

**NAMESAKE 1-6**  
A *Firefly* Ficlet Series  
By Valerie Mikles

*A.N. Snapshots of life, post BDM, Mal narration.*

*Contents*

- 1. Namesake*
  - 2. Inheritance*
  - 3. Terse*
  - 4. His Angel*
  - 5. First Job*
  - 6. His Women*
- 

**NAMESAKE**

**PART 1: HE NAMED HER**

Mal looked through the Infirmary window, shell-shocked. Simon tore about in a whirlwind, using every machine, drug, and verbal incantation he knew to bring her back. She, one of the few people in the ‘verse who would give everything to save his life... she who had given everything. His body felt cold and hollow, a lump in his chest storing grief for later, a bitter taste in his mouth. He hadn’t felt so alone since God left him to die in Serenity Valley.

The tiny baby squirmed in his shaking, calloused hands, crying for her mother. Yellow with jaundice, two months premature, but there was no choice. Come into this world, or die. And so she was here, her long lashes wet with tears as she wailed for nourishment. Mal shuddered and held the baby close to calm her.

“Take care of her,” her mother had requested, knowing she was dying. “I trust you.”

His hands shook all the harder, and he feared he would drop the little baby. She screamed in his ear as he rocked and cooed. How misplaced her mother’s trust had been. He wanted to run. To find other relatives who could raise the baby, give her a proper home. But her mother’s dying request echoed in his ears.

Mal’s heart stopped as Simon slowed his work, checked his watch, and noted time of death. Through the window, he motioned Mal to come in, but Mal’s legs were like jelly and he dare not move for fear of falling. Of dropping the little child. A child meant to be a sign of hope and a reminder of happier times. Now she was the last memorial of that happy union. A baby that would never taste her mother’s milk or know her father’s laugh. An orphan.

The child of Zoë and Wash, whose father never knew she was conceived; whose mother hadn’t known her long enough to give her a name. And when Simon asked, he could only think of one. He named her Zoë.

\*~\*

## PART 2: HE SLEPT

Mal lay face down on the double bed, sobbing. Throat raw, mouth parched, body exhausted from too many days with no sleep. Baby Zoë lay on the bed next to him, swaddled just as Simon had shown him how, surrounded by a throng of stuffed dinosaurs which served as the walls of her crib should she suddenly learn to roll tonight.

Clutching his pillow, Mal inhaled deeply, trying to clear his nose and find Zoë's scent on the sheets. He could still smell the relaxer she used to put in her hair, though the strength waned with each passing day. Holding the pillow more tightly, he wept again, wondering how he could continue with this life. He wasn't a hardened criminal; he just took the jobs he needed. Zoë had made those jobs worth taking. Made them fun. She was his life and his best friend. They were a set – one holding up the other. Without her, he was caving in.

The door to the bunk opened and Inara floated down, her sweet fragrance drowning and overpowering Zoë's. Mal stilled his sobs, waiting for her to speak. After Zoë's death, Inara had delayed her return to the Training House and Mal was waiting for the dreaded day when she would leave again. It didn't much matter now. He was alone with this tiny child and all reason in the 'verse seemed swept away.

Inara sat next to Mal on the bed, so lightly that none of the dinosaurs surrounding the baby tottered. Her hand touched his shoulder and Mal inhaled sharply as though he'd been stung. He accepted her comfort as she gently stroked his pack, her presence soothing like a cool breeze through the burn of his grief. Her touch reeked of Companion training, but Mal pushed that thought from his mind and appreciated her effort.

Feeling calmer, Mal rolled carefully onto his back and reached a hand through the line of stuffed animals to touch baby Zoë. Inara continued to stroke his arm soothingly and he breathed deep the comfort of her presence.

"What did you bring me?" Mal asked, noting the canister in her hand.

"Oh, um, baby formula. Simon and Kaylee bought a case of it today."

"The good stuff?"

"So I'm told. Hopefully she'll like this mix better than the last."

"She wants her momma."

Inara was silent a moment, affording Zoë's mention the respect it deserved. She touched Mal's stubble-roughened face and he touched the baby's soft cheek. Somehow between the two, he found just a moment of peace and clarity. Mal took Inara's hand in his and pulled it to rest on his heart, but she retracted awkwardly, reminding him that he wasn't hers to hold. He watched as she stood and busied herself straightening the mess of baby supplies on the bureau and folding the blankets.

"When are you fixin' to leave?"

Inara slowed, but didn't stop her puttering. "I thought I might stay awhile. Rent out the shuttle again."

"Is the Training House boring you?"

"I just want to be here ... to help with the baby. I didn't think you would resign yourself to a planet and she deserves proper schooling."

"I ain't raising a ... companion." He had swallowed the word 'whore' and she knew it. But she read the desperation in his eyes and didn't goad him.

Weakened from too many days of not eating, Mal's head lolled against the pillow and he looked at the baby again. When he closed his eyes, all he could see was Zoë's pallid face begging him to care for her baby.

The cry of his heart was unexpectedly joined by the baby's as little Zoë lurched herself into wakefulness. Mal started to move his weary body, but Inara stilled him.

"I'll get her," she soothed, picking up baby Zoë and carrying her to the changing table. Mal shuddered in grief, but when he blinked it away, he saw Inara cuddling and cooing the baby like it was her own. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. For the first time, he felt like he might make it through this tragedy. He felt a little less alone.

Inara prepped a bottle of the new formula and sat on the bed next to him while she fed the baby. He reached up briefly to touch them both, and a relaxed sigh fell from his lips. And then, for the first time since Zoë died, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

\*~\*

### **PART 3: HE LAUGHED**

"Uh oh." Those were her first words. Perhaps he'd said them too often, because God knew he thought them every day. Her wild, curly hair tickled his arm, unable to be restrained even by Inara's professional touch. Her thin little lips curled into a smile, more from Mal's response than the situation at hand. He was flying the ship, she sat on his lap, and they looked out the window at the forbidding Alliance cruiser in front of them. Normally, he'd be concerned, but the sound of her tiny voice echoing his own apprehension filled him with delight.

He was laughing when he grabbed the P.A. to warn the crew, so much so that Jayne darted in to make sure he wasn't dying in his chair. On seeing the cruiser, Jayne pegged him delirious, and grabbed the P.A. to repeat the grave warning to the crew, when she said it again. "Uh oh." She drew out the "oh" as if it were a song. That's when the burly mercenary cracked.

