eyes downcast and walked gingerly. By mid-afternoon, they were too parched and hungry for talking.

“Mal,” Jayne called, emerging from the woods and trotting toward the group. “There’s a dried stream bed starting about half a mile into the woods back that way. If we follow the bed a ways, maybe we’ll find a fistful of water.”

“A water source is a good start to civilization,” Mal agreed, then raised his voice and summoned Zoë back to the group.

“Couldn’t hurt,” she answered when he suggested the detour. “We should be careful not to go too deep into the valley. We need to have enough height come nightfall to check for city glow and get our bearings.”

“We’ll find a way.”

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The rocky bed had dried for the season and Mal began to worry. It was nightfall before the spring water moistened the rocks even a little, and the moon was nearly set before the water pooled deep enough to drink. When the water reached a steady ankle-depth, Mal decided it was time to set down for the night. Days on Perth were short, but he hadn’t given his crew a break. He appreciated that none of them had complained about the long journey. It took about twenty minutes to find a spot that didn’t look frequented by large carnivores (though they hadn’t seen more than a few birds all day).

“You sure this is the spot?” Kaylee asked, her eyes begging for rest, her body trembling. As soon as Mal nodded, she collapsed to the ground in exhaustion, laid flat on her back, and threw one arm over her eyes. It broke Mal’s heart to see the weariness shaking through her body.

Simon knelt by the stream, taking a quick sip of water, before gathering some for River. The girl was both shivering and sweating, her body wound tighter than a new watch. She clutched the white apron around her shoulders, drinking from Simon’s hands. Mal immediately saw the reason behind it – Simon didn’t want the icy water to steal any more warmth from her body than was required to keep her hydrated. River curled as much of her body under her dress as possible, closing her eyes and rocking slightly. Simon tried to massage her shoulders, but she shrugged him off.

Inara knelt gracefully near the stream and cupped her hands, shivering as the icy water touched her fingers. She didn’t drink much, probably because it only made her colder to do so. Jayne disappeared into the woods at the call of nature and Zoë took to gathering twigs and branches in preparation for a fire. It would be a difficult decision – making the fire. He had to balance their need for warmth and their need to not be found building fires by the wrong people.

Mal started arranging the sticks as soon as Zoë dumped them on the ground, more for something to do than anything else. He had no matches, no flint, and no gunpowder. Survival gear always included one such item, as fortuitous lightning strikes had a well known liberal bias. Jayne returned and sat near him and Zoë. Inara joined the circle. Despite there not being an actual fire, they still gathered around the collection of branches and brush as if there was warmth to be had.

“Kaylee?” Mal called, noticing she hadn’t moved.

She moaned tiredly and Simon rushed to her side with a handful of water. “Bao bei,” he whispered, cradling her head, “you should drink.”

Kaylee groaned and brushed his hand away, splashing the water onto the ground. Simon went stiff, moving to check Kaylee's pupil response, but Kaylee caught his hand tenderly and pulled him toward her. Softly, she kissed him, coaxing his lips with her tongue until he relaxed into it, looking for all the worlds like she didn't remember she was lying, freezing, and marooned on Perth.

Mal could see the stress melting out of Simon as he kissed Kaylee and he relaxed a little too. When he looked around he caught sheepish smiles blushing across Inara's and Zoë's faces and an approving leer from Jayne. Kaylee peeked one eye open to look at River and Mal followed her gaze. The tension had almost completely melted out of River as well. It was then Mal realized that Kaylee knew exactly what she was doing.

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## PART 2:

The crew was all lined up like sardines in a can, trying to steal warmth from each other as they slept. Zoë, River, Simon, Kaylee, Inara, and Jayne. Mal had taken first shift to watch over them. There was no fire, but every now and then, Mal would furtively rub twigs together to attempt one. They'd built their line around Kaylee who seemed to have no intention of moving until absolutely necessary. She and Jayne were the only ones sleeping soundly at the moment. Mal knew Zoë was too light a sleeper to not stir every time River jerked awake. Simon sat up with his sister, getting her to the edge of the woods every time she was sick, getting her water after, and keeping her as warm as possible. Kaylee treated his coming and going as commonplace, and Mal wondered how common it was. Each time Simon returned, Kaylee lifted and arm and snuggled instinctively closer to him.

Inara, Mal could tell, was not sleeping at all. He'd been watching her for awhile now, and never once had her breathing fallen into a restful rhythm. Every now and then, she'd open her eyes and gaze skyward. She'd been quiet all day – even when Mal left himself open to some fairly good burns.

Jayne had his arm slung around both Inara and Kaylee, resting in such a way that Mal vowed to come between them as soon as his shift ended. Inara didn't seem to mind, though. In fact, she nestled a little closer to Jayne than Mal would've expected.

Mal rubbed his hands together, trying to restore circulation to his fingers. His shift was nearly over, but he was holding off waking Zoë, because his first mate had been disturbed enough by Simon and River moving about. Standing and circling his crew, Mal knelt by Inara and placed a hand on her cheek. Her eyes opened immediately, not at all tired or disturbed. Just surprised.

"You need to sleep," he whispered. "There's plenty of time for thinkin' when we're walking tomorrow."

Her face suddenly scrunched like she was trying not to cry, and her icy hand fell over his. Gently, soothingly, he grazed his thumb over her fingers. He couldn't remember ever touching her and having her hold on. Inara always pushed his hand away. Always.

"I can't ..." she whispered hoarsely, then choked, her hand finally retracting from his. Mal didn't let go. Instead, he reclaimed her hand and rubbed warmth into her fingers, as if that was his original motive for reaching out to her.

“Don’t have to hold onto me,” Mal told her softly. “I’m holding onto you.”

Breathing life into the words, Mal woke Zoë for her shift, and then burrowed in between Jayne and Inara, getting the merc’s hand firmly off the women. Jayne hardly seemed to notice, and he pressed close to Mal, his arm falling lazily over Mal’s hip. It didn’t take Mal long to realize why Inara had huddled closer to Jayne. The man was a gorrām furnace, to the point where Mal briefly imagined all of them sleeping around Jayne like they would a camp fire. The notion nearly made Mal laugh outright, but the fact was Jayne’s arm resting on him was as warm and an electric blanket.

Mal wasn’t quite sure how to rest his own arm comfortably. It felt odd to flop it over Inara and Kaylee the way Jayne had done, but even odder to rest it on his own side. Inara finally decided for him, pulling his arm around her waist and tucking it between her belly button and the small of Kaylee’s back. It was a cozy spot and kept his fingers warm.

Inara leaned easily against him and was asleep within minutes. Mal must have fallen asleep very shortly after that, because the next thing he remembered was the sudden swoop of cold air against his back when Jayne got up for his shift.

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Mal awoke to the sweet smell of Inara’s shampoo and the hideous sound of River dry heaving. Inhaling a mouthful of Inara’s hair, Mal raised his head from the rocky ground and squinted into the dimness of sunrise. Simon sat on a rock, still as a statue, silhouetted by the morning light, watching his sister tiredly. River crawled along the perimeter of their camp, her muscles trembling, and her body unwilling to stop. Inara, Kaylee, and Zoë slept soundly in a line.

“Where’s Jayne?” Mal asked Simon, trying to disentangle himself from Inara without waking her.

Simon looked at Mal, his eyes glazed with exhaustion, then pointed downstream. “He went hunting about an hour ago.”

Stretching his muscles, Mal stood and took stock of their surroundings. The area was significantly more exposed than he had suspected in the darkness and their unlit firewood was covered with frosted dew. He glanced again at River, who hadn’t looked so shaky since she’d crawled out of her box that first day on Serenity.

“How is she?”

Simon shrugged. “Suffering withdrawal.”

“So she’ll get over the symptoms?”

Simon nodded, his eyes floating between River and some distant land far from here. “These symptoms, yes. But then we’ll be left with ones far worse.”

Mal nodded, all the more concerned with getting the group walking again. He and Zoë had pinpointed the location of a city the night before and he had no intention of making his crew sleep on the hard, frozen ground a second night. “Don’t worry, Doc,” Mal said. “We’ll find her somethin’ by tonight.”

Simon didn’t seem to hear. He simply watched helplessly as River prowled in circles like a caged, sick tiger.

Kaylee was next to wake, stretching lithely and slithering out of the space between Zoë and Inara without disturbing either one. She crawled to the water’s edge and

took a few tentative sips before sitting back on her ankles and sighing. With a weak but rested smile, she turned to Simon and Mal.

“Morning.”

Mal couldn't help but smile back. Kaylee hobbled back toward them, the limp sourced either from blistered feet or cramped muscles, Mal couldn't tell. She patted Mal's arm appreciatively when she passed, but focused her attention on the exhausted Simon, rubbing his shoulders until he closed his eyes and leaned against her.

Mal turned away from the happy couple, wondering when Jayne might be coming back, and filling the time by surveying the crew. He could tell by the scrunch of Zoë's eyelids that she was not fully asleep, but he vowed to let her rest as long as possible. Inara blinked tiredly, and sat up, rubbing her eyes. Without standing or crawling, she scooted to the water's edge, taking slow sips. It wasn't until she started rinsing her feet that Mal noticed she wore open-toed sandals. He'd been worried about River, but it was Inara who was practically barefoot!

