

MY OWN KIND OF FREEDOM

A FIREFLY NOVEL

***BY
STEVEN BRUST, PJF***

My Own Kind of Freedom
Copyright © 2007 Steven Brust.
Some Rights Reserved.

This novel is released under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. This means you are free to share (copy, distribute, display, and perform) this book as long as you leave the attribution (author credit) intact, make no modifications, and do not profit from its distribution. For complete license information visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>

If you find a typographical error or have other corrections or feedback, please contact kit@dreamcafe.com.

Firefly and the Firefly universe are the property of Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy, Inc. and 20th Century Fox. They are lovingly used without permission.

**TO CALIANN
FOR MANY REASONS**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Christopher Kindred twisted my arm into writing this one; blame him. Anne Zaroni, my personal assistant, created the conditions where-by it was possible to write it, and Anne Murphy and Joel Rosenberg kept the machine working so I had something to write it on. Dr. Flash Gordon was kind enough to consult with me on wounds. Thanks to Will, Emma, and Pamela for long-distance Scriblification. The Chinese translations were by Trent Goulding. Thanks also to everyone in the Browncoats chat who put up with my irritating questions on the Firefly universe.

In this, my first effort at a media tie-in novel (yes, my soul is lost), it seems tacky to thank the creator, cast, and crew of Firefly; but it feels wrong not to, so call this a half-assed nod in that direction.

For people who care about such things, the book was written in emacs on a box running Mandrake Linux, then I used OpenOffice to format it for printing. The final layout for online publication was created with Microsoft Word and Adobe Acrobat. People who care about such things need to get a life.

PROLOGUE

Those who appreciate ginseng – either for its supposed medicinal qualities, or for its distinctive flavor – are willing to pay inordinately high prices for it.

In the Southern Hemisphere of Paquin, about eighty kilometers east of the Scar (in the high foothills of the Napala chain) is a long, meandering forest called Runaround, full of oaks and sugar maples. It is the best place in the 'verse to find – or grow – the herb called panax, red berry, tartar root, and ginseng. It's a plant that is absurdly easy to grow, given the right climate and soil: you cut a furrow in the autumn, drop in the seeds, pack them down, and spend the next five years tapping maple trees and shooting at poachers.

In addition to being the economic base of the region, Ginseng is the name of the biggest town, with a population of almost nine thousand, if you include the nearby rooters. The town has an effective sewage system, clean water, several paved roads, dozens of permanent buildings, and, temporarily, just past the smokehouse, it had a Firefly-class transport, hunkered down in a clear field like something that pounces waiting to pounce.

Inside the vessel, even as her landing gear settled onto the rich dirt and plumes of smoke were blown away from the side-thrusters on the outside, a voice came over the intercom: "We're down. We have landed safely. Yes, through a hailstorm of fire, once more, we have achieved landfall in spite of all the obstacles of the heavens. We are delivered. We must kiss the ground. Yes, I say, the ground, the holy ground we must, uh, kiss."

On the outside, the cargo door swung down. On the inside, a large, square-jawed man wearing loose pants and a green tee-shirt said, "Need to break that intercom." He put a finger into his ear and shook it as the pressure finished equalizing.

Near him, also looking out on Paquin, was a brown-haired woman wearing greasy gray cover-alls. "This world smells like candy," she said.

"Smells like money to me," said the man.

Two others walked up next to them. Like the large man, they both wore sidearms: his was standard military-issue Shacorp IX semi-auto, hers was a lever-action sawed-off carbine. He was clean-cut, and of average build; she was dark and athletic-looking.

She said, "All right, let's make this quick and clean. We make the exchange, and then we're out."

The man glanced at her. She glanced back at him. "Just trying to save you the

trouble, sir. You must be tired of giving that speech."

"I'm appreciative, Zoë. Most like it'll do as much good as when I say it."

The big man snickered, but didn't say anything.

"Jayne, stay here and see to the loading. Zoë and I will go see about payment."

"I thought we were being paid on the other side."

The one who'd been addressed as sir (a title he accepted as if used to it) tilted his head and peered up at the larger man. "Yes, Jayne. We are. And they are being paid at this end. I think they call that commerce."

"Wait, Mal. We're paying them? I'm not real keen on giving money to a bunch of--"

"Is it all right with you if we pay them with the money Sakarya gave us for that purpose?"

"Uh . . . yeah."

"Glad to hear it. Then you don't mind if we go ahead and do this deal? I mean, I wouldn't want to take a step without your *ta ma de yunxu*."

"*Suibian ni*," said Jayne as Mal and Zoë set foot onto Paquin.

"I still don't get it," he continued after they were gone.

The woman in cover-alls said, "Cap'n and Zoë going to drop the money off, then they load the cargo, then we drop off the cargo on Hera, then we get paid, then we buy Serenity a new induction—."

"What I don't see is why we ain't just keeping the money and saving ourselves a lot of flying around."

She sighed. "Oh, Jayne," she said, and wandered back into the ship. She climbed the metal stairway up from the massive cargo hold that was the reason for the ship's existence and followed a long corridor back to the med bay. A young man—he looked like he barely needed to shave—stood looking down at the occupied exam table. He glanced up as the woman approached and said, "Hello Kaylee."