Mal smiled as the cruiser demanded they dock and hand over their stolen goods. His heart somersaulted as she peaked her little head into view of the vid and repeated the word for the benefit of the Alliance officer. "Uh oh." He was in stitches as she pulled herself to standing on his lap, and blew the officer a kiss over vid.

Jayne practically had to lift Mal from the pilot's seat to take over the conversation. Not bothering to find a chair, Mal sank to the floor, baby Zoë still in his arms, trying to catch his breath. He sighed happily, wiping tears of laughter from his face.

Clutching his aching side, he told her, "Wo ai ni, little Zoë."

She answered with the only word she knew. "Uh oh."

\*~\*

## INHERITANCE

### PART 4: HE WED

Mal peeked through the side door of the small chapel as it slowly filled. It had been a long while since he'd entered a church for honest purposes, but Mal knew his Ma would've killed him if he married any place else.

He could see his Ma by the back door, holding a squirming little Zoë, now two-and-a-half, all dolled up for the occasion and loathing it. It was way past her naptime, but he'd explained the plan for the ceremony to her and she had promised she'd do her best. He could hear her repeated babbling floating over the quiet conversations of the guests, even as his Ma covered her little mouth to shush her.

"Baba, Baba, Baba, Baba...." She called him Baba – daddy. Every time she said it, his heart soared. He had no part in creating her, but she didn't care. She had never known any father but him.

The music for the processional began and Mal took his place at the front of the church, watching and waiting in nervous anticipation. He felt the tingling in his stomach spread through his whole body, seeing his Ma come up the aisle, beaming at him. Then the bridal party. On cue, little Zoë – the flower girl – was released. With a squeal that was almost a battle cry, she tore through the aisles, lobbing rose petals at the guests like they were hot grenades. She circled the altar, and started toward the back of the church getting ready for another go down the aisle. Mal suppressed a laugh and whistled sharply.

Obediently, little Zoë ran to his side and grabbed hold of his leg, breathless. Not quite the plan they had discussed, but since when did things ever go according to the gorrám plan. Little Zoë met his eye encouragingly and he briefly wished it was her mother by his side witnessing the event.

His grief vanished as the music changed and his bride appeared through the door of the church. Feeling his knees go weak, little Zoë gripped his leg all the tighter, trying to hold him up. The world melted away – all he saw was his angel, all he felt was joy.

When Inara took his hand, he kissed it and pulled it to his heart. She was now his to hold forever. And while he wed, little Zoë stayed by his side, holding him steady. Just like her momma would've.

\*~\*

### PART 5: HE SANG

*The gorrám Fed ripped little Zoë right out of his arms, hauling her away, threatening to throw her into the system. She kicked and shrieked, reaching for Mal, too young to understand anything more than they were taking her from her family. Already being restrained by two men, Mal tore forward, ready to have his arms ripped off before he let them disappear with his little girl. He would have shot them all had they not disarmed him already. As she vanished from view, he shouted her name, but no words came out. A gag on his mouth. A spell. A scream.*

Mal awoke, covered with sweat, little Zoë standing at the foot of his bed, staring at him, wide-eyed and trembling. Had he woken her? Had he frightened her? Or had she

just awoken from the same terrifying nightmare. Ever since it had happened, it plagued them both, and at some point in the night one of them would inevitably get out of bed and check to make sure the other was still there. Tonight, she had woken up first. She stared at him with her mamma's almond, tear-filled eyes, and her daddy's thin, quivering lips. Somehow in the mix of Wash's and Zoë's features, she'd ended up with River's nose. He pinched that little nose and she took that as an invitation to crawl into bed and snuggle up next to him. Her fingers tugged and tickled at the hairs on his arm like she was counting them. Her eyes stared intently at his arm, afraid to close lest the nightmare return.

"Baba, will you sing me a song?" she asked timidly. He stilled her fingers so they wouldn't tickle his arm so and kissed the top of her head.

"No, Zobug, it's Aunt Kaylee that does the singin' on this boat."

Zoë sighed sullenly, then resolutely pushed the covers aside and scooted to the edge of the bed. Mal grabbed her waist and pulled her back.

"You ain't wakin' Aunt Kaylee at this hour, darlin'."

Little Zoë gave Mal that same stern look that her mother had often used against him, and he felt himself melt, enveloped by the memory. He would do anything to have his first mate back; but all he had was this sweet little girl asking him to sing. If he'd said no, she would have backed down. He could be a stern father when he needed to. But tonight there was no need for sternness. Not when they were both being plagued by the same nightmare. He racked his brain for a song he could sing without waking Inara – one little Zoë didn't know yet. Finally the proper neurons connected and he began.

"*Twinkle, twinkle, little star.*"

"Baba," little Zoë interrupted, turning to face him. "Stars ain't little."

"They're not?"

"No, they're huge." She picked up his hands and made a motion. "The song is wrong."

"Maybe I should change the words then," he suggested and cleared his throat.

"How about this: *Twinkle, twinkle great big star, How I wonder what you are.*"

"But Baba, we know what stars are."

Mal sighed, starting to wish he'd picked 'Itsy Bitsy Spider', as he wasn't in the mood for an astronomy lesson at 4am.

"What are they, little one?"

"They're hyja-gin."

"Hyja-gin," he repeated with a smile. Damn precocious child had been hanging around Simon and River too long. "Sounds like a moonshine liquor. No wonder they burn so bright. Are you gonna keep interrupting me or are you going to let me sing?"

"Both," she answered tersely, squirming his hand as he tickled her tummy. "You just sing, Baba. You just sing."

\*~\*

## **PART 6: HE PRAYED**

Mal was having an out of body experience – watching his forlorn self as he watched her. The evening was quiet, the only motion being the steady blink of the

monitors in the Infirmary, back-dropped by the thunderous roar of the engines as Serenity made a hard burn for a world with a decent hospital.

Inara stood next to the bed, holding Little Zoë's hand, stroking her hair while she slept. His wife's eyes were rimmed with the dark circles of sleeplessness and worry. Every time he remembered to breathe, the chill, stale air entered his lungs like illegal immigrants rushing the border.

