

Valley of the Shadow  
A Firefly Fan Fiction  
By Valerie Mikles

*“Even though I’m walking through the valley of the shadow  
I will hold tight to the hand of him whose love will comfort me.  
And when all hope is gone and I am wounded in the battle  
He is all the strength that I will ever need.  
He will carry me.”*

*- Lyrics from “He Will Carry Me” by Mark Shultz*

## PROLOGUE

Mal walked the length of the ship, checking to make sure that all the light bulbs were still burning, no weird smells were emanating from the creases, and that all the snakes lying around were rubber. Their quick escape from Santo had left them short some supplies, and though the engine seemed to be running fine, Kaylee still hadn’t explained to him what sourced the fire that burned her up so.

The tension between Kaylee and Simon was high as a kite, but their conversations had finally reduced from belligerent shouting matches to long fuming silences. Not being a marriage counselor, Mal resolved to stay out of the way so long as both were doing there jobs. Problem was, Kaylee wasn’t. Her initially fast recover had plateaued, and while Mal didn’t blame her, he worried about his mechanic being holed up in the Infirmary too much longer.

Mal cut his round of the lower deck short, detouring past the Infirmary to look in on Kaylee. Through the medbay windows, he could see her resting on the bed in the center of the Infirmary, staring vaguely at the empty air in front of her, as though she were drugged. Mal tried to catch her eye, illicit a smile, but she wasn’t seeing for now. Simon worked patiently, grafting skin onto the burnt part of Kaylee’s left leg. He had on his doctor’s face – serious, calm, and detached. As Simon finished his final stitches and sealed the wound from infection, Mal entered.

His heart wrenched as Kaylee continued to gaze defeatedly at nothing, not even looking up to see him enter. He missed her cheerful smile.

“How’s she doin’?” Mal asked.

Simon shrugged, moving from Kaylee’s injured leg to her paralyzed arm. He started folding and unfolding her wrist, massaging it to coax a full range of motion.

“She’s anxious about something,” he finally answered. “She woke up this morning, said she couldn’t move, and essentially ... had a panic attack.”

Mal could see no trace of anxiety now, only that dead, spiritless look. He assumed Simon had drugged the worry out of her. “Ain’t a little anxiety normal for someone being half paralyzed?”

“Yes,” Simon answered slowly. “And no... This isn’t quite a proportional response to what happened.”

“Could be we just buried a crewman.”

Simon's brow furrowed. "She's upset about Cappy's death, sure, but I've spoken with her about that. And I've spoken to her about the fire. Her anxiety seems triggered specifically by the paralysis. Certain things... Did something happen to her after I left?"

"You mean aside from bein' completely crushed?"

"No something... No... I've immobilized her... she's never reacted so ... strongly... before... This feels different."

Mal snorted uncomfortably. "You're startin' to sound like that sister of yours."

Simon injected Kaylee's wrist with something, then he moved up her arm to the elbow and began massaging that. "How is River? I haven't seen her much since Cappy's funeral?"

Mal started, a little surprised. But then, when Simon had left Serenity, Mal had taken it upon himself to look out for the girl; and Simon hadn't exactly jumped to reclaim that mantle on his return.

"Glued to the bridge," Mal informed. "She keeps muttering something about 'Diana' ... I already checked, it ain't a planet. I'm sure she'll be her old self soon enough."

Kaylee flinched as Simon moved her elbow, but she did not complain, did not retract. The numbness and resignation in her eyes scared Mal – as if every move Simon made were violating her. He took Kaylee's free hand, squeezed it, and patted it assuringly while Simon continued his work. Kaylee's eyes drifted toward him, pleading with him to release her from her drug-induced prison.

"Daddy?" His daughter's voice surprised him as she entered. Emma's dark brown locks were swept back cleanly in a pony-tail, a few ringlets framing her face, a royal blue bow tied on top of her head. If there was one thing Inara insisted on, it was that Emma look clean and proper, and fortunately for her, Emma had inherited that OCD cleanliness gene. She smiled sweetly, which only served to remind Mal that Kaylee had not yet smiled at all today.

"Run along, darlin', the grownups are working," he dismissed.

"But Ms. Kaylee," Emma protested, coming in anyway and finding a chair to pull up alongside the bed so she could see.

"The Doctor is tending to Ms. Kaylee. You run along."

Emma was already kneeling on the chair, scrutinizing Kaylee's expression. "But daddy, she's scared."

Mal scowled at her. "Emma Nandi Reynolds, do not make me carry you out of here."

Suddenly, Kaylee let loose a blood-chilling screech. "No! Stop! Please stop!"

Mal flinched in surprise and Emma's face went white. Irritated with his daughter but also concerned, Mal scooped her up and carried her out of the room, leaving Simon to deal with Kaylee.

"I told you to run along," he chastised Emma as she hung loosely in his arms, a shell-shocked expression on her face. "When I tell you to do something you do it. You know why?"

"Because you're the Captain."

Mal couldn't help but chuckle. "No. Because I'm your daddy and I love you very much."

Emma rested her frightened head on his shoulder as he carried her up the stairs, farther and farther from the memory of Kaylee screaming. They found their way to the galley and he sat Emma on the counter, looking her square in the eye. She had his blue eyes – about the only thing of his he saw in her. That and stubbornness, which she got a double dose of because of Inara.

“Daddy, she’s so scared. I don’t think a hug will help. Not even a hug from Mama.”

“Of course it will, little one. Everybody knows hugs are the best medicine.”

Emma nodded, only half assured, her eyes watery with almost-tears that would never fall. “Hugs and strawberry ice cream.”

Mal smiled, offering a hug, as that was all he had. Emma had only had strawberry ice cream that one time on Haven, but she never forgot.

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## CHAPTER 1

Mal sent Zoë to check on Kaylee armed with Emma’s prescription of a big hug, then carried his daughter to the bridge. The ship on autopilot, River had tucked her knees to her chest and folded wistfully into her chair. Emma leaned down, trying to kiss River on the cheek without falling out of her daddy’s arms. When River didn’t react, Emma kissed again.

“River,” Mal ventured, placing a hand on her shoulder.

At his touch, River inhaled sharply, like a drowning woman just breaking the water’s surface. She looked around the bridge, confused a little as to why she was there, then found her best fake smile for Emma. Though Emma smiled back, Mal wasn’t fooled.

“You want I should take over for awhile?”

“Not now,” River said quickly. “Maybe later... it’ll hit me later.”

“You look hit pretty hard now.”

“I’m...” She smiled, abashedly. “I could be worse.”

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Zoë waited for Simon to leave, the drugs to metabolize, and the angst on Kaylee’s face to fade to apathy before she entered. In stark contrast to Mal’s description, Kaylee looked up right away, her smile pure sunshine.

“Hey, Zoë,” she greeted, a sparkle appearing in her eyes.

“How are you feeling?”

“Shiny as a new penny,” Kaylee lied, bravely. “Only now I can feel everything and it all hurts.”

Zoë smiled back, pulling up a chair to sit next to the bed, watching as Kaylee wriggled her fingers and toes.

“Doc will get you up and about in no time. I see you have him running through the ship doing your job again.” Kaylee had sent Simon on quite a few trips to the engine room to fix small problems, having trained him well over the course of their six year marriage.

“Captain pushes Serenity, she pushes back. She’s not as young as she used to be.”

“You’re not just trying to keep Simon out of your hair?” Zoë prodded, seeing right through Kaylee’s excuse. The mechanic averted her eyes and shifted uncomfortably, fingers still wriggling.

“You want a ratchet or something,” Zoë asked quickly, switching topics. “Your fingers ain’t stopped twitching since I came in.”

Kaylee stilled her fingers self-consciously. She then used her right hand to shift the position of her left arm, cringing slightly. “It’s hard to move. I can’t... you ever been tied down so tight you can’t move?”

“I... yes,” Zoë answered, puzzled. In the time of war, Zoë had been through many horrific prisons, and just the mention of being tied down sent shivers through her spine. “But Kaylee, you’re just suffering some nerve damage. No one’s tying you down.”

Kaylee looked at her gimped left side and nodded. Zoë searched her expression, trying to understand Kaylee’s question

“Kaylee, did you...?” she began, uncertain how to finish the question.

Kaylee interrupted with a brave smile, shrugging off the melancholy like a wet coat. “I’m just feeling useless is all.”

Zoë nodded unbelieving, checking for any signs of... she wasn’t sure what, but her mother’s instinct was screaming bloody-murder. For her part, Kaylee smiled that cheerful, sparkling smile, concentrating on coaxing her left arm to move on its own.

“Mommy, supper is ready,” Jackson interrupted breathlessly as he ran to the door.

“I’ll be right there,” she told him, then turned back to Kaylee. “Did you want to come?”

Kaylee smiled and shook her head. “I’m too tired to ... sit,” she finished lamely. “Bring me something later?”

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River picked at her food more than ate it. Inara wasn’t sure anyone else noticed, but she did. She watched as River swirled the multi-colored protein meal until it became a brown mesh, exiled to the edge of the plate so that the middle looked clear. Mal would be angry at her for wasting food, and with Cappy gone, there wasn’t really a scavenger around picking scraps off other people’s plates. Finally, River left the table and curled up on one of the couches in the lounge area. When the conversation waned, Inara could hear River humming softly, one of the songs Cappy used to play on the guitar.