"Hey, Simon. How's River?"

"Sleeping," he said, glancing once more at the small figure on the table. "I'm trying a new treatment. She'll be out for an hour or two."

"Was she having more dreams?"

He looked at Kaylee and nodded, and there was a certain communication that passed between them, as if a conversation many times repeated didn't need yet another iteration. Instead, Kaylee said, "Checkers?"

"Why not?"

Five and a half hours later, the hold was loaded with four tons of pre-cut maple.

Mal punched the door closed and said, "Wash, take us out of the world."

"That part went pretty smooth, sir," said Zoë.

"Yep. From now on, you're giving the speech."

Outside, the sound muffled by the boat's skin, the side-thrusters fired, and the ship lifted.

CHAPTER 1

MY OWN KIND OF LIE

Serenity: Bridge

He always smiled when Serenity first kissed atmo.

That was the moment that separated pilots; a sloppy entry cost fuel, a perfect entry saved fuel, and the difference could be the difference between a healthy profit and a disastrous loss. When you kissed atmo, it was all touch; suddenly the number of variables increased by an order of magnitude: the shape of the ship, the tilt of her nose, the attitude adjusters, speed, direction, the density and exact composition of the upper atmosphere – all of it.

Mal never noticed, of course; none of them noticed. They'd only notice if he did it badly; then he would, no doubt, get all sorts of looks and remarks. And it would cut into his profits as it would the rest of the crew's.

But none of that was why he made his entries as close to perfect as humanly possible: he did it because it was what he loved doing. The challenges to a pilot in the black were rare, and usually involved some form of terror. But the first touch of atmo on a new planet, setting up the slide, the deceleration, balancing skin heat with fuel cost, inert-damp with gravity – feeling part of the boat in a way even Kaylee, bless her heart, could never know – those were the moments of living. That was the best.

He was aware of the first hint of rudder to port, and nose up, and then the thrust control was under his right hand; and after that for a while he could no longer follow the details, because he was no longer using controls – it wasn't cause and effect, it was just one long effect as distinctions blurred. Pilot to control, control to boat, boat to atmo, atmo to gravity, gravity to pilot: they were all the same thing as Serenity sang the song only Wash could hear. After an interminable twenty seconds that was over so quickly it may never have existed, the decisions were made, the hard part past, and everything was, alas, easy again. It was morning on this part of Hera.

From the co-pilot's chair, Mal said, "How's the entry?"

"It's an entry. They're all the same."

"How long are we looking at?"

"Twenty minutes, give or take. Unless I accidentally flip us over and lose control and send us smashing into the ground to a fiery demise. That would be quicker."

"Okay. Well, don't do that."

"All right."

Wash smiled as Serenity slid fully into atmo.

Serenity: Bridge

He saw his pilot smiling at his own joke, was tempted to make a remark, but just looked away instead. *What's wrong with me?*

In his mind, he played back the last several days of the trip. He'd been short with Kaylee, patient with Jayne, all but ignored Zoë, and, just now, he had asked his pilot a meaningless question, just to break the silence – a silence that he normally didn't mind; a silence he normally liked.

It had to be the job. That was the only explanation. There had to be something about the job that was bothering him.

He reviewed all the pieces, starting with the initial contact with the client (seemed all right; a public posting, nothing to make it appear aimed at his crew), the contact with the client's rep (over a vid; should he have insisted on meeting in person?), the plan for the dropoff (good flat area; easy to spot a potential ambush), and the guarantee for the payment (Flush said he'd known the client, Sakarya, for years; he'd never heard of him twisting on a deal).

So, what was his gorram problem?

If he was getting to the point where he was smelling trouble just because everything was going right, he'd have to give it up and *hao xianshi de gongzuo ba*.

When he felt the slight, brief weight fluctuation and heard the de-press cycle kick in, he got up, left the bridge, and made his way to the cargo bay. He threaded his way past the stacks of lumber.

Predictably, Jayne was there ahead of him. "Are they going to have people to do the unloading? I'm not that keen on carrying –"

"They'll have people," he said.

The big man glanced him. "You all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You been acting funny."

Mal shrugged. "Nope. Everything's shiny," he said. "Not a care in the world."

His weight increased a little as Serenity made her way toward the ground.

Serenity: Engine room

She pouted and loosened the starboard eq valve half a degree. She swapped the wrench for the I-tester, applied it, and looked. Then she turned to Zoë, who was leaning against a bulkhead next to the hammock.

"That might do it."

"Do what?"

"You didn't feel that lurch when the a-grav cycled?"

"I didn't notice."

Kaylee frowned. "Well, okay. Hey, Zoë?"

"Mmmm?"

"Has the Cap'n been acting funny?"

"You mean, more than he has since Inara left?"

"Oh."

"Hmmm?"

"That's what it is. Inara left."

"Honey," said Zoë, "I love you, but sometimes you're a bit slow."

"Well why didn't he" her voice trailed off.

"You know the Captain." said Zoë.

"No, I don't."

"Well, neither do I, for that matter."

Kaylee put the I-tester back in its case and the case into the cabinet. "We're almost down. Should we go explore?"

"I've been here before," said Zoë.