He blamed himself. Why had he not noticed? How easily she became winded, how tired she seemed. A cancer. Treatable, Simon assured, but she needed proper care. A hospital. Something Mal had never provided her, though he'd tried to give her everything.

Mal steeled himself for the journey, waiting for something to go wrong – for an unexpected delay that would leave his little girl dead before they reached help. Little Zoë had assured him, with her mother's strength and her father's good humor, that she'd be fine. But as he watched her shallow breathing and the way her mouth contorted in pain while she slept, he wasn't so sure. He couldn't help but fear that she'd die in the same cold, infirmary bed as her mother.

When it was just his life and death, he didn't believe in God. When it was his crew, he figured they could make their own peace. But now that it was his little Zoë, it was worth a plea.

"God," he choked tentatively. Not remembering how to pray, he decided to just speak plainly.

"I don't think you're real and even if you answer this, I can't promise I'll change my mind. But God, please be real. Please. Please look at her."

He was back there again. Serenity Valley. His angels flying away, abandoning him. This was crazy! He hated God for the war. If he'd still believed in God, he'd hate him for taking away his best friend. So why was he willing to crawl back to prayer on behalf of little Zoë? Mal took to pacing, the motion in his legs loosening his tongue. He wasn't crazy. He was just having a conversation with an invisible, imaginary being. Just trying to work things out.

His eyes fixed on Little Zoë, his legs still moving, he spoke again. "Can you see my little one? She's so tired and so scared. It's not something I can protect her from. Not something I can hold a gun to... God, please don't take her from me. If you're thirsty for blood, take my life, not hers. Not hers, God, please. Please let her live."

Mal's heart and flesh collided again as Inara exited the Infirmary and took his hand. She was exhausted. They both were. He cleared his throat and hugged her close, knowing she'd spent the last hour praying to her own god. Perhaps between the two of them, someone would hear and help. Hope against hope. For as long as she still breathed. He watched his little girl and he prayed again.

\*~\*

## TERSE

### PART 7: HE WORKED

Mal balanced and reclined as best he could in the stiff hospital chair, Little Zoë asleep on his lap. The color had returned to her face, but her shoulders still slumped, having carried more weight in the past three months than any five-year-old should ever be asked to carry. Thanks to Simon's top-three-percent medical expertise and his connections to core physicians, Little Zoë had received cutting edge treatment and was recovering quickly. The only reason they were still in the hospital was that Serenity was not clean enough for her weakened immune system. It broke his heart that the home he had provided, the ship he loved, was not safe for his little girl.

Mal rocked Little Zoë in his arms, enveloped in her recovery, giving only the vaguest attention to Jayne as he spoke. Jayne had come in a half hour ago, looking unbalanced with all his weapons concealed (as hospitals weren't prone to allowing heavily armed mercenaries roam the corridors) and begun his speech with his lifelong mantra.

"Mal, we need coin."

It was about there that Mal had stopped listening. The need for income was just one more plague on his existence. Hospital bills, port taxes, food. Even if he sold his boat, that would only buy a few more days planet-side. He didn't even want to dwell on the new mouth he'd be feeding in eight months time... Well, maybe he could dwell on his and Inara's coming baby for a moment. Erase all the fear, insecurity, and poverty, and hold on to the promise of happiness.

"We can't wait much more." Jayne's voice cut through the promise with his own take on reality. Mal shifted the sleeping Zoë so she wouldn't put his whole left arm out, and he thought of his crew. They hovered in his memory, separated from the current situation by a lifetime and then some. He needed to disband and let them go their own way. They all wanted to stay together, Mal knew; and if he didn't Jayne was here to remind him.

"Mal, you can't afford to set here and do nothin'. You gotta provide for your family."

Mal shuddered a breath, keeping his gaze firmly out the window away from Jayne. Away from hospital bills and port taxes and thoughts of disbanding the crew. Away to the farthest reaches of the Black where he wouldn't be hounded by governments or waiting for angels that never came. Away to where he was responsible to no one and for no one. Away.

Zoë coughed in her sleep, forcing Mal back into the hospital room and Jayne's gou cao de reality check. But Jayne wasn't talking about problems anymore.

"You ain't alone in this, Mal. You got options," he assured, and Mal listened through slightly less fog. "I got a contact about a job. Good take, given Serenity's reputation. If you can't fathom leaving this world, rent the ship out to me, I'll take the crew, and we'll get the job done. Two weeks, three tops, you got yourself a decent paycheck. If you wanna come along ... well, then I don't need to go hire a second gun hand."

Jayne paused and Mal looked at him carefully. How bizarre was this man before him. It hadn't been the shallow plea for money and ultimatum he'd expected. When had this stranger surfaced? Jayne organizing a job? Jayne leading the crew? In truth, Jayne had started picking up the role of first mate from the moment Zoë died. There had been no maneuvering for authority or talk of the chain of command. He'd just done it. As Mal had mourned and adjusted to being a full time parent, Jayne had taken the task of assigning chores and watch duty. Where once was a man who had promised imminent betrayal on more than one occasion, Mal now saw a friend. A brother, even. When had that occurred?

"Just think about it, Mal," Jayne reiterated, reaching out and touching Little Zoë's cheek. The girl stirred softly, twisting about to give Mal a kiss on the cheek as she stretched.

"Hey, Uncle Jayne."

"Hey, baby girl."

And there was Mal's answer in Jayne's eyes. When Little Zoë called him 'Uncle', he saw in Jayne the same swell of joy he felt every time she called him 'Baba.' Since Miranda, they'd been friends. Since Zoë, they'd been family.

Little Zoë crawled from Mal's lap into Jayne's, leaving him cold.

"Uncle Jayne, can you fly me?"

Mal tensed. He always hated it when Jayne bench-pressed Zoë. Jayne had only dropped her the one time and while Zoë was forgiving, Mal was wary.

"I don't know," Jayne teased, turning her in his hands like a salt shaker, making her giggle. "You're getting mighty big."

"Please, Uncle Jayne."

With a mock grunt, Jayne hefted her over his head, swaying her easily from side-to-side. Mal fought the urge to hold out a hand and help and just watch as Zoë squealed in delight.

"Did I ever tell you about the time your daddy pulled a Crazy Ivan to escape the Reavers?"