Emma ate her food slowly, methodically dividing the protein by color, and eating monochromatically around the plate. Accustomed to fresh food, Jackson picked at his meal and whispered his disapproval to Zoë, who calmly advised him to eat what was set before him.

“Have you made contact with French?” Zoë asked.

“Don’t want to send a wave this far out,” Mal answered, consuming his meal matter-of-factly. “Can’t afford to attract that kind of attention to ourselves.”

“You really think they don’t know we’re here?” Simon asked.

“I’m sure they know Serenity’s here. I’m just hopin’ they don’t know that you’re here, Doc.”

“Daddy, why don’t you want them to know Doctor Simon is here?” Emma asked innocently, rotating her plate so that the blue food was before her.

“Because they are bad men who want to take Doctor Simon away from us.”

“Mal,” Inara chastised, putting a hand on her worried daughter.

“Do they take kids?” the little girl asked, swallowing fearfully.

“Only the –”

“No, sweetie, they won’t take you away from us,” Inara assured, cutting Mal off before he could say something damaging.

“Was Doctor Simon bad?” Jackson ventured, worry tracing his face as well.

“He wasn’t bad at all,” Zoë said quickly. “That’s why we’re hidin’ him. Now finish up your food.”

“How is Kaylee?” Inara asked, switching topics, wishing she’d found time between Emma’s lessons to visit.

“She has some swelling in her joints, but she’ll recover,” Simon answered.

“Seemed okay when I spoke to her,” Zoë added, exchanging a glance with Inara that plainly said she should speak to Kaylee herself. The conversation continued roaming around ship business, what to expect on Persephone, and the general need for rosemary to add flavor to their dinner.

When Emma had finished her meal, she leaned over and whispered in Inara’s ear, requesting to be excused. Inara looked quizzically at her daughter. Ever the conversationalist, Emma rarely asked to leave the dinner table early.

“Sure, sweetie,” she whispered back.

With a little help, Emma slid gracefully from her chair, climbed onto the couch where River had curled up, and gave her a big hug. River broke into a grateful smile and hugged Emma back.

“Hugs are the best medicine,” Emma informed River.

“Hugs and strawberry ice cream,” River agreed.

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## CHAPTER 2

Evening meshed into morning without sleep. Past, present, future. As morning waned, the ship continued, not noticing her. No footsteps outside her door. River turned the needle over in her hand, watching as the pale, green liquid in the syringe lolled and resettled. She shouldn’t have been working air into the meds, but she had no intention of taking them anyway. Four years, it had taken for Simon to find just the right mix to keep her lucid, allow her to eat, be a normal girl. Only when she woke up, she was no longer a girl, but a woman.

Through the years, it became harder and harder to find a vein willing to be pricked. The needle tracks up both arms made her feel like a drug addict and she didn’t like that. The meds were harsh, but necessary. She would die young, but not before she lost a few limbs from long-term use of the brutal chemicals.

A tear fell down her cheek as she pressed the blunt end of the syringe to her lips, just to remind herself that she had sensation. Her hands trembled from withdrawal. She hadn’t taken her meds since Cappy died. Mal knew she was taking Cappy’s death hard,

but he didn't know she had stopped her meds. No one did. They didn't care. Didn't look in on her. Did they even remember she was here?

In a dream-like trance, River floated through the halls of Serenity to her favorite listening spot – the catwalk underneath the galley. If she stood on the rails and tilted her head just so, she could hear them whispering. Hear what was said and what wasn't.

Her paisley dress hanging over her food-starved body, River light-footed through the cargo bay, up the stairs, to the catwalk. With practiced grace, her bare feet stepped up to the cold rail... but they were harshly rejected. River stumbled backwards, shaken from her trance, her toe scratched and bleeding. She looked for her attacker and saw the chicken wire tacked to the railing. Mal and Inara had installed it to keep Emma from falling through.

Rubbing her nose with the back of her hand, River shuffled her memory into the present. Had it really been so long since she'd just listened? Her muscles shaking involuntarily, she climbed to the top rail, seeking a new position – a new balance.

Why was the galley empty at lunch time? The children were eating, Zoë watched hungrily, but the galley was otherwise empty. Why empty?

Her mind searched the ship for the rest of the crew, but without her meds, the world was confusion. The past and future collided. Book, Wash, Jayne, and Cappy were simultaneously dead and alive.

Suddenly, her knee gave out and River slipped off the rail, falling hard on the catwalk grating. She heard the bone in her wrist crack on impact, but she didn't feel. Her ear to the ground, she closed her eyes and listened to the ship. For her, this position was as normal as any. The crew would step over her without a second glance. And soon, she would melt into the deck plates.

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“French takes thirty percent?” Zoë asked Mal as they leaned against the kitchen counter, watching their children eat.

“Thirty percent. We need two hundred platinum to break even, so we can't let him push us past forty-three.”

“He ain't pushin' us past twenty-five,” Zoë replied sternly.

“Still wish we'd picked up food stock on Santo,” Mal mullied. “Weren't expecting that side-trip to Angel. Not to mention takin' on an extra mouth to feed. Doc don't eat much, but he makes his dent.”

“Sir, we have enough to make it to Persephone.”

“Only just. God forbid another delay. I won't leave my family a day without food.”

The two watched as Jackson showed Emma how to build a castle with her potatoes. Jackson sculpted with his fingers and chopsticks, while Emma stood on her chair, meticulously cleaning her fingernails with a napkin. “I'm sure Emma would survive.”

“Ain't worried about Emma,” Mal agreed. “But I will toss myself out the airlock before I spend a day on this boat with a hungry pregnant woman.”

Zoë smiled and turned back to watching the children, wondering if she should chastise Jackson for playing with his food, or admire his craftsmanship. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sounding of the proximity alert.

Mal rolled his eyes. “That sounds like a delay,” he complained.  
“Shall I toss you out the airlock now, sir?”

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### CHAPTER 3

Mal and Zoë rushed to the bridge, Mal slipping into the empty pilot’s seat and silencing the alarm, Zoë bending over the console to see what triggered it. Zoë determined that “proximity” had become a relative term in her absence, as the Qian Chung cruiser was still a long ways off. From this distance, it looked like a pitchfork, but only if that pitchfork were drawn by Picasso in his cubism phase.

“You think they know about Simon?” she asked.

Mal waited for the instruments to get a fair read on the heading. “They’re not coming toward us.”

“Maybe there’s some place we can hide before that changes.”

“Maybe,” Mal agreed, furrowing his brow at the screen. He looked out the window, in confusion. “Where the gou cao de are we? Find River!”

Zoë trotted out of the bridge, and through the dining hall again.

“Mommy,” Jackson called, standing up as she went by.

“Stay here, baby.”

She headed quickly past the ship towards River’s room, but fortunately didn’t have to go that far. River lay on the catwalk, her ear to the floor.

“River!” Zoë called, but the girl didn’t lift her head. Zoë came down the stairs, calling again, but something about the scene struck her as off. This was too much like the old River she’d left on Serenity eight years ago, not the young woman she’d been getting to know over the past two weeks.

“River?” Zoë asked slowly, coming onto the catwalk, and noticing the fresh scab on River’s toe. Slowly, uncertainly, she knelt beside River’s head and placed a hand on her back. The girl’s eyes were closed, red from dried up tears. “River, are you hurt?”

“Color of frond.”

It was then that she noticed the unnatural purple bruising on River’s wrist and trembling muscles. That along with River’s continued non-responsiveness gave Zoë a sinking feeling. She ran to the nearest comm box and called the bridge. “Captain, River’s out. You’re on your own.”

Returning to River, Zoë asked her again if she was hurt, and whatever her answer, Zoë could not make it out. Gingerly, she pulled River to sitting and placed an arm around her shoulder.

“Come on, honey,” she coached, helping River to stand. The ship rocked as Mal engaged the engine, and River’s knees gave out. Zoë held firm, picking the girl up and tottering downstairs toward the Infirmary.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” River whimpered, her voice finally reaching an audible level.

“Uh-huh,” Zoë grunted with effort, making her way through the narrow hallways. “Honey, when you fall and hurt yourself, you call for help. Not all of us are mind readers.”

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Later, she'd said. It would hit her later! Well, River had picked a hell of a time to have Cappy's death hit her. He briefly wondered what Zoë meant in saying River was 'out.' He'd been worried that her not eating might be affecting her meds. Was Zoë coming back? Was River even conscious, because he'd sure like to ask about this gou shi course she had set! It zigged and zagged in all the wrong places, turning them about until Mal hardly had his bearings. What's worse, the computer was telling him there were plenty of moons to hide on, but his eyes were telling him different.

The Qian Chung ship changed course taking up pursuit, and Mal rolled Serenity about, trying to get a three-sixty on their bearings. He decided to answer the Qian Chung hail, if only to stall them while he came up with a better plan.

“Transport ship, Serenity, this is the Qian Chung scout Talisman. What brings you to our space?” they opened diplomatically. This! This was where he needed Cappy, alive and well, in ambassador mode. Maybe he should call Inara.

“Just passing through on the way to Persephone,” Mal answered.

“Doesn't look like you're headed for Persephone,” the Talisman answered.

“Don't I know it,” Mal muttered in agreement, then raised his voice to answer. “Perhaps I got turned about. Where does it look like I'm headed?”

The Talisman was slow to answer, probably trying to gauge the intention of the question, but Mal didn't care. Any clue was better than none. He'd found two planets and a moon within spitting distance and needed a clue.

“Deliver the You Qian wan nao,” they answered, assuming a different tactic.