Zoë got up and made her way toward the cargo bay. Kaylee followed, just for the company. "I love new worlds," she said. "They're so full of possib –"

"So you've said."

Kaylee looked at her sharply.

"I'm sorry," said Zoë.

"Is this the first time you've been back to Hera, since then?"

"The second."

They didn't talk any more as they made their way down the passageway, until they reached the stair to the cargo bay, when Zoë said, "It must be hard on you, staying cheerful all the time in a boat full of us morose types."

"Not a bit," said Kaylee. "It just comes natural. Ain't nothing ever gets me down."

Mal and Jayne were already there, and the cargo door was just opening.

Serenity: Med bay

He had learned that there were times not to argue with his sister, so when she said, "There are ghosts here, Simon," he just said, "We'll be staying on Serenity."

"They're already here."

"Ghosts can't hurt us, River."

"They're hurting Zoë."

"Zoë can take care of herself."

"Sometimes they ask questions I can't answer. Sometimes they ask questions I don't want to answer. They want to know if they were right, Simon. How can I know if they were right?"

Simon wrapped his arms around his sister.

"They're going out now," she said. "And they're going to leave footprints where they walk. Tell them he isn't who they think he used to be."

"Who isn't, River?"

"The ghost. The one who's still alive."

Simon, from long experience, didn't try to work out how a ghost could be alive; there were too many things his sister said that didn't make sense. The trouble was, there were far, far too many things that did.

"You know what I think?" said River.

"What do you think?"

"I think you should kiss Kaylee."

He stared at her. "Why should . . . why . . . what are you talking about?"

"Well? Haven't you thought about it?"

"Of course not."

River frowned, thinking deeply for a moment. "Well," she said, "I'm not going to do it for you."

Hera: Yuva Road

Hera crunched beneath his boots.

Jayne's boots were much like what the mudders of Canton wore: coming to mid-calf, held on by three buckled straps; but they also had steel toes for protection from anything dropped on them and for additional emphasis in any argument that involved kicking.

"Mal, we going to have any time here?"

"Time for what, Jayne?"

"For getting a drink, and maybe getting sexed. It's been so long--"

"Depends how smooth things go. If everything is right, we can take a day or so."

Zoë said, "And things always go smooth for us, don't they, sir?"

Jayne patted his sidearm, a Greer Model B with extended magazine, and said, "I got a smoother with me."

"Oh, good," said Mal. "That makes me feel all kinds of reassured."

"Well, let's just reassure this ruttin' job and —"

"Jayne, that's enough."

"Jayne," said Zoë, "What's with the sudden urgency for a bar, anyway?"

"It's nothing. Just the same faces every day for months gets sorta old."

"Mmmm," said Zoë.

Hera: Yuva Road

Zoë glanced at the Captain, but he appeared to be lost in thought. Still, the operative word there was "appeared;" she'd known the Captain more than once to have picked up a subtlety that she'd thought he'd missed. And certainly he picked up on things that she had missed, and then put them together correctly. Much as he prided himself on his ability to form a good plan, it was this other skill, his way of seeing an odd little thing and knowing what it meant and reacting to it correctly, that had gotten them out of so many situations that they ought never to have escaped.

It was on this *yongyuan bei ding wei laipigou de wanju* world called Hera that he had noticed an overturned supply truck on a deserted road, and moved his command half a klick to the west and so outflanked what would have been an ugly, ugly ambush. And again and again, the same thing had happened. So she ought to trust him to pick up on Jayne's oddity, and, not just pick up on it, but figure out what it meant. Which was more than she could do.

Except that the Captain just wasn't himself these days, and that was cause for

worry.

The "town" of Yuva began abruptly as the road split into two main streets, which ran parallel for about a mile before the southernmost ("South Street," said a sign) left you at the top of a hill leading down to where the miners lived in what was effectively a different, larger, and much filthier town. North Street was half a mile longer, ending in the company security office. On South Street, a bright, clean-looking store stood on the right beneath a sign saying, "Company Store," opposite a small park-like area, with a pond and a few scrubby trees.

Sakarya's mansion (white, square, and imposing) was perched on a sort of hillock (artificial, and artificially green) just south of the store.

Zoë continued chewing over the problem, though she still scanned the empty street in a habit so deeply ingrained she could never shake it. Could she talk to her Wash about what was going on with the Captain? It got into tricky areas between them.

They continued up the street, past the long, walled and gated driveway leading up the hill. The effect was more absurd than imposing – why set the mansion back from a two-street little town?

To the north was a small, square brick building, that said in Chinese characters, "office."

"I'd imagine," said the Captain, "that this is it."

"Good," said Jayne. "Let's get our ruttin' money."

"You may as well relax," said the Captain. "We're probably going to be stuck waiting for unloading instructions, and waiting longer to get paid."

"*Wo taoyan dengyideng* . For how long?"

"A few hours, most like. Maybe a day. Rich guys take time before they're willing to part with money. You good with that, Zoë?"

"Of course, sir. Let's go in."

The Captain led the way.

Serenity: Med bay

She hated it that Kaylee was afraid of her, and so she didn't go near the engine room any more than she had to. She understood why Kaylee feared her: it was because Kaylee, as much as she knew about engines, didn't really see how anyone could be comfortable with fractal geometry. It had all been that one incident, the time months ago when Kaylee had seen her factor so many variables at one time, in the skyplex with all the shooting going on. Too many variables, and the equation solved too quickly, and Kaylee couldn't comprehend it, and so she was afraid.