And that's why Mal never stopped this particular game. Zoë always laughed and listened eagerly to the tales Jayne told and the girl deserved to hear about her father. As the story progressed and Zoë continued to fly over Jayne's head, Mal noted that she wasn't in any pain, nor was she out-of-breath. Her healing was sure. She wasn't going to die tonight or any time soon. It was okay for him to leave this world. To work. To provide for her like he should.

When the story finally ended, Mal nudged Jayne's shoulder. "When is this meet again?"

"Three hours. If you take point, I can stand there and look intimidating."

Mal smiled lightly. "You've always been good at that."

\*~\*

## **PART 8: HE FELL OUT OF HIS CHAIR**

Mal was surprised to get a wave from Inara so soon after finishing a job and immediately worried that something was wrong. He hated leaving his six-and-a-half

month pregnant wife on a planet a good million miles away. Serenity was half a day ahead of schedule, but still five days out. His tension melted somewhat when he saw Little Zoë staring at him through the vid, moon-eyed as though she'd just been punished. He put on his stern father face, ready to berate her for sending a wave without permission.

"Hey, Little Zoë," he greeted neutrally, nursing a cup of coffee. The job was done; he may as well chat a little and chastise himself for going soft.

"Baba, can I walk to the store and buy some peanut butter?"

Terse. Straight to business, just like her momma. Mal rolled his eyes, accustomed to Little Zoë's authority evasion techniques. "What does Mama 'Nara say?"

Zoë shifted uncomfortably and looked at her hands. "She said not to call you."

"So why are you callin' me, Zo?"

"Because I'm hungry," the little girl whined. "And I don't know how to make nothin' else."

"I bet if you ask real nice, Mama 'Nara will make you somethin'."

"She isn't here, Baba," Zoë carped, condescendingly. "She's at the hospital having her baby."

Heart! Stop! What?!!! Mal spit his drink at the screen and fell out of his chair, his mind reeling, his blood pumping so hard it felt ready to burst through his skin. Coughing to clear the half-swallowed drink from his lung, he climbed back into the seat and wiped the vid-screen with his sleeve.

"Baba?" She spoke with the same stoic calm as her mother had in such panic-worthy situations.

"I'm here, Zo," he gagged.

"Can I go?"

"Zo, when did Mama 'Nara leave for the hospital?" Blood pounded through his ears, muffling her response; his hands frantically flew over the console trying to connect with the hospital on a second line.

Zoë shrugged, nonplussed. "I dunno. Before we ran out of peanut butter."

"How many sandwiches ago?"

Zoë sighed and counted impatiently on her fingers. "Four. Two with bananas, but we ran out of those, too. Baba, I'm hungry."

"I know ya are, Little One, and I promise to get you food as soon as I can, but first you need to tell me what happened to Mama 'Nara."

"She'll be mad because I called before your job finished."

"My job is done now, Zo, you can tell me."

"She was screamin' and bleedin' and I called the doctor and they took her in an ambulance."

Ambulance! Mal gave up on the hospital switchboard and checked his bank account, figuring he could trace Inara faster through hospital charges. With one hand, he called up Simon to interpret the medical jargon.

"And you got left?" Mal prompted.

"I locked the door behind 'em, Baba. They never knowed I was here."

Mal whimpered a pained laugh. It occurred to him that Little Zoë had hidden from far too many sinister, evil lawmen and he needed to have a talk with her about trust. Later. Now he needed to focus. Get Simon up here to interpret the medical charges. Find

status of Inara and baby. Find someone to check in on Little Zoë. Hard burn! His mind was a blur wondering what might be happening to Inara to make her leave Zoë behind like that.

“Baba, did I do something bad?”

“No, darlin’, you did everything just right. You sit tight and I’ll get someone over there as soon as I can.”

“Can it be Nurse Rhinehart?” Zoë asked, her eyes lighting up. Mal let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. The request relieved him because as of that moment his mind was racing too fast to think of individual names.

“I’ll try her first,” he assured, a comforting smile masking his panic. Where was Simon?

“Wo ai ni, Baba.”

“I love you too, Little Zoë.”

\*~\*

## **PART 9: HE CAME RUNNING**

Little Zoë had been missing for three days. Mal nearly fainted when he heard the news. He’d just run from the hospital ward where Inara was still recovering to the NICU where his unnamed son was sleeping and was hoping to find a sweet, little smile in the children’s ward where Nurse Rhinehart had promised to keep Little Zoë while she worked.

“I’ve looked all over, I called the police, I tried to contact you over and over,” the young nurse gushed frantically. “I don’t know why she’d just run off like that.”

“Did you say something to her? About ‘Nara? About the baby? About... the declining sales of peanut butter on the eastern continent?” Mal demanded as he scanned the ward for signs of his little girl. But Little Zoë had spent a fair part of the last year here and knew all the dark pockets. He knew he wouldn’t just spot her.

“We went to visit Mrs. Reynolds that day, she was a little quiet after. But she’s always so terse.” The nurse was near tears at having to explain the story again, reliving the fear. “Security has her picture, but no one has seen her.”

“Girl knows how to hide,” Mal commented, trying to stay calm, giving the nurse a forgiving pat on the shoulder. She had to still be here; otherwise she would’ve called him again and asked permission to leave.

“Zoë!” he shouted, striding through the corridors determinedly.

“We tried that,” the nurse whimpered, rushing behind him to keep up. He yelled her name again. Pausing beside a cart toting food trays, Mal sniffed and considered the hot lunches that were currently being distributed.

“Any of these go missin’ today?”

The nurse shrugged, tearfully. “I’m not sure. We—”

“Shhh!” Mal hushed, crouching to listen. One of the ceiling tiles half way down the hall shifted minutely. Mal reached up and punched out the tile next to it. “Zoë?”

The tiles shifted again and Zoë’s caramel face peaked out, her hair covered with dust and lint, her face stained with dried up tears. She held a stolen food tray in one hand

and crumbs of bread stuck to the corners of her mouth. She held one little finger to her lips, warning Mal to be quiet.

“It’s safe to come down now. I’m here,” he assured, reaching up his arms. Cautiously, she peaked over the edge of the ceiling and on seeing only the crying nurse and Mal, handed down her food tray first. Mal reached out his arms and let her fall into them.

“What were ya doin’ up there?” he asked, rocking her slowly as she clung to him, curling in a ball.