“River,” Simon choked tiredly, making Mal turn in search of his little Albatross. River had nearly disappeared into some brush at the forest's edge. Simon tried to stand, but Kaylee pulled him firmly back down.

“Captain'll get her,” Kaylee told Simon, shooting Mal a look. Without even thinking, Mal obeyed the implicit order.

“River,” Mal called softly, squatting near River, worried he might startle her.

“I found it,” River whispered back, her face near the ground.

“Found what?”

“Fire.”

Mal looked where River's face hovered and sure enough, she'd uncovered a small patch of blue-grey flint stones. He reached to collect a handful of the sharp stones, moving tentatively, as if they might disappear.

“Now all we need is some steel,” Mal whispered. “What kind of boots are you wearin'?”

“Soft leather,” she smiled. Suddenly her head dropped and her breathing became labored. With a tender hand on the small of her back, Mal guided River back to the circle, then rushed to the stream to get some water for the girl.

Kaylee was sitting on the ground, her arms wrapped around Simon, who had fallen asleep against her chest. It eased Mal's mind to know they would worry about each other, so he needn't bother. Kaylee's hand lightly stroked Simon's hair, soothing him easily. River crawled over, rested her head on Simon's thigh, and looked ready to fall asleep herself.

“You should've taken a shift last night and let him sleep.”

Kaylee shook her head, smiling gently. “Oh, he won't sleep more than twenty minutes,” she assured. “Not with River like this.”

“We got a long walk ahead of us.”

“He'll have it easier than anyone,” Kaylee said, admiring Simon. “Unlike the rest of us, he ain't addicted to caffeine.”

Mal suppressed a groan, suddenly identifying the source of that low-throbbing headache he'd originally attributed to the concussion he'd gotten the day before. For her part, Kaylee cooed happily over Simon, who smiled lightly in his sleep. Those two, he wasn't worried about at all.

“Ready for sushi?” Jayne called, appearing a little ways down stream, coming toward them with a skewer full of fish and crawdads.

“Always,” Mal answered, his mouth watering in anticipation.

“No luck on the fire?” Kaylee asked, her nose scrunching.

“Not unless one of you has steel-toed boots.”

Jayne reached into his boot and pulled out a small utility knife. “I got this.”

Mal’s jaw dropped, not even caring how Jayne had kept hold of the little knife when all the rest had been stripped of their weapons. He took the flint from his pocket, took the knife from Jayne, and a good thirty minutes of swearing later, they had a fire.

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### PART 3:

They got a later start than Mal would’ve liked, but by that time, their stomachs were full, Zoë and Simon were as rested as they were going to be, and they’d managed to thaw out all their frozen limbs by the fire. River had been shaking so bad that within the first ten minutes, Simon picked her up and carried her. At mid-day, they took a break to rehydrate, after which Mal took a turn carrying River. Her body alternated between flashes of heat and shivering chills. She rested her face against Mal’s breast, her eyes glazed and defeated, utterly fed up with her deteriorating condition. She murmured softly to Mal, verbally reflecting his own thoughts like a sounding board. It almost helped hearing her give voice to his plans once they reached town, but it irked him severely that River knew how often he thought of Inara.

As the sun set, they settled briefly by the stream, which had become a full fledged creek at this point, and Jayne set out trying to repeat his morning miracle of producing fish. He managed only two small ones, which they split and ate quickly. They were getting closer to town, and the small snack would have to be sufficient until then.

Without anyone asking, Jayne scooped River up and carried her along the way. He’d been doing helpful stuff like that a lot since Miranda. Mal mused that Jayne must not be thinking on anything, because River quickly fell asleep in his arms. Mal matched his pace with Inara; her arms were wrapped tightly across her chest as she stepped gingerly along the path. She hadn’t spoken a word since the night before and Mal worried that she was mad at him. As was his way, he deflected any emotional conversation by addressing the business at hand.

“I figure you and me should walk into town ahead of the others.”

Inara nodded, but kept her eyes firmly fixed on the path her feet were walking. Mal continued talking, wanting to explain her part in the plan fully, even though she hadn’t asked.

“We’ll say your ship went down just outside of town. I’m just –”

“I understand the concept, Mal,” she cut him off curtly. “It’s not the first time we’ve played the respectability card.”

Mal nodded, a little concerned by her sharpness, but not wanting to show it.

“They won’t believe us at first.”

“Then we’ll tap into my accounts. We don’t need their charity.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

Inara's jaw set firmly and she quickened her pace to walk ahead of Mal. He was somewhat stunned by her brusqueness, but more stunned by the speed she could walk when she wanted to. Zoë fell into step next to Mal, a sympathetic look on her face.

"She'll come around, sir. This ain't the first home she's lost."

Mal stiffened slightly. "Serenity ain't lost yet."

"I know that, sir," Zoë answered quietly. "But Inara don't."

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Mal didn't like leaving Zoë and the others at the edge of the woods, but such was the plan. He wasn't about to bring the whole crew into an unfamiliar town and hope for charity. He needed to test the waters first and make sure it was safe.

Inara was practically tottering on her feet by the time they reached the edge of town, either from chills, hunger, or the blisters on her feet. As they crossed the gate into the main square, Mal instinctively put an arm around her waist to hold her up.

"I'm fine," she insisted, pulling away from him.

"Just humor me, 'Nara. We got an act to pull off."

Inara nodded, letting the temporary indignity be masked by the part she played in this charade.

"There," she said, nodding toward a reputable establishment bearing the sign Biltmore Plaza Suites. Mal knew they'd turn their noses up at a pair of mud-covered marauders wandering in. He scanned down the street and pointed to a tavern a few blocks down.

"What about there?"

Inara shook her head. "Companion respectability means nothing there. The Biltmore franchises are always amenable to Guild members. They probably have my name on file."

"Will they recognize you?" Mal asked, more interested than concerned.

"No. I've never taken clients on Perth."

They entered the hotel, and as Mal expected, received a cold welcome. The glittering chandeliers made the gold-flecked floors sparkle, and every surface looked polished and clean. Vases with fresh flowers lined a mantle into a classy dining room with a grand piano. Inara pushed off of Mal, unsteadily, and walked half a step ahead of him all the way to the front desk. In the false light of civilization, Inara looked completely beaten and worn, her hair tangled, her dress dusty and wrinkled. It hurt Mal to know that he had done this to her.

"I need two rooms for tonight," she stated to the two staff clerks who were firmly ignoring her and Mal. The authority in Inara's tone caught them off guard, and the shorter one came uncertainly to the desk.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, we have nothing available," the clerk dismissed, politely.

"Please," Inara responded, though there was no pleading in her voice. "The Biltmore establishments have always been kind to Guild members. Do not make me report otherwise."

The second clerk bristled and rushed to the desk at the mention of the Guild. "I apologize, ma'am. What did you say your name was?"

"Inara Serra."

The clerk hurriedly entered a few things into the computer, his face scrunched with concern and concentration. "I don't have any joint suites. Is it okay for the rooms to be across the hall, or shall I move one of our other customers?"

"No, across the hall is acceptable. I have no reservation."

"Members of the Guild do not require reservations," the clerk gushed. Mal's jaw nearly dropped at the sycophantic behavior.

"Others," Inara began, but then teetered slightly. Mal was next to her in a minute, catching her before she stumbled. "Forgive me, I need rest," she chuckled disarmingly to the concerned clerks. "Others in my entourage are not far behind and will be coming up later tonight."

"How many keys do you need?"

"Two per room will be fine," Mal answered when it became clear that Inara would not. He ushered her to the fifth floor as soon as they had their keys, chose the room on the left, and sat her down quickly. Her chest rose and fell, rocking her body in rhythm with every breath, and her hand rested lightly over her heart.

"Nara, should I call a doctor?"

Inara shook her head quickly, meeting his eye reassuringly. "I just need food and rest."

Mal nodded, his anxiety melted by her easy grace and certain tone. "Ok," he agreed. "Ok, you lie down and rest a bit while I get the others."

"I think I'll shower first," she smiled.

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When Mal brought the others into the room, he was not prepared for what awaited him. The air was humid and fragrant with the perfume of hotel soap. But when he rounded the bend, Inara lay flopped on her back, legs hanging off the edge, hair soaked, body still glistening, and completely naked!

"Nara," he cried in surprise, but she didn't move. His first thought was that she was dead and he rushed over to the bed, pressing an ear against her chest, listening for a heartbeat. She shifted minutely beneath him, but didn't wake. Assured of her life, he ripped up the bedspread and tossed it over her before the others got too much of an eyeful.

"Doctor," Mal cried, covering his emotion with the need for action. Despite the fact of her breathing, Inara had not moved and hardly responded when he touched her. Simon was busy directing Jayne as to where to set River down. It didn't matter, because River stumbled immediately to the sink to get a glass of water, and then set to raiding the mini-fridge. Mal almost smiled at how immediately at home River appeared in this upscale setting, despite her obvious illness.