Once River had tried to explain that problems in fractal geometry were easier if you solved them from the inside, but the explanation had come out muddled.

Communication was so difficult, because you needed to access so many different parts of your brain to form a sentence and they all worked at different speeds, and the part that told the sentence to vocalize worked at yet a different speed; and then there were the ants inside your brain interfering with everything.

She had tried to explain that to Simon once, but had gotten that look that said he was being Patient and Concerned. She hated that look.

He had that look now, as he sat next to her bed in the infirmary and studied her insides on his charts that didn't show the ants.

"I wish you could remember more," he said. "I mean, about what they did to you. Did they ever explain what they were trying to make you into?"

"Yes," she said. "They told me they weren't really ants."

"Ants?"

"Yes. In my brain. They aren't really ants, I know that. I just call them ants because that's what it feels like when they go walking around everywhere making it hard to see where everything is that I'm trying to get. I call them ants, but they aren't."

"All right."

"They're really termites."

She sneaked a peek at him. He had the Look again.

"River —"

"If I were deeper than the bay, I'd be a tidal estuary. But that assumes I'm going somewhere. Only I'm staying here. And I think I'm going backward."

"You aren't going backward. I'm going to find out what they did to you, and undo it."

"Not before he comes back."

"Who, River?"

"Who?"

"Who is coming back?"

"Oh. No one. Anyone who's gone that far away can never really come back. But the Captain doesn't know that."

"River, I don't understand what you're telling me."

Of course he didn't understand. How could he understand when he thought lines of probability only existed metaphorically? When all he had to understand with was himself? When he kept everything out? When he couldn't see that the ghosts who had never died were the ones who could hurt you never had the ghost of a chance that the right answers were always to the wrong question everything and be sure of nothing ever changes in a stasis —

"River?"

"I was thinking."

"What about?"

"Nothing. Are you hungry? I can cook something."

"When did you learn to cook?"

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Simon smiled affectionately. "I'd like a snack. Should we ask Kaylee if she wants to join us?"

"No. She doesn't like me."

"Of course she does."

"No, she doesn't. She's been afraid of me ever since I solved that problem in fractal geometry."

"Why would she be afraid of you for solving a geometry problem?"

"Some people are just afraid of numbers."

CHAPTER 2

MY OWN KIND OF SICKNESS

Yuva: Company office

Three hours later they left the office.

"Well," said Mal, "that was the most fun I've ever had."

"Yes, sir," said Zoë. "I especially enjoyed where they didn't have any chairs to sit in while we were waiting."

"I liked the way they ignored us."

"I still say it would have sped things up if you'd let me shoot one or two of the clerks," said Jayne.

"I'm sure something would have happened fast," said Mal. "Anyway, we have a few hours before they show up to unload us. Go get a drink if you want, Jayne."

Jayne grunted, but continued walking with them. Mal felt Zoë looking at him.

What the hell was going on with his gorram crew? Kaylee was acting like every time she spoke to him she was afraid of what he'd say, Zoë and Wash were having whispered conversations and exchanging looks, and Jayne

They went up the ramp into Serenity's bowels. Kaylee was leaning on the rail above, with a "tell me how it went" look. Next to her was an empty space.

"Zoë, let me know when they get here."

"Yes, sir."

Jayne headed up the stairs toward his quarters. Mal followed him, then continued up toward the bridge.

"Hey, Mal," said Wash. "How did it go?"

"Long and boring. Anything here?"

"An invasion by seven-foot tall clones with americium in their veins, but I fought them off with the laser cannon. We going to unload?"

"No, the client is sending his people."

"You going to supervise?"

"I expect I will."

"Good. During the loading, I just ended up standing there looking like an idiot."

Mal stared at him. "You supervised the loading?"

"Yeah."

"I thought Jayne was going to do it."

"He asked me to. Said he wanted to run an errand."

An errand? What sort of errand could you run on Paquin? All they have there is .

...

Without another word he stood up and left the bridge, heading toward Jayne's quarters. Halfway there, he started running. By the time he reached it, he was cursing as well.

He pushed open the door and climbed down the ladder. The big man was looking over his shoulder at the door, facing his cupboard, and holding a canvas sack.

"Yeah, Mal?"

"What's in the sack, Jayne?"

"Huh? Nothing. Just some stuff."

"Let's see what stuff."

"Mal, there's no need —"

He crossed the three steps and grabbed the sack. Jayne didn't let go of it, but there was no need to; it was open.

"Well now," said Mal. "Those'll bring a good price."

"Just a little private enterprise oper —"

"Just a little matter of stealing from a client."

"Hell, Mal. We steal all the time. What's the *mei you shenma liaobuqi*?"

"And what's going to happen next time we want a job there?"

"One gorram spot on one gorram moon —"

"That we'll be going back to after this job to return the ginseng."

"I'll return the stuff when *houzi cong wo gangmen feichulai*."

"We're returning it as soon as we've finished our business here."

"There's no ruttin' way I'm giving this stuff up."