“He's a mite slippery and I'm short-staffed,” Mal answered. “Perhaps we can do this exchange planet-side?”

“On Deadwood, then. Baker's Hill, just north of Seven Oak city, half a day's time.”

Deadwood! Mal squinted at the two planets and moon in recognition. He knew exactly where he was! With a gleam of adventure entering his spirit, he lined Serenity behind Deadwood until the Talisman eclipsed from view. Once free from their sensors, he made a hard burn away from Deadwood, headed for the opposite planet in view – Shadow. You don't mess with a man on his home turf.

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## CHAPTER 4

River moaned like a tired child when Zoë set her down on the Infirmary bed. Simon rushed quickly to splint River's broken hand, but Zoë's thoughts were elsewhere.

“River, honey, can you tell me where we are?”

“We're on a ship. Mid-bulk transport—”

“Where in the 'verse, River?” Zoë interrupted. “What world are we near?”

“Close to home.”

Zoë furrowed her brow. River’s home was Osiris – a core planet, and nowhere close to here. Still, Mal must have oriented himself. The ship shuddered and swayed as they entered atmo and set down. She was concerned about the lack of fancy flying, wondering if Mal had found them a crater or some place to hide, because setting on the open range would be suicide. Her heart pounded when she heard the back door open, and she ran out of the Infirmary, drawing her shotgun.

The cool autumn air swept through the cargo bay, carrying the smell of manure and hay. The room filled with the echoes of mooing cattle, triggering memories of a time when the cargo hold was full of those smelly animals. The sun gleamed through the back door, blinding Zoë, casting Mal into silhouette. Stealthily, she crept sideways around the bay, angling away from the sun until she could see outside.

From her view behind the aft bulkhead, Zoë could see a half dozen ranchers, all with long barrel shotguns aimed at Mal. She could only imagine that the circle extended around the whole back door. Qian Chung loyalists, she assumed, watching Mal’s every move. He had one hand shielding his eyes in his typical “don’t shoot me, I’m no one of consequence” posture.

“You best stay on that boat and turn back to the black you came from!” one of the ranchers bellowed in the deep, strong voice of a foreman

“Dekker?” Mal hollered, squinting and leaning forward. A shot fired, grazing Mal’s arm. Instinctively, Zoë tackled Mal to the ground and aimed her weapon, but Mal stayed her hand. Staying down, out of the line of fire, Zoë watched as Mal stood, brushed off his coat, and addressed Dekker again.

“Sorry I didn’t call first. I lost your number.”

“Malcolm Reynolds? That you boy?” Dekker answered.

Zoë’s head dropped in relief, recognizing the greeting between old friends.

“Dekker, hold fire!” a woman cried out, frantically pushing her way through the crowd. “Hold fire, I know that ship! That’s my boy’s ship!”

Mrs. Reynolds broke through the front line, twittering frenetically as she ran to the ship. She was a lean lady, her skin tanned and leathery from too many years in the sun, her hair streaked with gray. Zoë had met her at Mal’s wedding and immediately taken a liking. She had jovially insisted that they all call her Mama Reynolds.

“Hey, Ma,” Mal greeted as she ran up Serenity’s ramp, hugged him fiercely, and covered his face with kisses. Laughing, Mal picked her up and spun her around. As soon as her feet hit the ground again, Mama Reynolds ran to the edge of the boat and barked orders to her men.

“Dekker, go kill that bull we’ve been saving. Pull out the fine spices! Gather the firewood!” she cried, then turned to Mal, a serious scold clouding her face. “I haven’t seen or heard from you in ages and here you fall out of the sky unannounced!”

“I’m sorry, Ma.”

“Don’t be sorry, son! Do it more often! I watch the sky every day waiting for you to come home. I can only guess the occasion ain’t good.”

“Some good, some bad,” Mal acknowledged, linking arms with her.

“Hiding from the Qian Chung?” she asked. Mal gave a half-nod. “Bunch of hooligans. But don’t you worry son. We can take ‘em.”

Simon chose that moment to enter the cargo bay, and immediately the dozen ranchers had their rifles at ready again. Zoë tensed.

“Deng yi miao,” Mama Reynolds ordered, warily eying Simon. The men lowered their weapons, but the tension remained. Mama Reynolds shifted on her feet, looking from Simon to Mal. “A You Qian?”

“Ma, you remember Simon Tam.”

The older woman nodded suspiciously. “As in Simon and Kaylee Tam?”

“Formerly,” Simon agreed.

“This ain’t a simple brawl, then?”

Mal shook his head, regret tingeing his voice. “Fraid not.”

Mama Reynolds thoughtfully considered a moment, her mind running a thousand scenarios. Then she shook off the expression like an old shoe.

“Just as well,” she dismissed. “Now, where’s my granddaughter?”

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Mal tried to talk his mother out of killing the bull, knowing she intended an all out barbeque, which would surely send smoke signals high enough for the Qian Chung to see. He was itching to set up defenses, or at least find a better place than his childhood home to make a stand against the Qian Chung. But his Ma had him sitting at the kitchen table snapping green beans while she bustled about making cornbread, because she knew it was his favorite. A wave of guilt rushed through his body.

“Ma, I’m sorry I rained this terrible trouble on you.”

“Nonsense, Malcolm. If you can’t run to your Ma, who can you run to for help?”

Mal laughed. “Won’t that be good for my reputation.”

“It’s God brought you here, son. Brought my grandbaby, my daughter-in-law, and this quirky little extended family you call a crew.”

She touched his cheek, leaving a handprint of flour on his face, and for a moment, he felt like a boy again. Mal shook his heads, trying to focus on the woes of the present.

“We shouldn’t ...” he began uncertainly, looking for the end of the statement.

“We shouldn’t be distracted. We didn’t get too good a start on them. I suspect they’ll find us in less than a day.”

“What do you plan to do when they find you? Run again? Malcolm, if I have only a day to spend with you and you’re beautiful family, I’m not gonna waste it twiddling my thumbs and planting traps. I’m gonna celebrate and don’t you try to stop me.”

“I was just thinking to set up some defense—”

“Boy, who do you think you’re talking to?” she chastised. “I ain’t some starry-eyed sha gua. I’ve had this piece of land since before you were born and I know how to defend it.”

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The bonfire lit the back yard as day turned to dusk and the celebration kicked into high gear. From the window of the second floor guest room, Kaylee could see Simon sitting aloof at the edge of light garnering suspicious glances from some of the ranchers as they walked by, but mostly ignoring people and being ignored. Zoë and Inara laughed,

circling through the crowd with drinks in hand. Jackson and Emma danced gleefully, chasing fireflies and collecting them in a jar.

Pain seared through Kaylee's leg and the joints in her arm ached. It wasn't constant pain, nor a throbbing pain, just occasional stabs every now and then, like waves of memory from a bad dream. She just wanted the dream to end.

"Hey, sunshine!" Mama Reynolds greeted, coming into the room and offering Kaylee a glass of fresca.

"Hi, Mama Reynolds," Kaylee said weakly, not wanting a conversation, but pulling out her best smile so as not to appear ungrateful.

"Malcolm says you didn't wanna come downstairs."

Kaylee shrugged, looking out the window again. "I'm just not feeling up to it."

"Well, feel again, sunshine. This is a happy occasion and it ain't complete without you."

"Mama Reynolds," Kaylee began, then stopped herself expecting to be cutoff. Why had she expected Mama Reynolds not to listen? Was it because Simon hadn't? Kaylee had never really finished the thought in her head, because she wasn't quite sure how, but when Mama Reynolds sat quickly at the foot of the bed, all ears, Kaylee felt safe to putter through the question a bit.

"Mama Reynolds, you ever remember something so ... vague ... you ain't even sure it happened?"

"What are you remembering, sunshine?"

Kaylee sighed in frustration. Did she dare speak the dream into truth? "I'm not even sure. But not bein' able to move like this. Like I'm sealed up in shrink wrap. I get so scared I forget where I am. I smacked Simon upside the head the other day."

"Well, you and he weren't getting along so well anyway."

Kaylee shook her head. "No, I hit him because... for a minute... it's like I didn't know 'em. Like he's the one that did this to me."

"You don't know where this feelin' is coming from, sunshine?"

"I know... I think... I remember wakin' up," Kaylee struggled, fighting the mists and haze of her own memory. "Most times I know it's just a dream. But sometimes..."

Mama Reynolds scooted to the top of the bed and pulled Kaylee into a comforting hug. "Sure as it's real enough to get you all worked up. And who doesn't need a good excuse to smack their ex upside the head once in awhile?"

Kaylee laughed sadly, the memory subsiding. She suddenly felt foolish for bringing it up.

Mama Reynolds continued. "Sunshine, it is times like this that you need your family around you, keepin' you safe, even if you forget who they are. You ain't gonna feel safe up her by your lonesome. So do you want me to sit here with you, or will you come down stairs with me?"

Kaylee huffed in frustration, but couldn't deny she felt safer and stronger already. With all her will, she hugged Mama Reynolds back, her left hand trembling with the effort. No way was she missing this party!

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## CHAPTER 5

The couch was cozy and far from the buzzing noise of the party still going outside despite the lateness of the hour. Zoë lifted Mal and Inara's wedding picture off the coffee table as Jackson curled up on her lap to sleep. Sunset crater on Deadwood, party of ten. It was the first time Zoë had ever been at Mal's side without a pistol strapped to her hip – and probably the last.