“The doctor said he was gonna call child services and they were gonna get me out of his hair.”

“Which doctor said that?”

“Baba, he didn’t even have hair,” she whimpered. He tried unsuccessfully to brush the lint off of her with his fingers, but finally gave up.

“Well I got you now, and you ain’t going nowhere.” She nodded tiredly and sneezed as the dust swirled around her head. Serenity was definitely cleaner than this. If she was well enough to hide in the ceiling tiles, they’d be spaceborn again soon.

“How about we visit your little brother?”

“Cole.”

“What’s that?” Mal asked, wondering if it was a yes or no.

“I named him Cole. Because he has dark hair like Mama ‘Nara.”

\*~\*

## HIS ANGEL

### PART 10: HE RECOVERED

Red blood.

Waves of black nothingness.

An all-consuming ocean, a rip current sucking him further and further from consciousness. Crushing waves of pounding blood, their roar drowned out by sharp shrieks of pain coming from somewhere below his belly. His body screamed, fighting to die, even as his crew fought to save him. Through the deafening cries within, his ears picked up a faint melody from the world outside.

*“Twinkle, twinkle, great big star. Hydrogen is what you are.”*

Coughing up consciousness like bad food, Mal’s eyes blinked opened only to be blinded by a painful, white light. Had he been wrong about God? Was he dead? Was that sweet music really an angel’s song? He didn’t deserve such from death.

*“Mama ‘Nara, he’s wakin’ up,”* Little Zoë’s voice floated through the fog of his afterlife. The light burning the back of his eyelids dimmed and he opened his eyes again, this time able to make out the vague silhouette of his family. Little Zoë lay on the bed next to him, putting a nauseating bit pressure on his injured shoulder. Inara hovered like an angel, baby Cole in her arms, back-dropped by the far too familiar Infirmary ceiling.

“Ease up, Zo,” Mal choked, swallowing the bile rising in his throat. She slid off the bed, finding a chair to stand on instead so she could still see him. The pressure gone, Mal took a deep breath and tried to remember what had happened.

“Jayne? River?”

“They’re fine,” Inara assured, touching his cheek. He sighed easily, the pain in his body momentarily forgotten on feeling his angel’s skin on his face. Her tenderness was like a cool, refreshing breeze through his entire body, the sound of her voice like honey. He shivered in pleasure, wanting her to speak again.

“Nara.”

“Shh. Don’t talk,” she soothed, her voice a mixture of old concern and new relief. He was mesmerized now by the sweet melody of her speech and sent the first willing hand he could control up to touch her lips. She found his hand as it groped the air, kissed his palm, then pressed it against her heart, laying baby Cole on top to seal the connection. She swayed lightly, more for the baby than for him, but Mal closed his eyes, relaxed.

Little Zoë propped her elbows on the corner of his pillow, resting one hand in his hair, and she started singing again. And as the raft of his consciousness drifted slowly back to the dreamy sea, Inara kept hold of his hand, guiding him to recover.

\*~\*

## **PART 11: HE BREATHED**

Mal and Inara sat at the kitchen table, mapping out the next job as the babies toddled around the enclosed lounge area. Simon and Kaylee’s twins were just a year younger than Cole, and though they weren’t yet stable on their feet, they were prone to climbing over any and all protective fencing. Kaylee always teased that they’d inherited the escaping gene from their fugitive father. Jayne helped Little Zoë in the galley, making peanut butter sandwiches for everyone before all the bread went bad. The bread had been a present for her eighth birthday and a welcome reprieve from the normal protein mash.

“I finally got that printer working,” Simon chirped, waving a printout as he entered the galley

“I wanna see,” Zoë squealed, running to the table to look over Mal’s shoulder as Simon laid the picture down in the middle.

“Where is he?” Jayne asked grumpily, taking two sandwiches before setting the plate on the table.

Mal was at a loss as well; the black and white swirls could easily have been a Rorschach test in still frame. But given the age of the equipment they could afford, this was the best picture he had of his coming son. Instinctively, he touched Inara’s growing stomach, wondering when the first kick would come.

“That’s him there,” Simon answered, tracing an outline. Mal believed it for a moment but as soon as Simon’s hand left the paper, he blinked and lost it again. Still, he smiled, seeing Inara beaming proudly.

Inara picked up the photo and breezed out of the room, leaving him with only a light kiss on the cheek and the excuse that she wanted to show Kaylee. Mal watched happily the sway of her hips as she walked. The grace she managed to possess in spite of pregnancy-swollen ankles. He hardly noticed Jayne pulling the map he’d been pondering and carrying it to the cockpit to consult with River.

“You ready to be a father again?” Simon asked, taking a sandwich as he sat at the table across from Mal.

Mal pulled Zoë onto his lap and kissed her cheek as she took a bite of her sandwich. “This is the last one,” Mal said firmly. “No more.”

“Isn’t that what you said last time?”

“Yes, but Sake is evil.” Mal turned seriously to Zoë. “Remember that, Little One. Sake is evil.”

“Sake is evil,” she repeated with a giggle.

“If you want, we could take more permanent measures...”

Mal’s groin twitched protectively and he shook his head. “No thanks, Doc, I—”

His excuse was cut off by a loud explosion from the engine room followed by a deep rumble through the ship.

“Inara! Kaylee!” Mal shouted, tossing Zoë from his lap and running toward the sound. Jayne and Simon were at his heels in a heartbeat, Jayne with a fire extinguisher, plowing through the flames into the engine room. Mal felt the heat on his skin and smoke in his lungs as he got closer, and he put a sleeve over his nose, holding his breath until the room turned to stars. Only from years of practice was his head cool enough for action, dropping below the smoke, finding, reaching, carrying.

When they’d pulled the women out, Mal sealed the door to the engine room and activated fire suppression. The hallway felt surreally cool, free of the smoke. Simon worked frantically assessing burns, River appearing from nowhere with his medkit. Inara’s face was ashen and covered with black soot, her fist clenching the charred photo of their son. Mal held his breath waiting for the Doctor’s prognosis, the cold air touching his skin, but not entering his mouth. But when Inara coughed violently, sucking in lungs full of oxygen, Mal started breathing again too.

\*~\*

## **PART 12: HE WONDERED**

“Baba, it’s time,” Little Zoë informed him with stoic calm, poking her head through the door.