"Why are we still talking about this —"

Jayne pushed past him, climbed the ladder, and started down the hall, still holding his sack.

Mal climbed after him. "Jayne!"

There were times when he could deal with Jayne, and just accept it as part of the job. And then there were other times.

Jayne stopped and faced Mal. Mal kept his voice even. "You leave this boat with those goods, you won't be coming back on."

Jayne stared at him, jaw clenched. Mal met his eyes and waited.

Serenity: Catwalk

"Captain, do you have a minute?"

"Until they show up for the cargo, I have nothing but time."

Simon nodded, opened his mouth, closed it again. "I —"

"Spit it out, doctor. What's on your mind?"

It was so difficult talking to the Captain; one never knew how he'd react. In a way, his worldview was as skewed as River's, which made it as big a challenge to find the right words as when speaking with Kaylee.

He said, "I don't know if this is any of my business, but I —"

"Just say it, doctor."

Simon took a breath. "I saw Jayne walking out, looking like . . . well, carrying a couple of duffel bags. Big, full bags, like, maybe, everything he —"

"Jayne has left the crew."

"Oh," said Simon.

"Anything else?"

"I . . . yes. I'm wondering if his leaving will . . . that is, I'm afraid — "

"You think he might sell you out to the Alliance?"

"Well, we've never been exactly best friends. And his ideas of loyalty are, let's say, idiosyncratic. So, yes, I'm worried he might inform the Alliance about us."

"So am I. In fact, I think it's pretty near a sure thing."

"Oh. Well, then."

"Anything else on your mind?"

"Uh, no, that about covers it."

"Good, then."

Simon hesitated for a moment, then went back to check on his sister.

Yuva

After stowing his gear at the local depot, he spent an hour wandering around Yuva. In that time, while he failed to spot a police station, he did find a small shack that said, "Security" at the west end of North Street. Well, that was going to be easier than walking into an actual police station, anyway.

He made sure his pistol was concealed by his shirt, took a deep breath, and went in.

Two bored-looking security guards sat behind two tiny desks, one over-crowded with smart paper, the other with comm gear. They both looked up at him as he entered; neither seemed especially interested.

I could take them both, he thought.

One of them, wearing a hat and a pot-belly, said, "Yeah?"

"I need to use your comm to reach a fed."

They stared at him for a moment. "This a joke?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm the guy looking to reach the feds. You the guys gonna tell them why you wouldn't let me?"

He saw that shot hit. They looked at each other. "What's your name?"

"None of your ruttin' business. Are you going to hook me up with the feds, or not?"

They looked at each other again, then pot-belly nodded at the other, who played with the comm setup for a minute, put on the headphones, then spoke into the mic.

"This is Station HE nine three six six one, requesting code seven authorization . . . no, a civilian . . . He won't give it. . . I don't know . . . all right."

He held out the mic and the headphones to Jayne. "Okay, it's all yours."

He put the headset on and spoke into the mic. "You there?" He waited. "Hello?"

The man behind the console cleared his throat. "You have to push that button down to talk."

"Yeah," said Jayne. Then, "Anyone there?"

A voice crackled from the headset. "Identify yourself."

"No ruttin' way. I got the location of a fugitive you want bad. Her name is River Tam. Now, if you don't want her, just say so, and I'll be about my business."

The pause was very satisfying; it lasted most of a minute. Then there was a new voice. "Where is River Tam?"

"Where is my money?"

"Tell us where she is, and you'll get your money."

"You guys tried that with me once before. I got humped, and you still don't have the girl. I see the money before you get *wo zuo gaowan de suo zai*."

There was another pause, then: "All right, what do you propose?"

"You know what town I'm in; how soon can you get someone here?"

"Wait a moment."

"Take your time. I have all day."

This time, the pause was a good five minutes, which Jayne spent leaning on the desk and giving the two security guards the eye. Then, "All right, we have someone there."

"Already?"

"He can meet you at the canteen in an hour. If you prefer some other place, we'll accommodate you."

"No, that's fine."

"You'll negotiate a price with him, and the payment arrangements."

"Someone you trust, eh? All right, be there in an hour."

Jayne took off the headphones and the mic, and tossed them back to the security guard. The one in the hat said, "What, the Alliance has an agent here? Is that what they said?"

"Guess so," said Jayne. "Burn on you guys, eh?"

He chuckled and headed out the door and toward the canteen.

Serenity: Catwalk

"What a perfect, magnificent ass."

Zoë looked around and spoke over her shoulder. "I hope you're talking about me, and not one of them."

Wash came up next to her and looked down at the cargo area. "I don't know. That one by the ramp is kinda cute, in a big, hairy, bearded guy sort of way."

"I was just thinking that."

"Can I borrow that big, hairy, ugly gun of yours for just a minute? I'll give it right back."

"Now dear, you know we're not supposed to murder the help."

"Speaking of murder, what's up with Jayne?"

She shrugged. "I asked the Captain. He grunted. But it looks like Jayne's gone."

"Gone. What kind of gone?"

"*Gone* gone."

"Oh."

She looked at her man. "You seem disappointed. I didn't think you were that fond of him."

"Sweetie, I'm fond of people who help keep you alive and with all of your moving parts intact. Not to mention the motionless parts, which have their own charm. Any idea what happened?"