The warm breeze mixed with desert dust hit her like a gentle memory. Kaylee as maid of honor. Zoë as 'Best Woman' because Mal wouldn't name anyone else to stand by his side. Jackson had been two then, bouncing like a kangaroo in Mama Reynold's lap through the whole ceremony. No traditions, no rituals, just family – and only the closest members at that. When Inara had left Serenity after Miranda, Zoë never thought she'd see this day; but after Jayne's funeral, something in Mal snapped. He took to chasing Inara like she was the last breath of oxygen in all the black. Wouldn't take no for an answer. Nearly sold Serenity, just to prove he'd stop at nothing to have her. Fortunately for the both of them, she loved Serenity as much as he did. Zoë brushed a bit of dust from the picture frame. If she squinted her eyes just so, she could see Serenity's silhouette in the background, outlining the space between the Mal and Inara, joining them together. She smiled at the memory.

Jackson's breathing slowed as he fell to dreams, exhausted from a day spent exploring the Reynold's ranch. Zoë fingered her Mare's Leg, then Jackson's Mateba, wondering again about the life she had thrust her son into. After the first Tao Wu attack, she'd had a serious talk with him. He'd handled the second assault well, but Jackson was always in his element when planet-side.

"There's another bed upstairs," Inara whispered, tip-toeing into the living room.

"You really think we have the night?"

Inara shook her head, sitting on the couch next to Zoë as she tangled her fingers in her son's hair, letting his peaceful expression drive out thoughts of the coming fight.

"He's not used to wakin' up to violence," Zoë explained. "I just don't want him to be alone when it starts."

\*~\*

Mal's stomach protested that he ate too much, but his taste buds begged for another slice of cornbread. He could feel the peace settling into his bones at the familiar thought of his mother and forty ranch hands preparing a ho-down. The sight of Kaylee laughing and flirting with the men warmed his heart, even as it chilled Simon's. The Doctor remained distant, probably wise considering the rancher's reaction to him. Surprisingly, River was also aloof, sitting on an old tree stump, her lips moving, her body rocking.

"Hey, Little One. Teng ma?" he asked, indicating her wrist. Does it hurt? River continued to rock, staring at her knees, her body trembling.

"You know all these years when I worried about you, I've been asking your brother how you fare. And then this morning, he asked me how you're doin'. He asked me!" Mal repeated, with incredulous emphasis. River didn't respond, so Mal squatted down till he was at eye-level with her and continued. "And I realize I don' know. So I'm askin', how are you doing?"

“Moving backwards, not forwards. Circle the sky, needle in my eye.”

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to take that,” Mal chuckled, worried. Finally River met his eye and his blood went cold.

“You’re not looking for me, you’re looking for Kaylee. You look at her but you don’t see her. Don’t see inside.”

“Is there something I need to be seeing about Kaylee?”

“Everyone looks at Kaylee. No one looks at River. The butter is spread thin and melts.”

Mal was concerned now. River was starting to sound like her old self – her very old self from before Simon had found that magical cocktail.

“Is there something I need to be seeing about you?” he asked.

River looked at him shakily. “My heart hurts.”

Finally! Something clear! Something he understood. She was upset and grieving and this was just how it looked on her... or so he hoped. Deciding to cheer her up, he held out his hand suavely. “You wanna dance with me?”

“There’s no music.”

“Not just yet, but I saw some of the boys pullin’ out the strings.”

As if on cue, the music started and a spot on the lawn cleared out. The ranch hands danced to the swinging sounds of bluegrass, the band consisting of a violin, guitar, banjo, ukulele, and upright base. River accepted Mal’s hand and followed him to the dance area. She was a little shaky, but probably just needed a good meal in her – maybe another slice of cornbread after this song. The music took him straight back to his childhood, firing memories in his brain that he hadn’t visited in years.

“Watch this,” Mal smiled mysteriously as River observed his face. Suddenly his feet broke into a lively jig, jumping in time with the music. After a few phrases, he paused to gauge River’s response. With a calculated smile, she repeated every move, adding a few kicks and turns of her own. Laughing in delight, the two danced through the entire song, spinning and twirling and at the end, both were winded. Mal placed his hands on his knees, catching his breath; then he led River to the table to find himself some water... and cornbread.

“You okay?” he asked handing her a drink.

Despite her trembling limbs, River’s voice held child-like excitement as she cheered, “Let’s go again!”

“I’m afraid these old bones need more of a rest than that,” he chuckled, concerned by how unsteady she looked. He put one hand around her waist to steady her, and just like that, her knees buckled. She spilled her drink on the grass, looking startled as Mal held her up.

“Whoa, hold on there. I got you. Find your feet.”

River’s face went in a flash from happiness to surprise to concern. “Herself is hurting,” she whimpered.

Her knees wobbled again and with a little effort, Mal lifted her off the ground and carried her into the house. Simon noticed and rushed to follow.

“Speak plainly, Little One. I know you can.”

“She skips them. Skips on the water.”

\*~\*

Mal laid River on the couch in the living room. Inara stood up in concern and Simon rushed in, turning on as many lights as he could. Zoë shushed them, concerned for River, but not wanting to wake Jackson.

River's voice had dropped to that creepifying low level as she repeated a mantra. "Chemical pebbles, Color of frond, Skips if you want, Skips on the pond."

"River, I'm right here. Are you in pain?" Simon hadn't given her any pain killers for her broken wrist on account of the negative interaction it would have with her other meds. But at this point, he'd be willing to risk one of them. He recognized that expressionless look – the one that said she was trying to shut out a world too cruel for living in. Simon had fought hard to free her from that Alliance made prison. And after many years of freedom, Cappy's death had sent her right back.

River didn't respond to him, she just repeated her song. "Chemical pebbles. Color of frond."

"She's been actin' more and more like her very old self, from before you found that mix," Mal pointed out.

"Can you just give her an extra dose?"

"No, those drugs are pretty potent. Any increase would cause her organs to shut down."

"Where does that leave us?"

Simon sighed in frustration. "If her system has become immune to the treatment, that leaves us at square one. I need to find a new one."

"Skips if you want. Skips on the pond."

"You sure it's something with the treatment?" Zoë asked. "Her old self was never this shaky. She never just fell and broke a bone like she did this morning."

"Could be a defect in this particular batch of doses."

"Maybe she skips them." Everyone's eyes turned to Jackson as no one had realized he was awake. The boy still rested his tired head on Zoë's lap, but his eyes were transfixed on River's face, watching the movement of her lips. River repeated the song and this time everyone listened.

"Inara, run and fetch the meds from her room," Simon ordered, then turned to River. "River, have you been skipping your meds?"

River repeated the song, looking at Simon with resignation in her eyes, as if her lips were moving without her brain's consent. Unable to take the repeated nonsense, Mal placed a hand over her mouth to silence her, then pushed Simon aside to kneel by the couch. River placed her hand on Mal's, which made him all manner of uncomfortable since he knew how powerful a fighter she could be when she wanted.

"Is this what I need to see about you, River? That you stopped taking your meds?"

River nodded slowly, imperceptibly. Then she pulled Mal's hand away from her mouth and whispered. "One of the twelve."

\*~\*

Inara cuddled in Mal's arms, his browncoat draped over her shoulders as they rocked back and forth on the front porch swing. The party had mellowed, the children were sleeping, Simon tended to River, Mama Reynolds cleaned. Inara fiddled with her

wedding ring, a simple band with four stones, all inset so they wouldn't hurt Mal when she slapped him. At least that's what he'd told her when he'd given it to her. She'd slapped him a few times tonight, but only playfully as he suggested uncouth names for their unborn child. They'd been laughing for the past hour, making a game over who could come up with the least favorable name. As sleep tugged at her eyes, she stopped making suggestions and just enjoyed the gentle motion of the swing and the comfort of her husband's arms. His face was rough from blunt razors and harsh soap, his hair flying about carelessly in the evening breeze.

"So now you've seen where I grew up. Do you like it?"

Inara answered slowly, thoughtfully. "It's strange to say, but I feel like I've always lived here."

Mal let the answer sink in and the silence hang a moment. "How would you like to stay here for a spell?"

"How long a spell?"

"Was thinkin' till the baby comes. Or till we get stir crazy. Whichever comes first."

"About two weeks then."

Mal laughed lightly. "I know you'd follow me to the ends of the 'verse and circles from there. But it occurs to me you might need a rest from all this gun slingin'. Maybe find a world, start your own training house."

Inara lifted her head in surprise. "But you're just pulling the old crew back together?"

"Truthfully, I thought this job would run a whole lot smoother. I wanted to ease Zoë back into this life, not throw her to the wolves. May be apparent to you that Kaylee and River could use the recoup time. Seems they all got a touch of space dementia."

He was looking out on the open sky, but his thoughts were solely on her. For her part, she could hardly fathom the nature of his suggestion.

"A training house?" she repeated, incredulous, but at the same time excited. Mal tended to acknowledge her profession as only a necessary evil. He'd never displayed any sentiment approaching approval.

"Just a thought. Nothin' needs deciding today. Still got to finish this job."

Inara settled back into his arms, her mind racing with the possibilities, shocked and amazed at her husband. "How is it you're still a mystery to me?"

They rocked in awed silence a moment, then Mal pointed at the sky. "Hey, look who just peaked under the awning. See that bright one up there. That's Deadwood. You get a good telescope, you can see Sunset Crater. That one there is Persephone... looks so far away when you see it from here."

"Where's Sihnon?"