"Kaylee, get some ice," Simon ordered, rolling up his sleeves and coming over to examine Inara. She grudgingly obliged to his orders to open her eyes, but was clearly exhausted and in want of sleep. Finally, they just let her crawl under the bed sheets and fall asleep. Jayne leered at Inara the entire time, and when Mal shot him a warning glare, the merc retreated to the shower.

When Kaylee returned with the ice, Simon distributed it among the cups in the room, found a hard liquor in the mini-bar, and poured them all a stiff drink. Mal

collapsed into a chair by the desk and surveyed the situation as it stood. Time to regroup. He'd gotten the crew safe for the moment, but living in a hotel room was not a permanent solution. They were safe, but not well enough for him to start thinking about how to get the ship back.

"Zoë, take Simon and find some food and whatever medicines you can," Mal ordered.

"I found chocolate!" River cried, holding up a small piece of candy for Kaylee. Mal smiled to himself. On any other day, he would have carped about the expense of the small treats, but today all he could think was that there was a whole other fridge in the next room over, and they could get more things delivered.

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Kaylee ran down to the hotel gift shop and bought a touristy t-shirt for Inara to wear so Jayne would stop gawking and waiting for the sheet to slip. When Zoë and Simon returned, Jayne plundered the bucket of chicken he'd been given in ten minutes flat, then flopped onto the second bed in the room while the others worked more slowly through their meals. Zoë took to the showers last and luxuriated in a bath for nearly an hour. Knowing Zoë as he did, Mal anticipated nothing less from his old friend. Simon hadn't found the drugs that he wanted, but managed to find something that made River less feverish and pale-looking.

When the soup arrived, Mal tried to make Inara sit up and drink some, but she groused and swatted like a whiny teenager, hardly opening her eyes. He'd managed to get her to drink half the cup before she vomited it all back up and into the cup again. Mal looked to Simon who merely shrugged and handed him a glass of water.

"Let her sleep a little more, then try again," Simon prescribed quietly.

Disheartened, Mal dumped out the soiled soup, found his own bucket of chicken, and ate. Kaylee listened as Simon and River spoke animatedly about a hotel they had once stayed in on Greenleaf. For those three, home was each other. Mal needed Serenity.

As the food dwindled and the conversation mellowed, Mal started pondering sleeping arrangements, but they took care of themselves. River crawled into bed next to Jayne, claiming that he was warm and thought sparsely. Jayne's arm fell around her lightly, but he was too soundly sleeping to really notice her laying on him. Once Simon got over the shock, Kaylee coaxed him into the next room so they could share a bed. Zoë went into the next room as well, leaving Mal with the decision of whether to sleep next to her or Inara. Mal started to follow Zoë, but she stopped him at the door.

"Sir, you're not seriously going to leave two sick women alone with Jayne tonight are you?"

\*~\*

When Mal awoke, Inara was in his arms. He wasn't sure when she'd rolled there and he was very grateful that Kaylee had had the foresight to buy her that t-shirt. The next thing he noticed was an undercurrent of Jayne's soft swearing. Mal lifted his head off the pillow, and peered across Inara to the second bed. Jayne was propped on his elbows, poking at River lightly.

“Jayne?”

The man jumped a mile, landing on his knees, looking ready for a fight. “Mal, get the Doc! She’s having a fit!” Jayne urged quietly, then returned to looking at River. He rolled her on her side, making sure she could breathe, cradling her head softly. Quickly disentangling himself from Inara, Mal flipped on the bedside lamp and ran to get Simon.

For the millionth time in two days, Mal appreciated the skill with which Simon and Kaylee moved around each other. As much as he worried about the complications of shipboard romances, those two were like folded steel as a team. Simon rolled out of bed, leaving Kaylee sleeping like an angel in his wake.

By the time they returned, River had stopped seizing, but she was still unconscious. Simon did the best he could without his medical equipment, gathering information by questioning Jayne thoroughly.

“Started a few minutes ago,” Jayne said. “Didn’t think much of it. She’s had the shivers all day. This time, she just didn’t stop.”

Simon took River’s hand, unhappily surveying the stash of drugs he’d brought from town earlier. Most of the pharmacies had been closed by the time they had arrived, so there wasn’t much he could do. Any hospital visit meant a wall of doctors and explaining, and none would give him drugs he asked for on first blush. They’d suspect foul play. A few minutes later, River awoke, crying. Simon pulled her into his arms and rocked her gently, leaning against the headboard for support. With hardly a word, Jayne grabbed a pillow and blanket, and fell asleep on the floor.

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Wide awake from the rush of adrenaline, Mal decided he’d take another stab at getting Inara to eat something. Finding the container of cold soup, Mal drained the broth into a mug, and made sure to have a bag ready in case she threw up again. Settling himself comfortably against the headboard, he gathered Inara into his arms and prodded her awake.

Inara looked up at him with deep brown moon eyes, her lips parted slightly in confusion. Even without make-up, her features were smooth and perfect, and Mal believed her to be the most beautiful person he’d ever seen up close. Her wet hair curled wildly of its own accord, and the pale pink t-shirt advertising the Biltmore at Perth looked absolutely ridiculous on her.

“Thought you might be hungry,” Mal said softly when she continued to look perplexed.

“I ... where...?”

“We’re at the Biltmore on Perth. You chose the place.”

“You ... who are you?” she murmured softly, pushing away from him. Her confusion resolved into fear as she looked down at her shirt, then around the room. Simon sat up straighter, concern tightening his lips.

Mal touched Inara’s shoulder and she turned sharply to face him. “Inara, calm down.”

“Who are you?” she repeated, her hands groping the sheets for purchase as both she and Mal knelt on the bed.

Mal captured her wrists gently and pulled her to face him. “Malcolm Reynolds,” he told her, looking her squarely in the eye, his heart pounding fearfully against his sternum. “Captain of Serenity, Malcolm Reynolds. And you are Inara Serra. You live on Serenity.”

Her eyes darted distractedly around the room and Mal could think of nothing else to do but repeat the information over and over again, until she started to say it with him. But he could tell by her eyes it was merely an echo of his words. Eventually she calmed down, her shoulders sagged lightly, and she stared at the small space between her knees and his.

“Why don’t you have some soup,” Mal suggested, nodding toward the cup. When Inara didn’t move, Mal dropped hold of one of her hands and reached around her. Her grip on his other hand tightened when her nose bumped his shoulder.

“Mal,” she whispered urgently. The familiarity had returned to her voice – the momentary amnesia had passed. He leaned back, offering her the cup he had retrieved, but her eyes had not shifted.

“Just eat a little somethin’ and ease my mind,” Mal requested.

Without lifting her chin, she groped the air, nearly poking him in the eye when she neared his face.

“Watch it,” Mal carped, swatting her hand away, sloshing the soup onto the pillow.

“Everything is dark,” she whimpered, her hands and voice trembling. This time, Simon did jump out of bed and cross the room. Mal lifted Inara’s chin and looked into her eyes. The color was almost completely obliterated by the dilation of her pupils, which roved unseeing. Her cheeks flushed and she pressed her eyes closed, trying to control the fear threatening to overwhelm her.

Simon looked at her only briefly before telling Mal, “Get her to a hospital, now.”

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#### PART 4:

The world thundered to the beat of his heart, all light in the ‘verse narrowed to a pinpoint illuminating the path to the hospital. Mal’s skin burned despite the cold, and he ran, singly focused, with Inara in his arms. She wanted to walk, but the blindness slowed her too much for Mal’s liking. She asked him to stay calm; she could feel his pulse racing. Unable to soothe him, she wrapped her arms delicately around his neck, closed her eyes, and tried to be calm enough for the both of them.

Bursting into the emergency room, Mal scanned quickly for a doctor, a nurse, anyone who could help. Simon’s words echoed in his head. The room was wide, sterile, bright, and about half full of bored, tired, and infirmed people waiting to be seen. A few cries emerged from distant hallways, and the air smelled of plaster casting.

“Mal, put me down,” Inara whispered in his ear.

Mal complied reluctantly, keeping one hand on the small of her back to guide her. She clung to his arm, keeping her chin down as she followed his lead. He was glad she couldn’t see herself, hair messed up, wearing a hotel bathrobe over that silly pink shirt.

Mal tried, awkwardly, to smooth her hair as they walked. When they got to the desk, a bored receptionist slid a clipboard across the desk.

“Ma’am, we need to see a doctor immediately,” Mal told the woman.

The woman looked up, considered them briefly, then pointed to the form again. “Fill this out and we’ll call for you.”

“I just spoke to a doctor,” Mal explained. “He told me to get my friend here to a hospital immediately. This can’t wait.”

“It won’t be long,” the woman answered with forced sympathy. “Please, fill out the form.”

“I don’t think –”

“Mal,” Inara interrupted, gripping his arm tightly, her breathing labored.

“Nara!”

Mal’s heart nearly stopped as she gasped and wheezed, her knees shaking. Mal guided her to sit on the floor, watching helplessly as she struggled for air. A dark-skinned, male nurse rushed to their aid, scooping Inara effortlessly in his arms and leading the two down the hall to the nearest open room.