Mal looked up from the story book he was reading to two-year-old Cole in surprise. “Time for what, Zo? I’m puttin’ your brother to bed.”

“Mama ‘Nara’s baby is comin’. I called Uncle Simon.” She sounded so matter-of-fact, Mal wondered at the similarity between her and her momma. Having delivered her message, Zoë turned curtly, and left.

Taking his time, Mal kissed Cole, laid him in the crib, and set the baby monitor before following Zoë down the hall to the room where he and Inara had taken up temporary residence. River had jokingly hung a sign on the door saying ‘Maternity Suite,’ and the crew had added their own messages of congratulations and what not around the sign.

When he entered the room, Inara was pacing the room, one hand on her stomach, breathing deliberately through her mouth. Little Zoë sat on the bed, leaning back on her hands, watching calmly.

“You okay?”

“Braxton-Hicks,” Inara said between breaths. Zoë met his eye and shook her head, but Mal was inclined to side with Inara on this as she was still six weeks from due.

Simon knocked tentatively on the door and peaked in.

“I’m fine, Doctor,” Inara assured before he could ask. Her breathing had calmed and Mal escorted her to the bed so she could sit.

Little Zoë folded her arms across her chest resolutely. “I seen all the babies born on this ship, Mama ‘Nara. I know what it looks like when they’re ready to come out.”

Mal suppressed a smile that quickly became a wince as Inara’s grip on his hand tightened. She was having a contraction – a real one, by Simon’s response. He swallowed a mixture of excitement and nerves, grimacing as Inara cried out. He’d missed Cole’s birth, and when the first gush of blood and water came out, he started wishing he could miss a little bit more of this one too.

“Zo, why don’t you wait outside,” he suggested weakly, glad he was already sitting. But Little Zoë watched eagerly, her face filled with wonder as Simon worked.

“It’s okay, Baba, I’ve seen this part before. I wanna see what happens next.”

A smile spilled across her lips, her awe contagious. She seemed to know better than he did that something wonderful was coming. But then, her hand wasn’t being crushed by a woman in labor.

\*~\*

## **FIRST JOB**

### **PART 13: HE PAID HER**

Mal balanced Little Michael on his lap, coaxing him to stand, while Kaylee sat cross-legged in the lounge, telling Genevieve that she had to share the red crayon with her brother. Jamie’s round, red face was scrunched in desperation as he begged, “Please, Genny, please.”

Little Michael’s knees bent stubbornly trying to sit and Mal sighed. At a year-and-a-half, he should be standing, but the boy seemed to have absolutely no interest. He certainly had the strength when he wanted to. As Mal held his tiny fists up again, the boy lifted his legs and swung monkey-like onto the dining table, knocking over a place setting.

“Come on, Michael,” Mal whined, setting his spilled mug upright as the Michael crawled away. The boy turned and gave a mischievous smile at the sound of his own name. He picked up the mug and held it out to Mal.

“Mug,” Mal told him, taking the cup and setting it down. Michael picked it up again and prompted. Mal repeated the word. With a wide smile, Michael made a drinking motion, dumping the last few drops of liquid onto his shirt, breaking into silent giggles when Mal tickled him. Michael rarely made noise, even to cry. Simon had fitted him with a hearing aid a few months ago – as soon as they could afford one – but the soundscape was still new to him, and he was reluctant to join in just yet.

Having resolved her own children’s conflict, Kaylee glided over with a dish rag to wipe up Mal’s spilled tea. This time, Michael didn’t resist Mal’s attempt to make him stand, and he reached up on tiptoes, grabbing at Kaylee’s hair.

“Maybe you just need to dangle a carrot,” Kaylee suggested, a sunshiny smile radiating from her face as she kissed Michael’s nose. Mal smiled back, helping to free her ensnared locks from his son’s grasp.

“Baba, we need to talk,” Little Zoë interrupted seriously, standing in the doorway to the galley, looking all business at the age of almost-nine. (It was Mal who insisted on the ‘almost’ bit.) Kaylee raised an eyebrow at Mal and went quietly to the kitchen to prepare lunch, keeping one ear open for eavesdropping.

“Sure, Zo, what is it?” Mal asked, motioning to the seat next to him.

Zoë strode in assertively and sat at the edge of the chair, her feet barely grazing the floor, her back straight as she could make it, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Mal started to think that maybe Inara had coached her for this particular talk.

“I’m just a kid,” Zoë began matter-of-factly and Mal had to fight to keep a straight face, but nodded, businesslike. “But it seems I do an awful lot of work around here.”

“That’s how it is in the Black, Zoë. We all have to do our fair share.”

“I’m not talking about chores, Baba. Whenever you go out on a job or something strange happens, you always tell me to look out for my brothers. And look out for the twins.”

Mal furrowed his brow, not seeing where this was going. “Zo, that’s just part of bein’ in this family. Everyone on this ship has a job to do, especially when we’re gettin’ paid.”

“Exactly, Baba. But I’m the only one with a job who ain’t gettin’ paid.”

Mal balked, his jaw dropping, an incredulous laugh just moments from reality, but he held back in light of Zoë’s stern manner. “You want me to make the job official then?”

Little Zoë nodded seriously. Mal thought he would burst with amusement. “Ok, Zoë. It’s official. When we’re on a job, it is your responsibility to keep the little ones safe, dong ma?”

Zoë nodded.

“So am I payin’ you per job?”

Zoë tipped her head. “I was thinking a monthly fee for standard hours. Plus overtime if you and Mama ‘Nara are just takin’ a night off.”

“Sounds fair,” Mal agreed. Zoë reached out a hand and he shook it to seal the deal, then she walked proudly out of the room, presumably to tell Inara that the plan had worked. When she was safely out of earshot, Mal glanced over at Kaylee and they both burst out laughing.

\*~\*

## **PART 14: HE TOOK A RISK**

Mal’s mouth watered at the smell of whatever Sky was cooking for breakfast. He hadn’t hired her for her culinary skills. That was just a bonus. Jayne stumbled in, stretching and rubbing sleep from his eyes, groaning in anticipation at the scent of the food. A greedy leer falling on his face, he came up behind Sky, snaked his arms around her waist, and planted a kiss on her neck. She smiled accommodatingly, bringing her stirring spoon to his lips so he could taste.