"Sihnon set about half hour ago. About when you were tryin' ta name our baby Pushkar."

They laughed and continued to swing. The screen door on the porch creaked open and Mama Reynolds poked her head out.

"Qian Chung scout. Malcolm, get all the kids and gimps to the basement shelter. Inara, you may want to change into fightin' clothes."

She disappeared as quickly as she came. Inara stood to follow her inside, but Mal grabbed her wrist.

“You don’t need to stand in rank with a rifle this time. You should take shelter in the basement with the others.”

“No, I’ll stay by your side.”

“You don’t have to ‘Nara. Think about Emma, and little Pushkar.”

Inara placed her hand on his calmly. “It’s okay, Mal. I’m here by my own choice.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 6

The temperature dropped until it was just above freezing, the chilling wind nipping harshly at her face. Zoë zipped up her jacket and pulled her gloves tighter, raising the binoculars to survey the ranch again. Serenity was tucked safely in the north field, surrounded by all the herds. The Qian Chung ship, Talisman, landed just beyond the southwest pasture, making no effort to hide their presence. Two barns set in the south and west fields flanked the path to the ship, offering cover and blind spots. She could see the soldiers (were they soldiers?) spilling out of the Talisman and dispersing around the property. A ship that size wouldn’t have the manpower to surround them. For once, Zoë felt they had the advantage, having the best cover on the open range. To enter, they’d have to breach the field in open run.

Mama Reynolds circled the roof, looking to the southeast, talking into the comm. “Keep low, Dekker. Pick ‘em off slowly. We ain’t manned for war.”

Mal trotted up the stairs to the roof and came to her side, his browncoat flapping in the wind. “Zoë, report.”

“They landed in the southwest field. Looks like they’re setting a perimeter.”

“Right near the water pump,” Mal grumbled.

“Son, you ain’t the only one made an enemy of the Qian Chung. You coulda hid anywhere and they’d come here just because it’s in the neighborhood,” Mama Reynolds informed, pulling out a small cross from a chain around her neck and kissing it. Zoë remembered Mal carrying such a cross in their war days.

“They’ll probably take out the pump first, try to dry us out,” Mal reflected.

“This ain’t a war, sir. It’s an extraction. They won’t wait for us to run dry. And they won’t start firing till they’re on the way out.”

“Most like, they’ll try the Southeast passage,” Mama Reynolds spoke up. “That roll on the hill makes a blind spot from here.”

“You got men there?”

“Dekker and about five others.”

“They got a flare in case there’s trouble?”

Mama Reynolds didn’t answer right away. Finally she said, “Son, by the time we saw that flare, we’d already be humped... with a capital F.”

\*~\*

Inara had a clear view of the southwest border from her position on the second floor. The track lights of the Qian Chung ship gleamed, defiantly announcing their

presence to any observers. She shifted uncomfortably in her borrowed cotton trousers. Despite her years away from the companion life-style, she had never grown accustomed to 'practical' clothing. Something about it always felt unnatural and false to her. Mal never complained. In fact, he often surprised her with a new satin dress or a velvet wrap. For her benefit or his own, she was never quite sure. Perhaps what made them so perfect for each other was that the simple gesture served them both.

"One of the twelve." River's tiny voice startled Inara and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"River, you startled me."

"They won't come this way." She looked ominously out the window, her bare feet not making a sound on the wood floors.

"Sweetie, I thought you were staying downstairs with the others."

"Come with me," River pleaded.

Inara worried for River and a part of her wanted to run to the basement and take shelter with her daughter, but she'd promised Mal she'd stay here. Buddha knew, they needed the manpower.

"No, sweetie. I need to stay."

"No one sees her," River lamented, turning to go. Inara reset her gaze out the window, scanning the darkness, adjusting her grip on the rifle to relieve her stiffening arms. What strange turns her life had taken.

\*~\*

Simon settled Kaylee on the floor, helping her to sit upright against the wall. He asked her three times if she was okay before he finally backed away. He was heading upstairs to fight along side the others, but a small part of her wanted to beg him to stay. Jackson crouched under a plastic folding table by the door, Emma holding his hand. They were cast into shadow by the single bare light-bulb that hung from the ceiling. The chill of the cement floor had already numbed her rear, and the unfinished plywood walls snagged at her clothing.

"Where's River?" Simon asked, looking around the room.

"I thought she was following us." Kaylee checked the dark corners, somewhat bewildered by River's disappearance. They heard muffled voices from the corridor.

"River?" Simon called, poking his head into the hallway. Dekker suddenly filled the door frame, making Simon back into the room.

"Dekker, have you seen River?"

Without a word, Dekker punched Simon square in the jaw, knocking him out. Kaylee yelped, but Dekker pressed a finger to his lips warning her to be quiet.

"Dekker what's going on?" she asked, if only to muffle the whimpering of the children as the man pulled Simon over his shoulders in a fireman's carry. Suddenly Dekker was shoved into the room by two Qian Chung soldiers, dropping Simon's body, but staying upright.

The soldiers were older, muscular, one with an assault rifle, the other a machine gun. Kaylee swallowed hard as they stepped into the room, the taller one nudging Simon with his boot until he rolled over. If they noticed Jackson and Emma sneaking out behind them, they didn't care.

“Who is this You Qian slime we’ve been chasing round our ‘verse?” the taller one asked.

“Don’t look like much to me,” his friend jeered, jabbing Simon in the stomach just as the doctor came to. Simon gasped in pain and surprise. Kaylee called his name.

“He’s the one you came for,” Dekker assured. “Now take him and leave us be.”

Kaylee’s jaw dropped, realizing Dekker’s betrayal. Squeaks came to her mouth that could not approximate words any more than her thoughts could approximate coherence.

“Dekker, no,” she finally cried fearfully, using her good arm to drag her body across the floor toward Simon.

“Go!” Dekker repeated, but the two men circled Simon’s body again. Finally, the shorter one yanked Simon to his feet and threw a corn-bag over his head. Simon swung a blind left hook in the general direction of his assailants, but received a harsh blow to the ribs for his trouble.

“Take him,” the taller one commanded, letting his comrade drag Simon from the room. Kaylee would have screamed for help were it not for the gun pointed at her head.

“You have him, Voorhes,” Dekker said again. “Now go and leave us be.”

“I don’t think so, Dekker. Your little ranch has been quite an eyesore to our territory for awhile now, standing in the way of our having a truly unified sector.”

“We keep to ourselves; you have no qualm with us.”

“Oh, but we do. And now that I’ve made it through your defenses, I’m thinking I might burn the place down a bit.”

As Voorhes reached into his pocket, Dekker hollered and charged him. The man hardly flinched, raising the butt of his gun and catching Dekker in the jaw. Kaylee screamed and rolled herself out of the way as Dekker toppled backwards. Dazed, Dekker pushed himself up to his elbows, but the Qian Chung soldier had a new sinister look in his eye.

“Perhaps I’ll just extract a tax,” he leered, circling Kaylee, then grabbing her hair and pulling her to her feet.

“No!” Dekker grunted, and charged again. This time, Voorhes aimed his gun and fired, and a red stain appeared on Dekker’s chest before he fell.

\*~\*

Inara shivered in the emptiness of the room, her eyes growing weary. The Qian Chung ship had landed nearly an hour ago, and she could just barely make out movement on the perimeter of the field with the scope on her rifle.

The night was interrupted by a screech at the back door and movement. Ren ci de Shang di, please don’t let it be River! Inara suddenly wished she’d kept River by her side. But no! There were two – one pushing the other. Inara grabbed her comm.

“Mal, someone’s running out the back.”

“Wo de ma... Ma, they’re in the house!”

Inara felt the blood drain from her face. “They’ve been inside? Mal, Emma!”

“Nara, stay there. If you get a shot, take it!”

Inara's heart pounded at her rib cage like cannon fire. In the dark, it was hard to tell which of the two was doing the pushing, but one of those men out the window was Simon. The Qian Chung had Simon! How had they gotten in? Where was Emma?

Inara wasn't sure, but she felt her world shake as the first gunshot exploded. Somewhere downstairs. The basement! Emma! She grabbed the comm again.

"Mal!"

"Inara hold position! Don't let them out of your sight!"

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 7

Kaylee nearly shrieked, but before she could make a sound the barrel of the gun filled her vision. Her scalp screamed as Voohres held her up by her hair and she balanced precariously on her good leg. She grasped his wrist with her good hand, just to keep herself from falling onto him.

"What's your story, girlie?" he growled.

She couldn't see his face... she couldn't see anything except that huge, long barrel pointed right between her eyes. Her eyes filled with tears, her mind occupied by a single thought. She couldn't stop his name from rising to her lips as she whimpered for salvation. "Simon."

"Let her go," a firm voice commanded. Zoë? A glimmer of hope surfacing in her soul, Kaylee peaked around the barrel of the gun. Jackson!

The little boy stood at the door, his face one hundred percent business, holding Jayne's favorite gun - Vera. What was he thinking? The kickback from that thing would send him through the wall!

"You're a little young to be fighting, boy," Voohres laughed condescendingly.

"Hand over that gun, nice-like, and I promise I won't shoot the lady."

Jackson stood firm. "Let her go and walk out of this house, or I will kill you."

"You can't handle that gun."