“I’m fine,” Inara insisted as her breathing calmed, but the nurse still placed an oxygen mask over her face. All the while, Mal stayed against the wall, out of the way, and waited for his heart to quit jackhammering against his ribcage. The nurse listened to Inara’s breathing, took a quick medical history, then set out to get her medical records from the Guild. As soon as he left, Inara reclined on the bed and pulled the oxygen mask from her face.

“I think you’re supposed to leave that on,” Mal said, pushing off the wall a little.

Inara smirked, but being still blind, she directed it to the wall a little to Mal’s left. “This,” she said, indicating the oxygen mask, “is how you get bumped to the front of the line.”

Mal’s jaw dropped, incredulously. “Wait, you faked that?”

“Shh,” she chastised, waving him to be quiet. Then she whispered defensively, “It worked, didn’t it.”

“You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Well I couldn’t exactly tell you.”

“You could’ve given me a look.”

“Mal, I can’t see you!”

“I – hey, Doctor,” Mal said, dropping the argument as a white-coated man entered. Inara took cue and put the mask loosely by her face.

“Hello, Ms. Serra,” the doctor greeted cordially, brandishing a handheld computer pad on which Inara’s entire medical history rested. Inara set the mask on her pillow, sat up straight, and folded her hands in the most companion-y way.

“Hello, Doctor. I’d say I’m pleased to see you, but I seem to have lost my sight.”

“You woke up blind?” the doctor asked.

“I – ” Inara began, then faltered, as though she didn’t remember waking up.

“No, she woke up seeing,” Mal jumped in. “She could see, but she didn’t know who she was. Didn’t know anything. No less than five minutes later, she knows my name again, but can’t see a damn thing.”

“Really?” the doctor asked, intrigued, looking from Mal to Inara. Mal looked at Inara who appeared genuinely confused. “This was preceded by a low fever?”

“It’s ... hard to say,” Inara stammered. “Our ship went down... we’ve been walking for two days.”

“She wouldn’t eat,” Mal told the doctor, not wanting to leave out any detail that might help. “I thought she was just tired, but she wouldn’t eat.”

“The blindness is preceded by amnesia?” the doctor mused, as much to himself as to verify. “She didn’t wake up blind?”

“No,” Mal confirmed.

The doctor was nodding again, muttering to himself, making notes on his computer. “We’ve never caught the fever at this stage before. Excuse me, I need to call a consult,” the doctor told Mal before disappearing again.

\*~\*

It was near fifteen minutes before the doctor returned, this time with an older, blue-coated woman holding a pristine folder with fresh, gleaming pages – someone has printed out Inara’s medical file. Mal couldn’t really understand their jibberish, but was unsettled by the frequency of the words “remarkable” and “never seen this.” They were speaking to Inara in quick and excited voices. She listened patiently, nodding her head slowly as if she understood, answering occasionally. It was when the blue coated doctor shoved a pen in her hand and held a form under her blind eyes that Mal jumped in.

“She ain’t signing nothing,” Mal said curtly, taking the pen. Inara didn’t resist and didn’t protest. She simply found Mal’s hand and squeezed it gratefully.

“Now explain in plain terms what it is you’re planning on doing,” Mal demanded evenly, crossing his arms. The two doctors looked a little affronted, but the younger started explaining. He hadn’t gone more than two words before Mal was completely lost. Looking from Inara to the two eager doctors going on about a new treatment for her disease, Mal knew time was of the essence. The urgency in Simon’s voice said that much... Simon ...

“I need to send a wave?” Mal interrupted.

A few minutes and five switchboards later, Mal managed to connect to the hotel room and get Simon on the line. He handed the audio handset over to the blue-coated doctor and she blubbered animatedly to Simon. Mal watched the conversation unfold, confident in his chosen ambassador. Inara smoothed her clothes, but Mal could tell she was just trying to stay calm. After ten minutes, the phone conversation seemed to degrade into the medical version of mud-slinging, and the blue-coated doctor handed the phone back to Mal.

“Recommendations, Doc?” Mal asked.

“They want to put her in a medical study.”

“You don’t sound like you like that.”

“They’ll give you a form with five places to sign. Only sign the first box where it agrees to Phase One of the study.”

“Phase One,” Mal repeated.

“This is an untested treatment, but it’s our best hope. They’ll give her an injection right away that will make her groggy. Don’t let them do anything else until I arrive,” Simon said urgently.

Mal pulled the handset away from his ear and looked at the receiver in surprise. "You're coming in?"

"Mal, listen to me. The treatment is called plasmapheresis."

Mal was about to ask what that meant, but Simon was already translating it to Captain-dummy-talk. Simon was good like that.

"They'll stick two needles in her arms and hook her up to a machine. Do not let them turn on the machine."

"Simon –"

"No matter what, Captain," Simon insisted. "No matter what."

"Don't let them turn on the machine," Mal repeated.

"I'll be there soon."

\*~\*

Mal thought he'd feel better once Simon arrived, but in truth, he felt worse. The shot that was supposed to make Inara groggy had completely knocked her out and she hadn't so much as stirred since. Simon stood next to her bed, talking to the medical monitor screens as if they were people, making quick notes to himself. Inara was hooked up to a machine that filtered her blood, mixed it with something else, and then sent it back into her body. Mal had found himself a chair in the corner and sat, elbows on his thighs, fingers steepled and tapping his lips. Occasionally, he'd run his fingers through his hair, attempting to milk the exhaustion out through the roots rather than succumb to sleep.

Making a few last notes, Simon tipped the chart closed and tapped his fingers lightly against the bed frame. "I should go check on River," he said distantly.

Mal looked up in surprise. "You brought her here?"

"Her medication was part of the deal," Simon nodded. "Inara is in the study, we get 100 platinum straight up, and River gets medicine no questions asked."

Mal shifted in his chair, uncomfortable with the notion of trading Inara's health for money or medicine. Simon must have sensed his doubt.

"The treatment will work," Simon assured. "I know that."

"Just milking the fact that they don't?" Mal clarified, still unsettled.

"I *have* learned from the master," Simon smiled sardonically, giving the monitors one last look before heading out. Mal brushed his hands across his face, wincing at the uneven feel of two-day stubble.

"Mal?" Inara called weakly, finally stirring from her sleep.

"I'm here." Mal wanted to move, but his legs were lead until she summoned him with outstretched hands. He took both her hands, clasping one and holding it to his heart, guiding the other to his face so she, too, could feel his unkempt pre-beard.

"Stop trying to see me," Mal said softly as her eyes roved darkly. "You know how I look. Just close your eyes."

Inara closed her eyes, her hand relaxing against his jaw line. Soothed by her tenderness, Mal turned his head and kissed her palm. She retracted sharply, as she always did to his touch.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to mess up your image,” he laughed, retrieving her hand and encasing it with both of his. “I’m a little foggy on protocol here, because I’m not accustomed to waking up with you in my arms.”

Inara blushed a little. “Professional habit, I suppose. I feel a warm body and –”  
“I don’t need the thought train, Inara.”

She nodded and they spent a moment in silence as Mal studied their joint hands. She wasn’t pulling away from that.

“It was the middle of the night,” Inara spoke up. “Why did you wake me?”

“River had me all riled. And I know how sick you get when you don’t eat.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the food arrived,” Mal explained, wondering if she’d forgotten that as well. He hoped to God she didn’t know they found her naked on the bed. But then, knowing her, she wouldn’t admit to being embarrassed about it. “You were too tired to eat. But I figured since you had a few hours, you ... are you mad?”

“Why do you think I get sick when I don’t eat?”

“You do, don’t you? I mean, you hide it and play like you’re a dainty eater, but you have your five mini-meals a day.”

“What? Are you policing the kitchen?” Inara carped.

“Monitoring, not policing,” Mal corrected. “I stock the food cabinets and I can’t afford to buy things people won’t eat.”

She huffed and pulled her hands free from Mal’s. He hadn’t honestly expected to hold on that long.

“No need to get tetchy.”

“I’m not tetchy,” she scoffed, searching for a retort, but coming up empty. “I’m just ... cold.”

With a sigh, Mal let the conversation drop and found her a blanket.

\*~\*

Something was wrong! The bed rattled. Inara shivered and sweat. Mal had pressed the emergency call button and four people had run in, spewing medical jargon in raised voices. Mal tried to keep up with their diagnosis, but could barely hear over the blaring of the medical alarms. One of the nurses had a needle poised at Inara’s arm when Simon stormed in.

“Don’t give her that!”

“Who are you?” the nurse demanded.

“I’m her doctor. She can’t have that,” Simon said simply, taking the needle. He appeared far too calm for all the alarms sounding, but he strode confidently to the cart, selected a different medicine, and injected that instead. The world calmed and reassociated almost immediately in response. Inara’s eyes fluttered open, roved the room once, then closed, unseeing. Simon turned off the machined filtering her blood and disconnected the tubes.

“Inara,” Simon called gently. “How’re you feeling?”

“Vibrant,” she murmured, chuckling weakly at her own joke.

“There’s no mention of medicinal allergies in the chart we received from the Guild,” the nurse protested, scrutinizing Inara’s chart. “There’s no mention of any allergy.”