Mal didn't even know Sky's real name, but he figured Jayne did by now. Jayne and Sky were cut from the same cloth, and freakishly so at times. In gunfights, Mal would easily have believed they developed a psychic connection, moving in threatening rhythm like pack wolves. Between fights, they looked anything but threatening, her voice a sweet mezzo soprano, singing along as he played guitar. Or now, as they hung on each other like the lovers they were.

Sky turned off the stove and moved the liquidy, seasoned, protein concoction off the burner to cool. Jayne stayed wrapped around her, looking ready to fall asleep on her shoulder and Mal thought he had never seen Jayne more content.

"Sky can you help me with the press regulator," Kaylee asked, poking her head into the room.

"Sure, girl," Sky answered, disentangling herself from Jayne and heading out. Mechanical aptitude had been another bonus of hiring her, and Kaylee was not reluctant to tell Mal (over and over) how much she appreciated the help. At the door, Sky turned back and warned Jayne, "Don't touch it until I get back."

Jayne looked grumpily at the cooling breakfast, then came over to the table to sit next to Mal and soak in the aroma of the food.

"You thinkin' to marry her?" Mal asked.

"Naw, I figure we'll just keep livin' in sin till the Good Lord strikes us down," Jayne joked, failing to mask a satisfied sigh.

"He'll get a fair chance on this next job," Mal warned, a bit of serious foreboding leaking into their humor. Hiring Sky meant they could handle harder jobs with bigger takes, though it also meant more risk.

"It's worth the risk," Jayne grinned, fingering his empty bowl, not clear on whether he meant the job or Sky. "Maybe safer to get the kids off the boat, though."

Mal nodded, brooding over the unlovely reputation of their current employer. This take would be enough to pay off the last of Little Zoë's hospital bills, get proper treatment for Michael's hearing, and still have enough left over for a month long shore leave. The peril wasn't in the job itself but in the people they were stealing from and stealing for. Jayne was right. It was best to get them off the boat for this run.

\*~\*

## **PART 15: HE LOST HER**

The job had gone too easily and now Mal knew why. He searched frantically through the wreckage of the safe house for any sign of Inara or the children. Not even a drop of blood. Not a sign. Had they even been here when this place was torn apart? Would there be a ransom demand or had they already been sold off as slaves?

He could hear Kaylee upstairs, crying hysterically, being firmly ignored by the others as they checked the safe-rooms, false walls, hidden passages, or anywhere else that small children might fit.

"She's not here," River said mournfully, coming down the stairs. Mal stood in the middle of a rubble pile, having forgotten to move for the past few minutes. At River's word, his heart stopped. His angel flew away from him. The light receded. Serenity Valley.

He whispered her name. "Inara."

"She's not safe," River promised, tears in her eyes.

"Mal!" Jayne hollered, storming down the stairs. "I found one!"

Mal turned so sharply, he nearly fell over, tripping on a broken bed frame.

"Baba!" Cole cried, throwing up his hands with joy. Jayne held him securely at the foot of the stairs as Mal stumbled through the debris. Cole's dark hair was oily, his face and clothes dirty, his lips dry. He held a small pistol in one hand, but only loosely.

"Boy, what are you doin' here?" Mal asked gently, taking Cole in his arms and hugging him tightly.

"Zoë sent me to look for you," he explained simply. "She sends me every day because I'm the man of the house now."

"Zoë?" Mal repeated, a glimmer of hope coming for the first time. "Where is she, son?"

Cheerfully unaware of their distress, Cole led them out a narrow passage from the basement to the end of the back yard. From there, they followed him into a sparse woods, across a golf course, over a narrow, log bridge, and into another wood. The group traveled in silence, holding a collective breath, hoping against hope to find them well. Through a clearing just ahead, at the entrance to a cave, Mal could make out Zoë, kneeling on the ground, setting out a picnic for the children, singing them a song. Mal's step quickened, cracking the tree branches, pushing the rattling bushes aside. When Little Zoë heard their approach, she jumped quickly to her feet, drawing a Mare's Leg, and taking aim.

"Zoë, they're here!" Cole cried out, at which point she dropped her weapon and ran straight into Mal's arms. Mal lifted her up, then fell to his knees, unable to catch his breath as the fear and relief simultaneously flooded through him. Little Zoë sobbed and held on as tightly as she could.

"I tried to help, Baba," Zoë wept. "But I had to get the little ones safe first. By the time I got back, Mama 'Nara... she..."

Mal felt a lump growing in his throat, but stored his grief for later, focusing now on getting the children safe. "It's okay, Little Zoë. You did good. You kept the little ones safe till I got here. That's what I pay you for, right?"

Little Zoë nodded miserably and Mal lifted her again, carrying her back to Serenity, wishing away this burden on her childhood. He looked constantly from her to his two sons, one in Sky's arms the other in Jayne's. Kaylee held Genny on one arm, her free hand reaching over to Jamie who was in Simon's, vowing that she wouldn't leave them again. All the children seemed calm and well-cared-for, seemingly none aware of the true danger they had been in. Only Zoë wept now, finally free to be a little girl again, free to fear, free to take comfort in her father's arms.

"Baba," Zoë hiccupped, sniffing. "Can I have tomorrow off?"

\*~\*

## HIS WOMEN

### PART 16: HE FOUND HER

Mal stood in the Infirmary, watching Inara as she slept. Two-year-old Michael yawned on his shoulder, while Zoë and Cole stood on tiptoes trying to see her face. It had taken six months to find her. Six months and he'd found her broken. Though her stomach was relatively flat, he was convinced he could see the glow of new motherhood on her. Those hun dan had raped her over and over, even after she became pregnant. Pregnant and broken. Her lucid periods were getting longer now; hopefully long enough to satisfy the children. He'd kept them away from her until today, knowing it would hurt them more to see her broken than to not see her at all. It hurt him so much to see. Was this how she felt every time he nearly died on a job?

"Mama," Michael whispered, more in Mal's ear than to Inara. Mal teared-up at the sound of his son's voice. Inara had missed his first words, his first steps; but she stirred when he said her name.

Her eyes fluttered open and the children collectively inhaled as if watching an angel awake. At least that was the joy Mal felt when her eyes met his. Present one moment, vacant the next, but she recognized him now more than before.