Jackson shifted Vera in his arms, adjusting his grip, and Voohres let out a cocky laugh, finally lowering his own gun from Kaylee's forehead. Jackson did not lose the moment. His little hands moving like lightning, he dropped Vera, drew his Mateba and fired, hitting Voohres in the knee. Kaylee yelped and stumbled backwards as the tall man's hold on her suddenly went slack and his blood spurted on her body. Jackson charged the collapsing man, kicking the gun from his hands, then backing away, training his small Mateba on Voohres.

"I can handle this one," Jackson assured, shifting nervously on his feet, fueled by adrenaline

Voohres did not give up so easily. He pulled a knife from his boot and tossed it at Jackson, who dodged easily. The distraction gave the man enough time to reach for his weapon, but Kaylee threw herself on top of him, willing her body into motion. But too weak to fight effectively, he had her pinned within moments. Kaylee struggled against his weight, trying to free herself.

"Get off of her or the next one goes through your head!" Jackson yelled.

The man looked up and cackled at the boy, disbelieving, but a fraction of a second

later, a bullet entered his brainpan, and he collapsed. Jackson stood frozen, his face ashen, gun still aimed. River stood behind him in the doorway, a gun in her hand as well. It was she who had fired.

Kaylee pulled herself free and scooted her body over to Jackson, hugging him close.

“It’s okay, sweetie. You did what’s right.” she consoled, turning Jackson’s head away from the scene. “You’re my hero.”

River circled the room, walking through the blood pooled between Dekker and the Qian Chung soldier. “Simon,” she said softly, then ran off.

\*~\*

“Zoë, check on the little ones, then catch up,” Mal ordered as he crept quickly out the back door, comm in hand. He turned on the flood lights next to the south barn, then fell into the shadows of the west one. He could hear his Ma on channel 2, still trying to contact Dekker and the hands on south east border. Quietly, he switched to channel three.

“Nara, you still see them?” he whispered hoarsely.

“They’re headed straight for the ship; just follow the lights,” she answered.

“Seems Simon is giving his captor a run for his money, but they have reinforcements already coming in.

He could hear her voice shaking and knew it wasn’t just the chilly evening.

“Just point and shoot,” he assured, his advice ringing empty in his own ears.

“Somehow it’s easier up close and in the daylight.”

Mal smiled at the banter, making his way to the edge of the west barn. From here, it was a straight shot and open fields to the Qian Chung ship. It would all be crawling from here.

\*~\*

Zoë was not prepared for the calm that awaited her when she reached the basement. Kaylee sat in the middle of the floor, machine gun raised in her shaking hands, Dekker and an unknown Qian Chung man bleeding out on the floor. She relaxed a hair, but tensed immediately at a sound behind her, drawing her weapon and taking aim.

“Jackson,” she sighed in relief, seeing him crawl out from under a table. Had he been here to see this? His face was pale, his breathing shallow, and he held his Mateba in one hand and Jayne’s Vera in the other.

Affording him a brief hug, Zoë offered the only advice coming to her mind.

“Baby, don’t ever let them hear you.”

“Zoë, they took Simon,” Kaylee panted.

Zoë nodded, releasing Jackson and surveying the scene. “Where’s Emma?”

“She’s hiding.”

“River?”

“Shot ‘em and ran off,” Kaylee answered.

There was no time! She needed to join Mal. There was no time to speak the order, just to move. She motioned Kaylee to give her an arm and carried her to the next room down the hall. “Jackson, bring Emma in here.”

Zoë didn't like this room. It was emptier, narrower, and there were no places to hide. But the battle had already left the house, and there was no way she was leaving the children in that other room with two corpses.

\*~\*

Mal angled his breath downwards so that the frosted cloud would not obscure his view. The dry grass crackled beneath him, thunderous in his own ears, though he knew it was barely above the whisper of the wind or the mooing of the cattle. He could just make out the movement ahead of him, and could easily pick out Simon by the way his sleek white shirt reflected the moonlight. The track lights on the Talisman also added light, but Mal hoped they weren't getting too close.

"How'm I doin' 'Nara?" Mal whispered.

"About fifty yards from the Talisman, and an army waiting there. Zoë's just reaching the west barn now."

Mal nodded and silenced the radio, entering stealth mode – though stealth seemed like a joke on the open range. No time to wait for Zoë; he had to do something now before this one soldier found reinforcements. He tried to take aim, but Simon was bouncing around and kicking too much on his captor. Plus any gun shot would draw too much attention to them.

Holstering his weapon, he crept closer to the two. The Qian Chung soldier whacked Simon on the head, causing the doctor to stumble to one knee. Before Simon could get up, Mal charged in and tackled the soldier.

"Simon, run," he ordered, loud enough for Simon to hear, quiet enough not to draw the reinforcements he was sure were coming. His hands still bound, Simon managed to scrape the bag off his head and tried to get his bearings. But three more Qian Chung soldiers jumped from the shadows and took him down again.

That's when the first shot rang out. Zoë? Inara? One of the Qian Chung soldiers holding Simon fell to the ground, one tackled Simon and pinned him, one drew his weapon and fired at Mal. Suddenly they were leaking out of the shadows. Three, six, twelve, forming ranks, taking aim. Zoë appeared from the south, gun at ready, six ranchers behind her. Four more ranchers approached from the east. The Qian Chung that had tackled Simon pulled the doctor to his feet and through the ranks toward the Talisman.

No one was firing. No one wanted a war. Everyone wanted Simon.

"Diana!" Mal heard his mother shout. "I told you to stay off my property!"

Mal's brain near exploded, seeing his ma stride across the lawn, shotgun aimed in the general direction of the Talisman, belligerent as hell. Diana! The name River had been muttering since Cappy's death. It wasn't a planet or a ship, it was a person!

"Diana?" Mal repeated, uncertainly. "Cappy's Diana?"

A stout and thickly muscled woman stepped from the ranks, her skin pale as the moonlight, her eyes red as blood.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Diana asked, disdainfully.

Mal wasn't quite sure. He had dismissed River's ramblings as nonsense, now he strained to remember the words. "Cappy called for you, when he died."

"Jian ta de gui!"

“He ... well...” How could he explain River? “Cappy was part of my crew the last several months. The Tau Wu killed him on Santo.”

“The Tau Wu wouldn’t go to Santo.”

She was catching all the finer points of the story! He wouldn’t have believed it his own self. “They did to chase us.”

“Well you’re just pissing everyone off this week, aren’t you,” she retorted, turning away to end the conversation. They had what they came for. They were retreating.

“That man you’re holding is on my crew!” Mal called desperately.

“He’s You Qian!”

“Not by choice,” Mal said quickly, remembering Simon’s words. “We do what we must to survive. We weren’t planning on totin’ him through your space, but he’s a doctor and we had need for a medic on this trip. We also weren’t planning to come here without escort. Cappy assured us that he had friends here and we could pass safely.”

“Cappy isn’t with you.”

Mal was running out of reasoning, but someone else was running out of patience. A new shot fired, and everyone hit the deck; bullets flew from both sides, none quite sure who shot first. A quick glance around revealed River in the shadows, holding a gun, aimed but not firing. Mal and Diana both shouted at their people to cease fire; then Mal crawled over to River and disarmed her, waiting to stand until the gunfire died down.

His Ma brushed herself off easily, Zoë nursed a wound to her arm, a few on either side failed to get up at all. Diana glared at River suspiciously as River circled her, unafraid. Mal tensed when River picked up a new gun off a dead soldier.

“River, this nice lady is about to release your brother; let’s show some kindness, not put anymore holes in her people.”

“She had no intention,” River stated, her eyes hollow, yet accusing, her gun at her side.

“What do you know of my intentions?”

Mal felt his face tighten, as well as his grip on his pistol. “Oh, plenty. And I’d heed her, because she’s a mite trigger happy and I’m pretty sure she’s lost her mind.”

“How tragic for her,” Diana spat sarcastically.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” River answered distantly. Suddenly her feet stopped and her gun took aim at some unseen assailant in the shadows.

Mal looked at her stiffly. “Let’s make nice and you return my doctor without any more killin’.”

She didn’t answer. They stared at each other, Diana evaluating the value of her bounty, Mal wishing for more firepower. When she didn’t budge, he played his last card.

“Cappy assured us we could pass safely. Please.”

“You got proof?”

Mal balked, taken aback. Proof of what? A written contract? Slowly, River produced Cappy’s Rubik’s cube and held it out for Diana to take.

“This was his. He could solve it, one-handed and blindfolded. He showed me how.”

Diana looked uncertainly at River. Finally, she took the cube quickly, then turned it over in her hands, making sure it wasn’t rigged to blow. If possible her white face grew paler.

“Release him,” she ordered. Her men grumbled, but she repeated firmly. “I said release him. He’s just one anyway, traveling around with Independents.”

They grumbled more, and made sure to get in their fair share of punches and kicks as they forced Simon to the front of the ranks. Diana came nose to nose with Mal, her voice low and threatening. “You won’t be safe in Qian Chung space, but you’re safe from me. Run fast.”

With that, she gathered her wounded and retreated. Simon tottered to Zoë, helping her tie a tourniquet to her arm, but having difficulty as blood streamed from his own face. As the Talisman closed up, Mal walked angrily to River and snatched the gun from her hands.

“What’s the rule?” he demanded.

“No touching guns,” she said softly, ducking her head.

Mal gave a berating nod. “Get to the ship; get her ready for a hard burn. We gotta run fast.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 8

Zoë poked gingerly at the stitches on her arm, trying to itch them without ripping them out. She leaned against Serenity’s kitchen counter, waiting for the cappuccino maker to finish. It was a departure gift from Mama Reynolds, and had been well used over the past two days since they still had fresh ingredients.