“Let me see that,” Simon carped, snatching the chart harshly. He turned to the later pages, making incredulous squeaks as he went. “How does the Guild not know you’re allergic to tuna?”

“How do you know I am?” Inara countered, clearly startled.

Simon thought for a moment. “The Captain told me.”

Inara shot Mal a look, but he missed the brunt of it since she didn’t quite know where to aim.

“Second week you were on board,” Mal shrugged.

“Never mind.”

“It’s not like I’m stalking you! I watch everyone,” Mal insisted defensively, then started counting off. “Kaylee eats almonds, but not walnuts. She has some specialized walnut radar and always leaves a pile of ‘em whenever she eats a Fruity Oaty Bar. Zoë, once a month, gets an inexplicable craving for powdered cheese. River will eat protein in any color but blue –”

“I didn’t know that,” Simon interrupted, looking up from his work, both concerned and perplexed. Mal shrugged off the look, but lost momentum for his defense.

“I stopped stocking it, so there’s not much opportunity to notice.”

“I suppose Jayne eats anything,” Inara continued, relaxing a little.

Mal considered a moment, the softness in his voice mirroring hers. “Jayne won’t eat spinach. He’s got some superstition about it.”

Inara raised an amused eyebrow and Mal relaxed and smiled.

“Simon here’ll eat anything so long as it can be stacked monochromatically on the fork.”

“Okay, that observation crosses the line of food stocking,” Simon warned, holding up a finger to stop whatever came next.

Mal laughed and clapped Simon on the back. “Little River told me that one, but you do eat anything I set in front of you... even if you do turn your nose up first.”

Inara’s face softened a little more, garnering peace from the familiar banter.

“What about you?”

“Excepting the powdered cheese, I don’t stock anything on Serenity I wouldn’t eat myself.”

Simon stopped working a third time and looked squarely at Mal. “Is that why River never gets her plantain chips?”

\*~\*

## PART 5:

Mal slept awkwardly, sitting on the chair, his head resting against the side of the bed, his hand loosely holding Inara’s while she slept. His mind hovered just short of sleep, thinking about the softness of her fingers and how quickly she’d retract them after she awoke.

Inara stirred, sputtered haggardly, gripped Mal's hand and jerked it sharply, unseating his resting head and causing him to bang his brow against the bed frame. A little dazed, Mal lifted his head and Inara jerked on his hand again. Shaking the fuzz from his brain, he focused on Inara and their eyes locked immediately. She could see! But clearly she was frightened, like the time she woke up and didn't recognize him.

"Hey, 'Nara, how are you feeling?" Mal soothed softly, cradling her face.

Inara moved her mouth soundlessly, fell a little deeper into panic, then placed a hand on her throat, sputtering and wheezing. Mal pressed the nurse call button by the bed, then helped Inara sit up and lean forward.

"Can't talk?" he asked gently.

She shook her head.

"Can you breathe okay?"

She closed her eyes, breathing intentionally, placing one hand on her chest. Mal watched, frustrated by his own helplessness, knowing that this time, she wasn't faking it.

"I think you got musical ailments – never wake up with the same one twice."

Inara stopped wheezing long enough to make a face at him and he chuckled lightly.

"Good morning," a nurse in pink scrubs greeted them, entering calmly. "How-"

"She can't talk now," Mal interrupted, not caring for pleasantries.

"That's ... interesting," the nurse said, coming to the bedside, feeling Inara's neck, asking her to cough, swallow, and say "ah". Inara had caught her breath, but sputtered soundlessly when asked to swallow. The nurse went in search of a doctor.

Mal set himself in the chair, out of the way again, watching as Inara sat up straight, folded her hands, and waited patiently for the doctor. 'Morning,' the nurse had said. Mal thought briefly of his crew.

The doctor entered a few minutes later, going through the same motions as the nurse, murmuring to himself.

"Doctor," Mal asked softly, "What is this sickness?"

The doctor kept up his poking and prodding of Inara, addressing Mal without looking at him. "It's called Hitomi's Fever. It's native to Perth, but very rare. Most patients sleep through the first fifteen hours of the fever and wake up permanently blind." He considered Inara carefully, watching her watch him. "We've never caught it early enough to attempt a reversal before."

"And why can't she talk?"

"That," the doctor mused, stroking his chin, staring at Inara as if the answer was written on her forehead. "That is an excellent question."

Mal shifted angrily, seriously considering throttling the doctor, just so he'd have something to do with his clenching fists. He was surprised to feel a hand on his shoulder restraining him from that same action. It was times like this that Mal believed Simon to be just as clairvoyant as his sister. Or perhaps Simon was just moving him aside, because he was blocking the door. Either way, Simon entered calmly, his hair all spiked from running his hands through it, looking like he hadn't slept at all.

"What seems to be the problem?" Simon asked, his voice holding all the professionalism that his appearance lacked.

"Her vocal chords are paralyzed," the doctor answered, perplexed.

Simon did not appear immediately concerned, so Mal relaxed a hair's breadth.

“And?” Simon prompted.

“This is not a natural progression for the fever.”

“No,” Simon criticized sharply. “It’s a side effect of the drug treatment. Hemophalpin and Cytodikaline.”

The other doctor looked at Simon, clearly confused. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“I... huh,” Simon trailed off reflectively, his voice losing the accusatory edge. “I suppose I only discovered it a few months ago... with River... It will pass as soon as the drugs metabolize.”

His tone softening even more, Simon turned to Inara. “It’ll only last a day or so. You might have trouble swallowing.”

Inara nodded, calmed by Simon’s confidence and tone.

“How are you besides that? I see you watching me.”

She smiled a little.

“Any pain? Hypersensitivity?”

Inara shook her head.

“Follow my fingers,” Simon prompted, holding up two. Inara watched him make two sweeps left and right, then took hold of his hand and motioned for the pen. Before she could set ink to page, Mal spoke for her

“She’s hungry again.”

\*~\*

With no windows in the hospital room, Mal had lost track of the hour. Inara mostly slept and he mostly dozed next to her. Simon came in occasionally with food, but the world had tunneled to a pinpoint and Inara was his only focus.

“Sir?” Zoë’s voice called through the haze of darkness.

“Oh, wha...” Mal murmured, the muscles in his neck crying in agony at the move. “Hey, Zoë. What time is it?”

“Just after 1900.”

The time processed slowly through Mal’s brain, causing the world to expand beyond the single room. Mal suddenly felt guilty for not considering his crew and he stood quickly, nearly making his vision black. Zoë ignored his wooziness and handed him a musty smelling coat.

“Thought you might want this before you go out next.”

Mal noticed that Zoë was wearing a fresh set of clothing and carried even more.

“Is that for Inara? Where’d you get these?”

“Second hand store,” Zoë answered. “There’s a ranch partway out of the city hiring day laborers. Jayne, Kaylee, and I—”

“Kaylee?” Mal repeated, another pang of guilt hitting him at the thought of Kaylee working on a ranch all day while he dozed in a hospital. Mal had done his share of ranch work growing up. It was a chore he didn’t readily wish on others.

Zoë laughed off his guilt. “Kaylee’s the bread winner of the day, fixin’ all them tractors.”

Mal smiled and relaxed a little. “I don’t think that girl’s ever seen a machine that don’t speak to her.”

“Do you know where Simon is?”

“I – ” Mal paused, realizing he hadn’t actually left the room since they arrived, though Simon had floated in and out frequently. He vaguely recalled Simon saying River was “up”. On an unrelated note, he also realized that he was in need of a shower and in want of a close shave. Briefly, he considered returning to the hotel room with Zoë, if only to check on his crew. He glanced at Inara, who was awake now and staring vaguely at the blank wall.

“Sir?”

“Have the nurse’s station page him,” he answered.

“No need,” Simon said, entering with River. The girl’s color had returned and she was clearly stable on her feet, but she whimpered and tugged at Simon’s wrist. Zoë set immediately to bundling River in one of the coats she’d brought along, assuring her that they’d leave soon.

Simon offered Mal a bowl of tomato soup and Mal in turn offered it to Inara. She blinked despondently and didn’t ever look at the food. Mal exchanged a look with Simon who shook his head. Wordlessly, Mal set up the food tray by her bed and left the bowl there.

“It’s here if you want it,” he said gently, and then returned to the others. “She won’t tolerate this place much longer,” he told Simon. “I’m going batty my own self staring at these white walls.”

“Our contract here ends tomorrow afternoon. The research doctors will want her to stay longer.”

“She won’t stay,” Mal said, rubbing his eyes, but realizing the image of Inara was seared onto his retinas.

“Go,” River pleaded. “Go now.”

“In a moment, mei mei,” Simon said to her, then turned to Mal. “Captain, when you take River back to the hotel, give her this after she eats.” Simon handed Mal a syringe with green liquid. “And this one later if she has trouble sleeping.” The second syringe was blue. Then he gave Mal a pink one. “Use this one and call me immediately if she starts seizing again.”

Mal looked tiredly at the syringes in his hand, not quite processing Simon’s meaning. “Why am I takin’ her back and not you?”

“I’m working here tonight,” Simon explained, looking slightly abashed. “They’re short-staffed... It’s part of the trade, so we can get the medicine.”