"No. I imagine we'll hear about it eventually."

"It'll make great dinner conversation. Sweetie —"
"Hmm?"
"What's wrong with Mal?"
"That is the question, isn't it?"
"No, honey. The question is, why won't you talk to me about it."
Zoë reached over and squeezed his arm, then stepped to the intercom. "Sir, they're here to unload the ship."
"I'll be right down."
Wash said, "Honey —"
She just shook her head, and he fell silent.

Company Headquarters

He was both at "work" and at work when his belt buckle started vibrating. He liked it when he could do both at once; it made him feel that the 'verse was behaving the way it was supposed to.

The "work" part he could do with only a portion of his brain: download tonnage of dirt moved, download percentage of pay dirt, download content of pay dirt, download produce futures, download bauxite futures, run the projections, break them down, generate the report. Tedious, but, once you've learned the system (and Kit learned systems quickly and easily), there was nothing to it.

The work part was more entertaining, more important, and just the least little bit scary: monitor everyone else in the office without ever being caught doing so, wait for someone to be sloppy with a keycode, sniff around in places he wasn't supposed to have access to, look for the fact, the hard number, that would add another layer of sealant to the case he was building. And, if he were very lucky, maybe he'd be able to get to Miss Wuhan's system, and then he could just walk out the door and be done with it.

What he did not want was anything to break him away from both activities at once, and that's just what it meant when his belt buckle started vibrating.

Gorram them anyway; this better be important.

He got up from his desk, stretched, put on his jacket, and made his leisurely way to the men's room. That was just the sort of thing he would notice if someone else did it: *Why is that man putting on his coat to use the men's room?* But it wasn't likely any of his co-workers would twig to it; they didn't have his training.

He closed the stall door, and removed his C-box from the coat pocket. He fired it up, selected a reasonable mask, and made the connection.

After his identity was established and confirmed, they didn't waste any time.

New instructions. Top priority, abort current operation if necessary. There is a man you have to meet . . .

Five minutes later, he was out the door, leaving everything undone behind him and trying not to think about the feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Serenity: Cargo bay

Only the smell of fresh-cut wood was left in the empty hold.

"Still going smooth, sir," said Zoë.

"We haven't been paid yet."

"I noticed that."

"So let's go do it now." He looked up. Wash was there, leaning on the rail.

"You're in charge," he called up. "Supervise."

Wash nodded, but didn't make any remarks.

Kaylee's voice came through the intercom. "Can I go out, Cap'n? I want to see if there's a junkyard here with a monolock for the gravboot."

"Okay. Don't take too long. If we manage to get paid, I want to be off the world in a couple of hours."

Zoë fell into step beside him as they made their way out of the boat and onto the road into Yuva.

"Sir, any idea just what he wants all the wood for?"

"Couldn't say. There's enough for a good-sized house, but not for a whole new mansion."

They made it to the office, and looked at the sign on the door.

He clicked on his comm link. "Wash, can you find out what local time is?"

The voice came back in his ear, "Just a second, Mal . . . it's about thirteen hundred."

"Okay, Zoë. We have an hour to kill."

"I could stand a beer, sir. There's a place on North street, just a step from their office."

"Good plan."

It was a low building, made out of the same sort of crumbling brick as most everything else in Yuva, and distinguished only by a neatly stenciled sign that said, "Canteen."

It was dark inside, surprisingly clean, and mostly empty.

Mostly.

Mal looked at Jayne, sitting in the back corner, then looked away. He led Zoë to a table on the far side.

The bartender called, "If you want something, you'll have to get it from me. No table service 'till evening."

"I'll get it," said Mal.

"Thank you, sir."

As he approached, the bartender said, "Welcome to Yuva. You with chatty over there?"

"No," said Mal, not turning around. "What sort of beer do you drink, when you drink beer?"

"My own. I make it in back. We have a winter ale that came out pretty good."

"Two."

The bartender was of medium height, had a shaved head, and seemed to be about Simon's age. Young. Too young to have fought in the war. Mal still pegged people that way: could they have fought? And if the answer was yes, which side? "Two it is."

Mal took the bottles. "They're cold. I'm impressed."

The bartender smiled. "We serve the staff here, so nothing but the best."

"Staff?"

"Office workers, and such."

"That all that comes here?"

"Both offices, and the security people."

"Both offices?"

"General office, and the ones who work in Mister Sakarya's house. The important ones work there. They sit on that side of the room."

"There are rules for what side of the room you sit on?"

"No rules. It just works itself out that way."

"What does everyone else do?"

"Everyone else?"

"In town. The ones who aren't security, or one office or t'other."

"I work in a bar. This bar, in fact. See, this is me, working. In the bar."

"Good job. Own it, too?"

The other laughed a little. "In effect. Not technically. Only one man owns things. I'm just grateful not to be digging bauxite."

"One man. That would be Sakarya."

He nodded. "Mister Sakarya owns pretty much everything on the subcontinent, and quite a bit on the rest of the world."

"I'm sure he finds that very fulfilling."

"Uh huh."

"And not so good for the rest of you?"

The bartender made a non-committal grunt. "I do okay. Call me Mark, by the way."

"Mal. That's Zoë."

"Pleasure."