Jackson sat at the kitchen table, practicing his lettering, sporting a red, orange, and yellow knit hat that Kaylee had given him, claiming he was her personal hero. Jayne’s hat. Zoë recognized the silly article immediately, figuring it came out of the same closet where River had found Wash’s old dinosaur. Zoë needed to find this closet that seemed to be storing Serenity’s past. When she first came aboard, she thought the ship had been sterilized of those memories; now it seemed that little morsels of history could leak out of the bulkheads at will.

And now, here was her son, sporting Jayne’s hat, already on his way to being a big damn hero at the age of eight. Jackson admired Serenity’s former merc too much, perhaps because he had only heard of all of Jayne’s virtues and none of the vices. If Jackson wanted to follow her into the crime business, he needed to practice his shot and learn to handle the long guns. And for the love of God, she’d make sure he had a decent education and a proper respect for womenfolk!

Mal entered the room abruptly, stealing the first cup of cappuccino before Zoë could get at it, then giving it to her when she glared sternly at him. After pouring himself the second cup of the frothy beverage, he took a quick drink, giving himself a foam mustache. Jackson smothered a giggle in his hand and Zoë couldn’t help but smile.

“What?” Mal asked, though he knew full well why they were smiling.

“You look silly,” Jackson laughed.

“Says the little man with the hat!”

\*~\*

For lack of a free weight, Simon had found a heavy wrench and put it in Kaylee's hand, asking her to do bicep curls with it. Whatever had been hindering Kaylee's healing before was now fueling her fiercely. He worried that once the intensity of the Qian Chung attack faded from her memory, she would regress.

"There's something you're not telling me," he said as delicately as possible. "And I think it's slowing your healing."

"I can move just fine," Kaylee retorted, switching from a curl to a lateral lift.

"Why won't you tell me?"

Kaylee was silent a moment, concentrating on the new movement. Her arm wouldn't comply, so she tried something else. Finally, she spoke. "We're not married anymore, Simon. I don't have to spill all my secrets to you."

"Okay, don't talk to me," Simon agreed diplomatically. He tried to busy himself, but kept getting distracted by the mystery. He couldn't let this go.

"Promise you'll talk to someone soon. Please."

She shot him a glare, but that only fueled his worry and he continued, pleading gently at first, then getting more urgent. "Who do you want here? Inara? Mal? Tell me and I'll bring them here right now. Tell me you want Almighty God and I'll break down the doors of heaven to get him here."

"Wo de ma, Simon, back off!" Kaylee shouted, dropping the wrench. She fumed alternately at Simon and the fallen wrench, leaning heavily on her right side. Penitently, Simon picked up the wrench and offered it to Kaylee, but she didn't take it. She just sat sideways on the bed, contemplating tien xiao de, her feet kicking slightly at the air.

Something was wrong. He'd been too angry at her before to see it, but he saw it now. Kaylee had so many walls up around herself, he wasn't sure he'd get through. He felt the words about to overflow his lips, and worried he'd end up with his foot in his mouth yet again, but was powerless to stop himself.

"Kaylee, I don't know if this means much right now, but I think it's important for you to know. I love you. Absolutely, completely, totally, without reservation, with all my heart. To the end of the 'verse, to the end of time. I love you."

Kaylee still stared at her knees, but he could see the tension leaving her face. Timidly, she peaked up at him with those soft hazel eyes, strands of chestnut hair falling across her cheek.

"Unconditionally?"

His heart nearly stopping, Simon nodded and swallowed hard. "Unconditionally."

Kaylee took a deep sigh and bit her lip, preparing for a confession. Simon shifted his weight in anticipation. "Simon, do you remember the first night after we separated?"

Bitterness flared through his flesh, straight to his tongue. "Are you trying to make me angry?"

There it was. Foot in mouth! Kaylee withdrew and fell silent. He'd blown it. After a moment, he ruefully reached out his hand and placed it on hers, not allowing her to retract.

"I'm sorry, bao bei. Unconditionally."

Kaylee kept her eyes averted, and shivered in hesitation. "That night, I went to the bar with Captain and Cappy, and I didn't come back till morning."

Simon could feel the resentment rising again, but held his tongue. The men had been tight-lipped, but he knew she'd stayed out with some barfly. He waited, but Kaylee had stopped talking. Maybe she needed a push to get over this bump in the story.

"I know you slept with someone else," he prompted, watching her response. Kaylee shook her head. "You didn't sleep with someone?"

Kaylee shuddered in frustration, finally blurting out, "It's not like I planned it. One moment, I'm drinkin', next thing I know I'm lyin' there with a killer hangover, mostly naked..."

She trailed off on the last word, misreading Simon's horrified expression. He'd worked enough nights in the ER to recognize the story, even if she didn't.

"Bao bei, were you..." he breathed incredulously.

Kaylee shook her head, her face covered with self-loathing. "I couldn't believe I'd do such a thing to you. I didn't think you'd ever forgive me."

"Do such - ? Kaylee, you weren't..." What was she saying? Did she not realize? He could see the anger on her face, directed only at herself.

"I went out lookin' to ruin everything that night, and I did."

Simon's breath hitched, wanting desperately to stop her from this horrible train wreck. "Oh, my love, no, that isn't the way of it at all."

Kaylee's head hung in defeat. Silently, she detangled her hand from Simon's grasp. "Just walk away Simon. You deserve better than me."

He couldn't stop the tears rushing down his cheeks, and could only sit in shock seeing Kaylee's eyes dry with self-blame.

"I can't stand seeing how I hurt you so much," she whispered, wiping the tears from his eyes using both her hands, the one trembling with effort, the other with misery.

"Oh, no, my angel, my sweet love, you're not hurting me," he replied urgently, taking hold of her hands. "This... this terrible thing, it wasn't your fault. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I was ashamed, Simon." Suddenly she was distant, hands in her lap, looking at her knees again. "All I could see is I was unfaithful to you, and I hate myself for it."

"All you could see? What do you see now?"

Kaylee shook her head. "Doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does."

"I don't know if it's real," she protested.

"Tell me the dream, then. Please."

Kaylee shifted uncomfortably. Simon wanted to take her hand, but held back, not wanting to distract her. "I... I'm paralyzed. Worse than now, because it's my whole body. He's tied me up so tight, I can't move. I try and scream, but I can't make a sound. No one's coming to help me."

Simon felt his heart breaking in a million and a half pieces as she spoke. She didn't cry, she just sat there, hands in her lap, looking broken and defeated.

"But it's just an excuse - just a dream," she whispered.

Simon forced an ironic smile. "I've got a busted lip saying it's real enough."

"That ain't the worst of it," Kaylee gushed, suddenly looking at him, her eyes begging for mercy. "Simon, even if you would forgive me for that first time... I've been whorin' myself out ever since. I can't tell you how many men... You see. You don't want me. I'm just a rotten, low-down, filthy—"

Simon put a finger to her lips before she could call herself ‘whore’. Completely drained, he took both her hands, kissed her palms, then slid off the bed to face her. Not knowing what to say, he leaned his forehead against hers and they just stayed in that moment, listening to the sounds of the ship.

“See, now I’ve told you and I still feel the same,” she harrumphed.

Simon fought the urge to be a doctor or a counselor or even an ex-husband. With a sigh, he offered his advice as friend.

“Kaylee, I think you should talk to Inara.”

Kaylee’s head snapped up in alarm. “Oh, Simon I couldn’t. I’d be so mortified!”

He couldn’t convince her of what happened. He couldn’t counsel her back to good health. He could barely hold himself up on his own two legs, he was so horrified by the truth she denied. So he just held her hands while she refused to cry.

\*~\*

Inara had not stopped crying since Kaylee told her. She’d seen the pain in Kaylee’s face, seen the agony. She had assumed she knew the cause of it, but would have never guessed this. Kaylee had kept it well-hidden, maybe even not realizing herself until the paralysis brought back the memory.

Inara locked the door to Shuttle 1, lit the incense, and guided Kaylee to kneel on a pillow in the center of the room. Of all things, the companion cleansing ritual was the only thing she knew to wash away such pain. To get a harsh sentiment off your skin, off your spirit. She’d talked Kaylee through the ritual and offered her privacy, but Kaylee insisted she stay. Inara knelt nearby, coaching as Kaylee soaked the sponge in lukewarm water and brought it to her exposed skin.

“Slower, mei mei. Take your time ... No need to scrub so hard. It’s a memory, not engine grease.”

Kaylee held her composure, stoically going through the motions and responding to Inara’s coaching. Finally, she washed off that last layer of resistance, and her resolve began to crack. Her face crumbling, Kaylee fell face down on the floor, buried her head in her hands, and wept. Tears fell like rain, and Inara ran to her friend, wrapped her in a blanket, and held her tight.

“He raped me, didn’t he?” Kaylee sobbed, her voice just a whisper. “All this time... it wasn’t my fault.”

\*~\*

## CHAPTER 9

River lay on the floor of the catwalk, the cool air from the ship’s vent blowing on her face. Emma and Jackson were running around the cargo bay playing some manner of game, their mirth washing over her like waves of ocean. The crew went about their work, their thoughts lying about as carelessly as dirty laundry. The Captain was at the helm, not letting her back to work yet. She didn’t mind so much. She wasn’t ready to go back. She wanted to spend a few more days listening.