“I should –”

“Check on the others,” Simon finished. “Get a hot shower and a decent meal. I’ll be here with Inara.”

Mal nodded slowly, looking at Inara who still stared vacantly at the wall. He could read it in her eyes – the defeat, the humiliation, and the utter frustration at her illness. He went back to her side and touched her shoulder gently.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” he murmured. “You better have finished that soup before I come.”

Inara sighed, but didn’t even turn her head to look at him. He hadn’t meant to come off so patronizing.

“Would you rather have pudding or something?”

Inara blinked and finally looked at him, not giving an answer. But there was light in her eyes, and intrigue. It warmed Mal's heart.

\*~\*

As soon as Mal walked into the hotel room, his heart lightened nearly three kilos. The room was bright, comfortable, and clearly lived in by now. The air smelled of sweat, soap, and coffee, and Jayne and Kaylee were busy pulling food containers out of a plastic bag. Both looked weary from a long day of work, but satisfied. The bed was piled high with second hand clothing.

"Hey, Cap'n," Kaylee greeted cheerfully. "How's Inara?"

"A little stir crazy, but otherwise okay," Mal answered, pulling Kaylee into a one armed hug, trying to absorb some of her tranquility and mirth. She had lost her usual strawberry scent to the hotel soap, but was otherwise her sunshiny self.

"Well if it ain't old Blackbeard," Jayne remarked, digging his cheap wooden chopsticks into a bucket of noodles and slurping loudly. Jayne hadn't shaved, and from the smell of it, hadn't showered either. "Heard about the money and came back for your cut, eh?"

Mal touched his scruffy face tiredly and didn't bother to comment. Jayne propped his feet up on the bed, and tipped his head toward the showers. "There's a fresh razor in there if you want."

Mal blinked, a little startled, unaccustomed to having his needs met by others. Especially by Jayne. A long shower, a close shave, and a square meal later, Mal sat around the table with his crew, minus Simon and Inara.

"You're sure Inara's okay," Kaylee asked for the umpteenth time.

"Simon's confident she'll pull through," Mal reassured, hoping that Simon had sent him away because he was sure Inara would live, not because he didn't want Mal around when she died.

"Do we have a next step?" Zoë asked.

"If we're setting roots here, I'm not stayin' at that ranch," Jayne grumbled.

"You're free to do what you like. I'm getting my ship back."

"I only meant—" Jayne protested but he was silenced by a look from Zoë.

"In the meantime," Zoë continued calmly.

"Monty," River interrupted them, picking vaguely at her fingernails. They all looked at her expectantly waiting for her to finish. She continued to clean her fingernails with a folded sheet of paper. Finally she glanced around the table, seemingly unaware that she hadn't completed the initial thought. "He has your ship," she explained simply.

"He has *a* ship," Mal clarified.

River rolled her eyes in that patronizing way she had. "No, he has *your* ship."

"Girl, Monty didn't take the ship," Jayne spat.

"Not from us."

"He may be able to help, though," Mal mulled, his mind stewing, calculating how much it might take to hire a friend to steal back your home from a half dozen of hun dan with five Alliance assault rifles and one corked baseball bat.

\*~\*

River had no trouble falling asleep and Mal was grateful, because she'd given him the saddest face when he'd administered the post-meal shot. Mal honestly couldn't fathom how Simon survived those wounded-puppy eyes begging not to be drugged. After stealing all the chocolate off the turned-down beds, River burrowed under the stack of second-hand clothing that Zoë was sorting, folding, and putting into the drawers.

Mal could feel his lids growing heavy, and he tossed around the idea of catching a few winks here at the hotel before returning to the hospital. Kaylee was fast asleep in the second bed and Jayne stood in front of the mirror, meticulously sculpting his goatee now that he had proper tools. It had not escaped Mal's notice that a large fraction of Jayne's first day's wage had gone to purchasing a decent hunting knife and a supply of matches.

Pressing his palms against his thighs, Mal forced himself to stand and help Zoë fold the clothes, slowly unburying River in the process. He noticed Zoë tugging the girl's dress into place and brushing the hair off her face, compelled by some maternal instinct that Mal reveled seeing in his friend, but was rarely privileged to. Following her lead, Mal unbuckled River's boots and pulled them off and he and Zoë carefully maneuvered the sleeping River under the covers.

Once the clothing was folded, Zoë yanked off her own boots and crawled into bed next to Kaylee, leaving the two beds in the second room for Jayne and Mal. Mal was about to grab the key and head over when Jayne emerged from the bathroom, smelling of aftershave, his goatee shaped to perfection. Quietly, Jayne slithered into the bed where River slept.

"Um, Jayne," Mal said, his voice an unsettled warning. "What are you doing?"

Jayne looked over, as guilty as a child with his hand in the cookie jar. "Come on, Mal," he whined. "She's a stone cold killer, but she's all soft and cozy when she's sleepin'."

"No, Jayne."

Jayne was about to protest loudly, but Mal's stern look limited him to quiet grumbling. Mal was sure he heard a comparison of River and Vera surfacing in the mumbles, but he let it slide. Careful, so as not to disturb River, Jayne slipped out of the bed again and the two men crossed the hall into the second room to sleep.

\*~\*

## PART 6:

Mal only slept a few hours before the exhaustion in his body faded sufficiently for the worry over his crew to take charge. He lay in the soft hotel bed, designed for two but able to fit five in a crunch. The pillows were thicker than he preferred and excellent for smothering, though Mal tried not to think in that direction, except toward the men who stole his boat. Dim city light peaked through the pulled curtains, but it was far from morning.

Jayne had not moved since his head hit the pillow. His breathing was regular, but silent, as though he were stalking prey even in his dreams. He lay flat on his back under a single sheet, using one pillow, having thrown the rest of the linens onto the floor. Although Mal had no plan, he knew he needed Jayne in order to get Serenity back. He

also knew that if their first attempt to recover the ship failed, the merc would likely head off to greener pastures. Since Miranda, Jayne had become more attached to the crew, but it was the ship holding them all in once place. The ship and the work... Right now Mal could offer neither.

“Simon?”

River’s voice startled Mal and he jerked up sharply in his bed. He hadn’t even heard the girl enter, but in the dim light, could see her tip-toeing through the room.

“He ain’t here, River,” Mal said, his voice gravelly with sleep. Briefly, he mapped the location of the syringes Simon had given him. “You feelin’ sick?”

“Help her. She’s screaming,” River implored eerily, sitting at the foot of the bed, her hands falling limply onto her lap. Mal rolled onto his knees, donned his shirt, and moved closer to River. Tears streamed down her cheeks and even with Simon’s medicines at ready, Mal felt helpless.

“Why is she screaming?” Mal asked, not understanding the question even as he spoke it.

“Because she *can’t*.”

Mal reached out to touch River, but his hand didn’t connect. Comforting River wasn’t his domain; it was Simon’s domain. And Mal wanted to check on Inara anyway.

“Why don’t we go to the hospital, you and me? You can find your brother.”

“No. Go,” she moaned, and Mal’s confusion doubled.

“River, we go to the hospital or I give you that medicine I got in the other room.”

“No,” River cried again, the wounded puppy eyes returning. “No, don’t. I’ll sleep. I promise I’ll sleep. Just need quiet. Quiet that’s louder than her screaming.”

“Is it quieter in here?” Mal asked.

River nodded miserably, nuzzling into his shoulder. He patted her back uncertainly.

“Then sleep here,” he told her motioning toward the bed. River looked around shiftily, then crawled under the covers and obediently closed her eyes. Mal found the tissue box and set it next to her, but he was still unsure of what to do. Deciding to go to the hospital alone, he crossed into the second room to leave a note for the others. Zoë and Kaylee slept peacefully, but were crunched on the bed in such a way that Mal was sure River had tried snuggling next to them first.

Mal found his boots and River’s medicine, deciding to check on her once more before leaving. After two years of traveling with the girl, Mal knew there was a point where medicine just didn’t help. Otherwise, Simon would’ve kept her in the hospital. When he returned, he found River curled up like a cat on the wrong bed, her head resting on Jayne’s stomach. Her tears were dried up and her body was calm and relaxed. Jayne’s fingers were tangled in her hair, but he looked to have fallen asleep again in the middle of the move.

Folding his arms, Mal considered the unlikely pair. “Li’l Albatross. When I get back, we are going to have a serious chat about this.”

\*~\*

Mal returned to Inara’s room with a hot cup of jasmine tea in a disposable cup, spilling over a plastic lid. He nearly bumped into the nurse as the younger man hurried

out, looking like he'd received a fair talking to. Mal perked at the thought of conversation with Inara, but she sat propped up in a chair, staring out the door right through them. Mal grabbed the nurse's arm.

"What happened?" he asked in a low tone, his voice accusatory.

"She ... fell."

"Don't seem she's rightly placed in that chair."

The nurse huffed in frustration, shaking free of Mal's grip. "It's better than the floor."

Mal let the man leave, and approached Inara cautiously. "What in the seven hells did you say to that boy?"

Inara glared at him so sharply there were sparks.

"Still can't talk?" Mal asked, but she looked away.

"Nara, these folks are just trying to help. It's a kindness they ain't charging us."