Mal nodded, paid, and brought the beers back to the table.

"What was that about, sir?"

"Beer, and the after-effects of being on the losing side."

"Oh?"

"I sort of asked him what things were like here."

"And?"

"He gave me the kind of answer you give when you don't want to give an answer."

"It'd be a familiar story, sir."

"Seems I might've heard it once or twice before."

She cleared her throat. "I see that Jayne —"

"Let's not talk about it."

"Yes, sir. What do you think of those two?"

Other than Jayne, the only other customers were two large, rather shabbily dressed men at a table against the wall.

"The thugs? The red haired one has a piece strapped to his right ankle."

"And something behind his back; look how he's sitting."

"I'm guessing a knife. The other one —"

"With the pistol under his right arm."

"— Yes. He's trying not to look like he's waiting for someone."

"Good catch, sir; I hadn't noticed."

"I was the first one in the door. He twitched, then relaxed when he saw it wasn't whoever he was waiting for."

"Nice they aren't waiting for us, anyway."

"I'm inclined to agree."

"The curly-haired one is more experienced; he isn't nervous. He's done this before."

"So has Red, but not as often. He's either scared, or having a few qualms of conscience."

Zoë nodded. "Well, if they aren't waiting for us, then it isn't any of our business."

"That's my conclusion."

"So, when some poor slob comes in here to be robbed, or beaten up, or murdered –"

"Murdered, I think, looking at those two. They'll probably pick a fight with him."

"Yes. So, when that happens, we just ignore it."

"Right."

"Not our problem."

"Exactly. We keep right on drinking."

"In fact, sir, I think that when he comes in, we should leave."

"Good then. That's what we'll do."

"Yes, sir."

"You take the redhead."

"Right. Tell me again why we're doing this, sir?"

"We like being heroes."

"What if we're about to save the bad guy, sir?"

"Look at those two and tell me they're the good guys."

"Yes, sir."

Jayne went to the bar and got another drink, carefully not looking at them.

About five minutes later the door opened.

"That's him."

"Yes, sir. He certainly looks harmless."

He was of average height, with something of a belly, and appeared fairly young in spite of streaks of gray running through his hair and his beard.

"Now," said Mal, "is when Red gets up and walks to the bar, accidentally bumping into him."

"Uh huh."

Red stood up and did a credible imitation of a drunk by swaying a bit and using the chair to steady himself. It would have been more believable if there had been a few empties on his table. He bumped into the newcomer on his way to the bar, and proceeded to start cussing him out.

Mal and Zoë stood up at the same time.

Mal gave the curly-haired one at the table a big smile, walked over, and sat down. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Just a friendly stranger with a gun in your ribs."

The other stared at him. There was a voice raised with insults, most of them in Chinese, but that was Zoë's end of things, so Mal continued watching Curly, who said, "You have no idea what you're getting involved in."

"I generally don't. But here we are, so let's just stay friendly."

Mal didn't turn his head when he heard the thump; the other did, then turned back to Mal. "You're an idiot."

"Probably true."

Zoë called, "Secured, sir," which meant that Mark wasn't doing anything either.

Mal stood up, and permitted himself a quick glance. Zoë's weapon was out, and Red was prone on the floor. The well-dressed stranger was looking back at Mal. Mark was standing very still, both of his hands on the bar. There was a comm unit on the wall next to the cash box, and the bartender was staying well away from it. The stranger hadn't moved.

"Escort him out, Zoë."

"Yes, sir."

When he heard the door, he nodded once to Curly, gave him a friendly smile, and backed away from the table. He felt the door behind him, opened it, and stepped through, holstering his sidearm.

"Well," he said. "That was almost too easy to be any fun."

"I was just thinking the same thing, sir."

They started walking back to the boat, the stranger between them, Zoë mostly walking backwards, keeping an eye on the canteen.

"Who sent you?" asked the stranger.

"No one sent us," said Mal. "We just happened to be in there having a drink."

"Uh huh." He smiled as if sharing a joke with them. "Pretty remarkable timing, then."

"Timing is one of our specialties. I'm Malcolm Reynolds, and this is Zoë Washburne."

"A pleasure. And of course, you know my name."

"Uh, not so much."

"We're clear, sir," said Zoë. "No one following us."

"Good to hear."

"You don't know my name? What did they tell you?"

"Who?"

He stopped. Mal and Zoë continued a couple of steps, then they stopped too, and turned to look at him.

"Uh, I thank you both for your help, but I need to get back to work."

"Right. What was your name again?"

"Kit. Kit Merlyn."

Mal nodded. "Well, see you around, then."

"Probably," said Kit.

He turned and started walking back to town.

"Well," said Zoë. "For the victim of a murder attempt, he took it awfully calm."

"I was thinking the same thing my own self."

"On the other hand, he wasn't armed."

"No."

"Think we'll find out what his story is?"

"I'm afraid we might."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's get back to the boat. We'll see about getting paid in a couple of hours."

"Yes, sir."