River heard the soft click of Zoë's boots coming up the stairs, and closed her eyes, focusing on the sound. Zoë stopped just behind her and leaned on the rail, placing her foot on River's rump as if she were a part of the scenery. River giggled, more in her heart than out loud. 'Zoë sees me', she thought.

"You take your meds today?"

"Yep."

"Good girl." Zoë paused, watching the children in the cargo bay as they leap-frogged over each other. The first mate considered River again and River smiled at the continued attention.

"Was Cappy the first fella you ever liked?"

"No," River answered plainly. "When I was thirteen, I kissed a boy in the gazebo. Mom and Dad didn't know, but Simon found out and beat him up later."

"That doesn't sound like Simon."

"He was trying to protect me," River explained.

"Maybe it does a bit."

River mulled over Cappy, considering the difference between being intrigued by him in an intellectual versus a romantic way.

"Cappy – he was dark. He was a mystery. Kept secrets from me."

"Didn't think it was possible – keeping secrets from a reader."

"Don't know how. But I liked the mystery."

Zoë smiled in agreement. "There ain't nothin' like a man who keeps you on your toes."

Zoë tensed as Jackson fell, scraping his elbow and unseating his silly hat. The boy brushed off the injury with a laugh and continued. Zoë turned her attention back to River.

"Don't worry, honey. Other men will come along. Maybe even ones tryin' to steal your heart."

"Won't be the same."

"Doesn't have to be," Zoë assured. "Doesn't have to be."

\*~\*

Kaylee laid down on the floor of the engine room, not tinkering, not puttering, just laying there in her pink, satin dress, listening to Serenity's beating heart. This dress, this place – it carried the memory of being a woman. Not an object. And today, she wanted to be a woman. Captain and Zoë were out meeting French, dividing the take. And she was here. She played with the skirt of her dress, convinced she could still see the mark where she'd stained it before. Some marks just stay forever. Some memories...

"I thought I might find you here – not in a dress, though," Simon smiled, poking his head into the engine room. Kaylee nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Are you alright?" he asked

She sat up quickly and tried to fix her hair.

"I was just..." Kaylee shrugged, giving up on explaining her appearance.

"Weren't you shipping out today? Booking passage back to Angel?"

Simon shrugged too, and didn't answer, filling the time by stepping into the room. "You're looking better... than before, I mean... not just the dress..."

Kaylee smiled at his awkward manner. “Yeah, I took your advice—talked to ‘Nara.”

“Oh, good!” he answered, too quickly.

“Yeah, it was... did you want something?”

“Well, not...” Simon scratched his jaw, as though trying to coax the words out. Or at least coax the right ones. “I hoped – I mean – I could go if you like.”

“No, please stay,” Kaylee insisted, reaching out a hand before she could stop herself. She retracted awkwardly, but at least he stayed. Simon sat next to her on the floor, stretching his long legs and leaning backwards on his hands. For awhile, they just stayed there in an embarrassed silence, listening to the throb of the engine. Her in her pink dress, him in his fineries.

Kaylee screwed her lips together, trying to climb over that wall of insecurity she’d put up so long ago. Finally, she spoke. “Simon, I’m sorry. For goin’ out to the bar that night, not talkin’ to you after. For drivin’ you away.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he said softly. “For all the fighting we were doing before that night. For being selfish and not even seeing you were hurt, for not listening.”

“Neither of us were listening to well back then. I can’t help but think, if only I hadn’t gone out that night. We would’ve worked things out, right?”

Simon hung his head, shamefully. “No we wouldn’t. Maybe a little ways down the road, we’d have realized our fighting was stupid and petty, but ... you never know. I mean, I didn’t know. When Serenity came to Angel, I was still ready to be petty. I didn’t want to be here treating you. If you hadn’t slapped me, I never would have seen...”

Kaylee brought her hand to her mouth to cover an embarrassed wince, tears of shame filling her eyes. Simon reached over to brush the tears from her cheek, but she ducked her head and turned away.

“Kaylee, please forgive me,” Simon begged, his hands penitently by his side, giving her space.

“I forgive you,” she whispered, her lip quivering. “I never stopped...” Kaylee choked on the words, too afraid to finish. Of the two of them, she still felt her betrayal was far worse than his. “I’m so sorry, Simon.”

“I forgive you.”

She watched him as he clicked the toes of his shoes together, his eyes intently looking at his kneecaps. Those simple words set her heart fluttering like a butterfly in a net that wouldn’t be contained. Frightened, desperate... forgiven. Unable to help herself, she leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips – the honest, yearning kiss of a love that never died, but had been too long neglected, fueled not by lust, but by pent-up need for the love they thought they had lost.

Not breaking the kiss, Simon maneuvered onto his knees, touched Kaylee’s shoulders; then he ran his hands tenderly down her arms to take her hands. She shivered with sad desire as he pulled away. How long had it been since she’d looked into his eyes?

“Kaylee, it might be too soon for this...” he began.

Instantly regretting her forwardness, Kaylee ducked her head in humiliation. But he cupped her chin in his hand, lifted her eyes, and continued kindly.

“Kaylee Tam, will you be my wife... again?”

A wellspring of relief rushed through her soul, washing out all shame and regret, spilling a smile across her face. Her breath coming in shudders and sobs, she kissed him again, more deeply than before, her 'yes' lost in his lips.

His arms slipped gently around her waist, waiting for her invitation. For a moment, she just hugged him tight, taking in the comfort of his presence, letting him hold her up as the walls of resistance came down. When at last she could breathe, she kissed him again, her movements like a slow ballad, awkward and uncertain in places, as though they were trying to remember all the chords to an old, familiar song. But as her fingers caressed his face and danced through his hair, she had a feeling that he would be helping her out of that dress again tonight.

\*~\*

Mal was in high spirits, dancing around the store, suggesting off-kilter dresses for Inara. He and Zoë had come back from their meeting with French richer than they'd intended, Zoë having forcefully played some wildcard involving starving children and a shotgun. They'd been laughing too hard to explain it properly, but Inara imagined she'd hear it again, come supper.

Inara mixed a groan and a laugh as Mal pulled out a two-piece, red beaded gown.

"Come on, Mal. I won't be able to wear that for months."

"Codswallop," Mal jested, holding the dress to her front and admiring. "There's this big opening in the middle, allowing for greater comfort through all stages of pregnancy."

"Right," she laughed, taking the dress and hanging it firmly on the rack.

"If you want something you can wear now, we could find a maternity store."

Inara didn't suppress her groan this time. "Oh, I loathe maternity clothes. I just... don't feel pretty enough to be picking out dresses."

She hung her head and closed her eyes as Mal massaged her shoulders sympathetically. Feeling his hot breath on her face, she bit her lip as he whispered mischievously in her ear, "I got just the thing."

"Mal, I'm not wearing a gold bikini."

"I got that impression from the last wallop on the head. Now close your eyes and come on."

Closing her eyes, Inara couldn't help but smile in anticipation as he steered her through the store, both hands on her shoulders. Her smile widened when he gave the command to open and she found herself in the shoe department.

"Every pregnant lady needs a sensible, yet sexy pair of shoes to liven up that plain maternity-wear," Mal informed, sounding like a salesman.

"You're in quite a mood," Inara laughed mirthfully as Mal pulled off his boots and tried on the least sensible pair of platforms he could find.

"What mood might that be?"

Inara didn't answer; she just let him go on playing with the shoes as she surveyed the shelves. She was glad to be out with Mal on Persephone. After so many years of stopping in, they knew the place, knew the locals, and didn't have to watch their backs so closely. She watched Mal totter around in a black sequined shoe and thought back to the conversation they'd had on the porch swing on Shadow. A part of her was glad he hadn't

brought it up since, because she didn't have an answer yet. But she could see behind his dotting grins the burning need to have a conversation.

"French offered you another job, didn't he?" It was a statement, not a question.

"He did," Mal answered, sitting on a bench again and finding his boots.

"Did you take it?"

"No. I wanted to talk with you first. About what we were saying before."

"Mal, take the job." She said it so quickly, she caught herself off guard. Inara wondered at the source of her confidence, but refused to doubt her instinct.

"You don't even know what it is."

"Does it make a difference?" She sat next to him on the bench, seeking an explanation. "What would you have us do? Camp out on Shadow? Mooch off your mother? Burn through our savings until we can't even fuel Serenity? Lose our contacts? Wind up with no jobs, no prospects. That ain't us!"

Mal reeled backwards with laughter, slapping his knee. "Wife, since when do you say 'ain't'?"

"Your words." She sighed and leaned against him, and he put his arm around her shoulder. For a moment, they just looked at the racks of impractical footwear and the placid shoppers busying themselves with their own worlds. This was what planet-side life was like. Despite the benefits of schooling, society, and the safety it promised, life on land had all the appeal of an Alliance prison camp.

"Mal, the world is a place we visit. It's not a place we live," she explained softly.

"Take the job?"

Inara nodded certainly. "Take the job."

Mal jumped to his feet, his heart soaring, his eyes lit up like a child on Christmas morning. Though startled, Inara complied when he pulled her to her feet, picked her up, and spun her around, covering her face with gleeful kisses. When he set her down again, she drew him into a slow, deep kiss, her toes barely touching the ground. She knew without a doubt that taking the job was the right decision. She could surprise him too, with her willingness to leave behind what she knew and travel the 'verse with him. For his benefit or her own, she couldn't be sure. Perhaps what made them so perfect for each other was that the simple gesture served them both.

\*~\*