He waited a beat, but she didn't respond. He reached for her shoulder. "You look ready to fall out of that chair – "

Inara shot him a venomous look that was probably a toned down version of the one she gave the nurse, but it still made Mal's blood run cold. He nearly dropped the cup of tea in his hands before he remembered it.

"I – I brought you this," he stammered, setting the tea down beside her.

Inara looked at the cup, then at Mal, grateful surprise ghosting over her features. She touched the cup tentatively, worried it was a mirage, then brought it slowly to her lips. The first sip, she savored on her tongue a long minute before swallowing carefully. Her body melted sweetly, her eyes misting ever so slightly, trying not to appear too grateful for the gift. Mal smiled inwardly.

"Hope it's not too sweet," Mal murmured. "I know you like two lumps in a regular cup, but these disposable ones –"

Inara pressed a finger to his lips, her eyes alone saying the tea was perfect. Her fingers briefly grazed his smooth shaved face and she smiled wistfully.

"I know you're restless," Mal continued. "It's just another half day."

She took another slow sip, swallowing deliberately so she wouldn't choke. Mal couldn't stand how this prison was slowly stealing the light from her soul. He had to get her out!

"Come on, let's take a walk."

With a glimmer in his eye, he reached out his hand. She met his gaze, uncertain but hopeful, and held on.

\*~\*

The hospital's roof was a mixture of gravel, concrete blocks, and maintenance accesses. Mal kept one hand on each of Inara's hips just to keep her from pitching forward. Their journey up the stairs hadn't been exactly stable, but the determination in her eyes was incentive enough for Mal to keep pushing. She swayed slightly like a flag in the breeze, clutching her tea cup with both hands, leaning against him. He wanted to wrap his arms around her – to envelop her – but he resisted. Her head rested against his shoulder as they gazed upward at the last few morning stars disappearing. To the west

was Persephone; to the north, Shadow. Mal could locate Shadow in any sky on any world, but he never pointed it out to anyone. It just wasn't his way.

The sun peaked over the horizon bleeding red and gold across the smattering of clouds. A pair of birds landed on the roof, chirped at each other, and flew away again. The air frosted in puffs in front of their faces as they breathed in the scent of city and morning.

"You okay? You need to sit?" Mal asked quietly as Inara leaned into him. "You breathing okay?"

The journey had wearied Inara, but she didn't want to sit. She just sipped her tea slowly, demonstrating that she had sufficient breath control to do that. Mal peeked around her shoulders, catching a glimpse of her chocolate brown eyes. For the first time in days, he saw rest there. Peace. Confidence.

"You warm enough?"

Zoë had thought to bring a coat, but Inara still lacked shoes. Mal had swiped a pair of sneakers from the break room on their way up the stairs, but the shoes were too big for Inara's feet, and still let the chill in.

Inara turned to him with a placating smile that clearly told him not to worry, but Mal couldn't help worrying. He had nothing else to do, what with his ship being stolen. In another hour maybe, he'd meet up with the others and try to get a decent day's wage, but for now, he only had Inara to think on. Mal was about to speak again, but Inara put a finger over his lips. Then softly, delicately, she leaned over and kissed him.

Mal was suddenly lost in a brief forever, the world going warm as her lips touched his. She tasted just like the jasmine tea he'd brought her, and her skin was soft like silk. The kiss was tentative and unsure – as though she didn't know how long to make it last, because she had no clock governing this particular interaction. Mal pulled back from the kiss, uncertainty washing over him as well. It took a moment before he was able to open his eyes again and when he did, Inara gazed lazily at him, her features lax and peaceful. She didn't mind at all that he'd pulled away and she didn't reach for his return.

"You see how things are all fogged up now?" Mal joked and she smiled easily. There was something so comfortable and natural about the way she leaned on him and looked at him, that he couldn't begin to describe it. As if they'd been kissing for years and years. She pulled one of his arms around her waist, just as she'd done the first night they were stranded, and leaned deeper into his body. Her lips parted, soliciting another kiss, and Mal complied with only a short one. He wasn't sure how much of her behavior was an effect of the drugs, how much was their strained situation, and how much was genuinely her. Plus, she had no voice just yet and couldn't tell him to stop if he went too far. Their lips hovered just centimeters apart.

"Hey, get a room," Kaylee shouted teasingly, startling Mal back into reality. Flustered, he pulled back from Inara and resumed his completely innocent hold on her waist, just to keep her steady. Kaylee bit her lip and looked knowingly at Mal.

"Simon, they're on the roof," Kaylee said into a radio as she approached the pair, then looked squarely at Mal. "I figured you'd come some place with a view."

A few minutes later, three doctors burst out of the door to the inside and rushed over to Mal and Inara, poking and prodding, then literally pulling Inara out of Mal's arms and back inside. Her tea cup fell to the ground, half-finished.

“Careful,” Simon carped, appearing at the door, just as they were ushering the tottering Inara through it. He threw an apologetic look back to Mal and Kaylee, then forced his way through the throng to Inara’s side.

“What’s going on?” Mal asked Kaylee when the roof fell silent again. He tried shifting his feet, but they seemed reluctant to move from the spot where he and Inara had kissed for the first time.

“What do you think? You kidnapped their prized patient. The doctors were jumping down Simon’s throat and he was in a panic.”

“She just needed to get out.”

“Sorry I had to interrupt,” Kaylee said sympathetically.

“Weren’t interrupting nothing.”

“Oh?” Kaylee prodded. “It looked like things were going *well*.”

“I wouldn’t say *well*,” Mal denied, ducking Kaylee’s questions by going to the door and tugging on the handle. It was locked. He turned back to Kaylee who was already reaching for her radio, but the device was no longer clipped to her belt.

Trying not to giggle, Kaylee met his eyes. “So here’s something ironic...”

Mal rubbed his eyebrows and scanned for the fire escape. “Definitely not well.”

\*~\*

Simon refused to leave Inara’s side during the last litany of tests and River refused to wait with them at the hospital. Zoë had volunteered to stay at the hotel with River, but the ranch would give her a higher wage as a returning laborer, so Mal stayed with River instead. It was the second day his crew was going out and working to support him with their wages while he sat idle, and he didn’t like it.

Mal and River spent the morning lounging in the hotel’s dining room, River watching the piano man’s fingers with rapture. For his part, Mal found his thoughts drifting more toward Inara than how to get Serenity back. As if she was his home and not the ship. When the piano man stopped for a break, River returned to the table bringing orange juice for herself and half plum/ half cranberry juice for Mal. Seems he wasn’t the only one who monitored who ate what on board Serenity.

“Serenity can’t find us,” River told him matter-of-factly. “We should call her back.”

“Last night, you told me to wave Monty.”

River didn’t answer. She just drank her juice.

“Why’d I find you sleeping on Jayne this morning?” Mal tried.

A pensive smile flashed across River’s face, then a frown. Her hands gestured around her face and ears as she searched for words to explain something that Mal suspected made even less sense to her than to him.

“When I’m far, I hear them all. I hear everything. Waves washing over me and I’m drowning... and there’s too much water to sleep. But when I’m close, one sound can drown out the rest. I sleep and drink slowly but he holds me above the surface.”

Mal scrunched his face, thinking he understood, but not liking it. “What you’re saying is Jayne’s thoughts are easier to sleep through?”

“For now,” River shrugged. “Simon doesn’t like it.”

“I’ll bet not.”

“But he left me alone. He goes where I can’t.”

“He’s looking after Inara.”

“He hears her without his ears and the screaming saturates me.”

Now it was Mal’s turn to sip his juice and wait.

“When can we leave?”

Mal stiffened, noticing that River was getting tense and shifty – like she was ready to throw something. Preemptively, Mal took her drink from her, then the two weaved out of the dining area to the elevators.

“If you don’t call Serenity, she can’t come,” River whispered, looking anxious, and leaning against Mal’s chest.

“I’ll find a way to call this afternoon,” Mal promised, praying he didn’t have to administer any of the drugs Simon had given him. “Simon and Inara will be back, and I’ll call then.”

Reflecting on their conversation, Mal did his best to empty his mind of all the worries, fears, and confusion roiling about so that River would have a stable life raft to cling to.

\*~\*

As soon as Simon and Inara returned, Mal went in search of a comm station from which to wave Serenity. He didn’t know why River kept insisting on it, but if nothing else, he wanted the opportunity to properly threaten the hun dan that had swiped his home and conked him with a corked bat.

“Monty?” Mal cried out, surprised to see the image of his old friend when the vid line finally picked up. Monty head was down, busy fiddling with the controls, but Mal clearly saw the beginnings of a new soup catcher on his chin. It would take years to grow to its former glory, and Mal doubted he’d ever shave it for a woman again.

“Mal, how did you know I was looking for you?” Monty greeted.

“I had a hunch. Is there a reason I called my own ship and found you?”

“Is there a reason you aren’t on your own ship?” Monty countered in jest. “I’m a bit stumped as to how such dimwitted sprites wrested this ship from your hands. Thought maybe our mutual wife was involved.”

“Fact that I’m breathin’ says not,” Mal answered. “How’d you find her so fast? Serenity, I mean.”