"Mommy!" Cole cried and Zoë lifted him onto the bed so he could give his mother a hug. Inara closed her eyes and leaned her head against his, but no smile came to her face. Little Zoë took Inara's hand as delicately as if it would break off from too much pressure. For a brief moment, as Cole caught Inara up on the latest ship news and Zoë chimed in with addendums, Mal saw peace on her face, and he felt hope. But only a brief moment. Inara's eyes shot open again, brown orbs glistening with fear and intensity, caught in the past.

"No more," Inara whispered sharply. Confused, Cole stopped speaking, his mouth hanging open with unsaid tales.

"Zo," Mal warned cautiously, handing over Michael and lifting Cole off the bed. "Take your brothers to the galley and send Uncle Simon down here."

"Mal," Inara gasped again.

"I hear ya, 'Nara." He moved more quickly now.

"But daddy," Cole protested as Mal directed him out by the shoulder. Without a word, Zoë shifted Michael to one arm, then took Cole's hand and led them out. When they were up the stairs and out of sight, Mal turned back to Inara.

"Get it out of me," she pleaded.

Mal bent down so that his face was near hers, trying to keep her calm. "You're already pretty far along, 'Nara. It's safer to wait."

She didn't seem appeased by that.

"Serenity babies have a habit of bein' preemies. It'll be out of you soon."

"I don't want it!" she wailed. "I don't want it in me! Get it out now!"

"Shh, shh," Mal soothed, stroking her hair, feeling hot tears building in his own eyes. Her distress was contagious, her breathing labored, racked by sobs. Without warning, she jerked his arm spinning him around, and taking his gun in one fluid movement.

"Get out!" she cried, pointing the weapon at her own belly.

“Inara!” Desperately, he grabbed the gun, angling it upwards and taking it from her. Her arms felt like jelly in his hand, all sobs, no life. Tucking the gun safely in his boot, he leaned next to her again, taking both her hands in his and hugging her close.

“Soon as the Doc gets here,” Mal promised, sitting her up so he could hold her. “Soon as he gets here, we’ll get it out of you.”

\*~\*

## **PART 17: HE HELD HER**

Mal was so exhausted from the events of the past week, that he hardly noticed Inara leaving the bed. Since her return, she tended to roam the ship at night, wandering the halls like a ghost, checking in on the children, sitting on the catwalk and reliving conversations they’d had years ago. Mal had followed her for the first several nights, his heart breaking as she stared at the empty cargo hold, drinking wine that wasn’t there, whispering “Why would I want to leave Serenity?”

The walks, he had determined, were harmless and as the nights progressed, she’d returned to bed sooner and sooner. Mal rolled to the middle of the bed, inhaling her scent on the pillows, ready to welcome her back to sleep when she arrived.

“Baba!” Zoë’s piercing shriek shot through the ship like an air-raid siren, sending chills through his spine.

Heart pounding, Mal burst into the hallway and charged down the stairs to the children’s quarters. His breath quickened, worried that Inara may have lost her head and tried to hurt Zoë.

“Zoë!” Mal hollered, seeing her room open and empty. He strode determinedly down the hall, his eyes alert.

“Mama, stop it,” Zoë whimpered, drawing Mal’s eyes to the Infirmary. Inara’s eyes were glazed, her right hand holding a scalpel. Zoë stood pressed against Inara’s stomach facing out, both her hands clenched around Inara’s wrist, holding the sharp blade away from their bodies. Both Inara and Little Zoë were smeared with blood, though whose was a mystery.

“Please, Mama, let go.”

Mal entered quickly, but cautiously, taking hold of Inara’s wrist and finding the pressure point that made her drop the scalpel. Her eyes suddenly locked on his, calling him betrayer as he held her wrist in the air, but not fighting. Zoë snaked out of the face off, hiding behind Mal, letting him see that the blood was Inara’s. The cut went across her abdomen, right through her night gown.

“Get it out,” Inara begged, her eyes wild and desperate. Mal pulled her into an embrace, feeling her hot blood pulsing onto his body. “Mal, get it out!”

“It is out, Inara. We already did that. It’s out of you. It’s out.”

She sobbed and bled on him and he fought with himself on whether to hold her a little longer or start patching her up. Little Zoë put her arms around the two of them, squeezing them closer together, her arms trembling.

“Is Mama ‘Nara ever gonna be okay?” she asked.

Mal held his angel – his broken angel – and prayed she would.

\*~\*

## **PART 18: HIS JAW DROPPED**

Mal was drawn to the sweet sound of all his girls gathered in one place, talking excitedly. Little Zoë had been upset earlier and she and Inara had spent the afternoon talking. It pleased Mal to no end to see his wife behaving as a mother again, helping Zoë through the drama of the week, as she was now prone to having. He was even more pleased by the joy bubbling up through the cargo bay like fizz from a champagne bottle.

They'd pulled the red couch into the middle of the room, surrounding the area with small tables and mirrors, making it look like a salon. Inara patiently combed and braided Little Zoë's hair, while Kaylee cheerfully laid out a selection of nail polish. Sky sat on the floor facing them, reclining on one hand, holding a capture in the other, telling everyone to smile and say something profound for posterity. He noticed that Little Zoë was wearing her momma's old, brown, leather vest. The straps on the side were tightened as far as they would go and still it hung loosely on her body; but she would grow into it. She fingered the vest excitedly, listening to stories of her mother as Inara braided and Kaylee began painting her toes.

Mal smiled and watched, leaning easily against a bulkhead, letting their joy rain over him like a warm shower. River stepped out of the galley carrying a tray of cheese and crackers and a bottle of wine. She caught Mal's eye and shook her head.

"A floral bonnet won't buy you an invite," she chided, her lips parting in a smile.

"Come on, Aunt River! You're missing the fun!" Zoë called up, blowing a kiss to Mal when she saw him.

"Is this a girls night?" Mal asked River, a twinkle in his eye. "Is that why I wasn't invited?"

River's smile turned mysterious as she walked gracefully down the stairs. "Not girls. Women."

Mal watched the scene again, as River's words took a leisurely stroll to the comprehension centers of his brain. His jaw dropped as he understood River's meaning and he looked again at the collection of ladies in the cargo bay. His Little Zoë, now a woman? Dear God, he was not ready for what came next!

\*~\*