“I was in the market for a new weapon and a man tried to sell me this.” Monty held up Mal’s pistol, and it was all Mal could do not to reach out and touch the screen. “I thought the worst.”

“We were lucky, considering,” Mal agreed. “They left us on Perth with just the clothes on our backs.”

“I’ve been stranded with less.”

They both chuckled lightly, though neither were fond of the respective memories.

“I’ll have your boat in atmo in two more days.”

“You’re that far out?” Mal asked, surprised.

“Just slow going. Don’t want to push her too hard. My mechanic don’t have magic fingers when it comes to Fireflies.”

Mal nodded, choking a little at the prospect of seeing his ship come back for him so easily. “Thanks, Monty. I can cover your expenses. Just name the price.”

Monty chuckled a little, considering the offer. “I thought sure I’d find a corpse of you.”

Mal waited a beat, not wanting to encourage any sentimentalism.

“Keep your money, Mal. You’re gonna need every cent to get this boat running again.”

“Or to chase down those ‘dimwitted sprites’.”

“Not much cause for that,” Monty commented. “I can tell you where they’re buried, if you’re really eager. My Papa once told me ain’t no horse that’s too dead to beat.”

Mal said nothing, but Monty kept muttering quietly under his breath. He was sure a price would drop eventually.

“Figure I still owe ya, after Bridget,” Monty murmured, before finally looking Mal square in the eye. “Two days. Don’t leave town, just watch the sky.”

The vid went black and Mal stared at the screen, slack jawed. If the last few days had shown him nothing else, it was that he wasn’t as alone in the ‘verse as he once thought.

\*~\*

## PART 7:

By the end of the third day, Jayne had traded his keep for a high-quality sidearm and a hunting knife. Mal had no idea what Jayne thought he needed such things for when they were working on a ranch to make ends meet. Though he had to admit that if he hadn’t seen his own pistol in Monty’s hand, he probably would’ve sacrificed a few meals for a new sidearm as well. Jayne hadn’t mentioned it, but Mal knew for a fact that three other ships leaving Perth had tried to hire him on as a mercenary. Jayne had bedded the last ship’s cook, but otherwise took no interest, even when offered cash up front.

When it came time to go, Mal found Jayne in the hotel’s gym, pressing weights and working up a sweat. As much as Jayne had changed since Miranda, Mal supposed some things never would.

“Time to go, Jayne. Last chance for a shower.”

Jayne grunted one last lift and sat up, slinging a towel around his neck. “We got showers at home.”

Home. Not Serenity. Home. When had Jayne started that? Jayne stood and brushed past him, heading back up to the room. Mal continued his circle of the grounds to collect the rest of the crew.

Kaylee and River were at the hotel’s indoor pool, tossing an inflatable ball around the shallow end and squealing madly at the game. Ever since Inara had returned from the hospital, River had been sleeping soundly through the nights – a fact Mal was grateful for now that he’d grown sensitized to her sad, puppy eyes whenever Simon had to medicate her. She’d also stopped cuddling on Jayne and that eased Mal’s mind a bit too. When Kaylee had teased him about, Jayne just shrugged and grumbled about the fact that he “weren’t paid to nanny after little sister.”

The room was warm like summer, filled with sunlight, and smelled strongly of chlorine. The floor was slick, and Mal walked slowly so he wouldn't slip. He caught River's eye first, and when she stopped to look at him, Kaylee tackled her and dunked her under the water.

"Hey, play nice or I'll shoot ya both!" Mal hollered. Kaylee looked at him and grinned broadly. River surfaced a moment later and hopped on Kaylee's back, but didn't push her under.

"You coming swimmin', Captain?"

"Not today. You two best hit the showers anyhow, it's time to go."

"Ten more minutes?" Kaylee pouted.

"Checkout's at noon. I told you all this morning. Don't see why I have to collect you now."

"We don't know one home from the other," River explained. "Home is each other."

"Uh huh," Mal grunted, only half listening. "Either of you seen Simon?"

"He's doing laps," Kaylee answered nodding to the far side of the pool. "I'll get him."

Before Mal could protest, both Kaylee and River were swimming away from him to the far side of the pool, making a quick game of who could reach Simon first. He really didn't care if they smelled like chlorine later. He only worried they weren't thinking about the fact that the outdoors wasn't nearly as heated as the indoors and they weren't giving themselves time enough to dry off.

Zoë was exactly where Mal thought she would be – in the hotel's hot tub soaking. She looked so restful, Mal was hesitant to disturb her, and he was startled when she spoke first.

"I know, sir," she said flatly, without opening her eyes.

"I didn't say anything."

"I have three more minutes."

Mal smiled, not at all surprised that Zoë had timed her relaxation to the minute. He didn't waste any more words on her, he just let her be.

He found Inara standing in the cold just outside the front door of the building, dressed serenely in a navy blue gown, dark green cloak wrapped tightly around her shoulders, long black tresses flowing. She shivered and stared skyward. Her voice had returned, but was slow in recovering; she preferred silence to the hoarse sound of her own words. Hands buried in his pockets, Mal closed his coat more tightly around his chest and stood next to her.

Inara pointed up as Serenity burst through a cloud and floated gracefully toward the city.

"There she is," Mal agreed, admiring his ship. "Home."

\*~\*

Mal found Inara leaning on the catwalk as the others bustled around, doing last minute prep for Serenity's departure. Monty hadn't been kidding in implying that the ship was barely space worthy. Most of the valuables had been stripped, but fortunately their ship-nappers hadn't had time to get all the treasures off. A lot of the first few hours had

consisted of transporting the stacks of possessions from storage bins in the cargo bay back to their original homes. The pots and pans hadn't made it very far, nor had Kaylee's tools or Jayne's weight set. But about half of Jayne's gun collection had disappeared – mostly the smaller firearms. Most of the armory, all of their food stock, the mule, Kaylee's pink dress, Mal's best suit. Those were gone. Of all the things looted, Inara's shuttle had suffered the worst, and after a cursory survey, she'd simply come out to the catwalk and waited. For what, Mal knew not. Perhaps for the strength to return and face her violated sanctuary again.

"You need a hand straightening up?" Mal asked her, nodding toward the shuttle.

"Not presently." Her voice was quiet, smooth, and sweet as honey.

"We're headed to Persephone next. Setting a leisurely pace in case there are problems. Should be there in a few days."

"That shuttle won't be ready for clients so soon."

*That* shuttle?! Mal's heart lurched.

"You don't have to work from the back of a shuttle, you know. Can't you set up elsewhere? I'm sure Persephone has a Biltmore Plaza whatever."

Inara looked meekly at her fingernails. "*I* won't be ready for clients so soon," she confessed softly.

His heart faltered again. Much as he abhorred her work most days, her working meant her staying, so as a rule, he didn't discourage it. "Let me know when you're ready," he said gently. "I'll be sure to take you some place nice."

He wanted to put a hand on hers, but he didn't. Now was the test. The fairy tale that was Perth was over. Life back to normal. He waited for her to say something, but she didn't. When she didn't even meet his eye, Mal headed upstairs to check on Kaylee's progress in the engine room.

"Mal," she called, her voice filled with quiet urgency. Mal paused and turned, and she met him half way up the stairs.

"What is it?"

She closed her eyes and her hand wavered in the air, hovering just inches from his chest as if she wanted to touch him but wasn't sure she was allowed. "Mal, things happened on Perth. Things. Unexpected things," she stammered.

"What do you want, Inara?" Mal interrupted impatiently.

"I want to acknowledge that they happened," she said simply. "And acknowledge that they were good."

Mal braced himself for the brush-off to come, but it didn't. Bravely, Inara reached out and cradled his face. Her hand trembled ever so slightly and a soft breath shuddered out of him, relishing the contact.

"I want to build from there," she said.

As gently as she did the first time, Inara pulled his face closer to hers and kissed him as delicately as angels breathe. The world melted into ethereal light and all he felt was her presence next to him, enveloping him with her scent, her touch. His hands rested softly on her waist, then wandered from there. By some mutual signal, they both floated back out of the kiss, and the light slowly sorted into the shape of the world. Mal kept himself from diving back in because he knew if he initiated the kiss it would be raw and animalistic. When she did it, it was like an invitation to a dream, and he kind of liked that

pace better. Even the look in her eyes was like she was watching a dream unfold before her.

“I should clean up ... my shuttle,” Inara said, nodding back toward the door. “I will have to work eventually.”

“Wouldn’t ask you to stop,” Mal agreed, breathlessly.

“I could use a hand when you’re done out here.”

Mal blinked, his brain still struggling to function. Serenity. He needed to fix his ship. Inara disappeared into her shuttle and Mal stood on the stairs, trying for the life of him to remember where he’d been headed.

“We’re ready to break atmo, Captain,” Kaylee called, peaking her head into the hallway. Mal looked up in surprise. He had been headed to the engine room.

“Cap’n?” Kaylee prodded, giving him a significant grin. Mal met her eye, a mischievously eager glint in his own.

“Tell Zoë she has the con,” he ordered, striding purposefully toward Inara’s shuttle. “Things are going *well*.”

\*~\*