Kaylee was drinking tea when Mal and Zoë came in.
 Mal punched the intercom button. "Wash?"
 "Yes, Mal?" came the crackly voice.
 "Keep an ear on the emergency channels for a while."
 "What am I listening for?"
 "Alliance."
 "How long a while?"
 "Till we leave." He released the button. He looked tired.
 "How did it go?" asked Kaylee.
 "Hard to say."
 "Did we get paid?"
 "Not yet."
 "Oh."
 Mal frowned at her. "What's wrong?"
 "I just want to get off this world. I don't like it."
 "That's three of us," said Zoë, taking a chair opposite her. The Captain went into the kitchen and started poking around. "What's your problem with it?" he asked. "No junkyard?"
 "The whole place is a junkyard."
 "Hmmm. Looked clean enough to me."
 "That's the area for the office workers. The miners live on the other side of the hill."
 "Oh. Ugly?"
 Kaylee nodded.
 "It's an ugly 'verse," said Mal. "Especially on Independent worlds. You've seen it before."
 "Not like this."
 "We'll be gone soon," said Zoë. "We just need to get paid —"
 "And they're all afraid of him. That's what really got to me."
 "Afraid of who?" said Mal.
 "Sakarya. He has everyone afraid. They were afraid to talk to me. There was one little girl, she looked right at me and . . . " She shook her head. "It was creepy," she finished.
 "I expect it was," said Mal. "So, you didn't get that part?"
 "No."
 "Is that a problem?"
 "No, it just means we'll twitch a little and our ears will pop when the gravity normalizes."
 "All right, we can live with that. Kaylee"
 "Yes, Cap'n?"
 "We'll be out of here soon. Don't let it prey on you."
 She nodded, stood up, and took her tea back to the engine room, where everything was simpler.

Wonderful. "Until we leave," he'd said. Like he had nothing to do except sit here and listen to a dead comm channel in case something came on.

Well, in fact, he didn't have anything else to do. He could always do shadow puppets, but it wasn't as much fun without Zoë to entertain.

"Until we leave."

Why weren't we leaving? What was there to stay here for? Obviously, they hadn't managed to get the money yet. Probably gotten into trouble, gone off and rescued someone the Alliance wanted, and now they were all going to be humped. And he was stuck sitting here listening to a dead channel like a *quanmian ta ma de baichi*.

There came the sound of his favorite combat boots.

"Hi, honey," she said. "How's it going?"

"Well, other than being stuck here listening to a dead channel in case something happens, I'm just fine. What did you do down there?"

"Nothing. Well, something. But I think he wants you to listen because of Jayne. I can take it for a while, if you want."

"Sweetie, having you here instead of me sort of defeats the purpose of – wait. What did Jayne do?"

"Nothing as far as I know. But I think the Captain is afraid Jayne is going to tell the feds about Simon and River."

"Oh. I see. So, if we're lucky, we'll hear about it soon enough to get off this planet without getting paid."

Zoë exhaled. "Wash, what do you want?"

"Well, a vacation would be nice."

"Wash . . ."

"And it would be even nicer not to have this feeling that everything is about to fall apart on us."

"Wash."

He sighed. "All right."

"Want something to eat?"

"That would be – Hey!"

"What?"

As the chatter came from his headphones, he adjusted the gain and dropped the filtering. With his other hand he slapped the "record" button, then switched on the intercom. "Mal, I'm getting something."

CHAPTER 3

MY OWN KIND OF PAST

Nine years previous

Bursa leaned forward. "You'd keep your present rank," he said.

"That's not that big an inducement," said Mal.

"Ah. Then I suppose it wouldn't help that you'd be in line for promotion."

"No."

"Even if you get a nice fancy office like this?"

Mal looked around at the paper-thin walls of the cubby-hole. "Huh," he said.

The Colonel's face was long, bony, and pale. His nose had been broken at least once, and there was a long white scar running from his right ear to just below his chin. He wore brown, with the Independents' lieutenant colonel insignia on his shoulders--wide shoulders for his frame, giving him a sort of scarecrow appearance. His feet stuck out from under the little desk.

Mal felt himself being studied. "Okay," said the Colonel. "Well, the point remains. The nature of the war has changed. Units like yours were useful when they were all we had. The war was sprung on us like, um, like something that springs on you. Little detachments kept them slowed down until we could --"

"I know the --"

"Don't interrupt, Sergeant."

Mal's jaw clenched.

Bursa continued, "Until we could organize, recruit, and prepare. Now, every time one of your little bands is rampaging through an area the army is in, it interferes with the operations of the army. You're doing more harm than good now, Sergeant."

"So you say."

"So I say." The Colonel frowned. "What's the problem, anyway?"

Mal stared at a spot over the Colonel's shoulder. "If I had wanted to take orders from everyone who likes giving orders, I wouldn't be fighting the Alliance in the first place, would I?"

Bursa let out a breath. "Okay. I can see that. I can even respect it. But the fight is on. You want to win?"

"I'd been planning on it."

"Me, too. We want to defeat the Alliance. We need regular, organized forces. Bands like yours are harming us. Those who won't join us will have to be suppressed."

"Suppressed."

"Would you prefer I used a more graphic term? You know what I mean."

"I surely do."

"So, tomorrow morning, you and yours swear in to the regular army."

"What if we move to a different sector, where you people haven't gotten to yet?"

We can still – "

"No, Sergeant. I'm sorry."

Mal clenched his teeth.

"Sergeant, I think you can give good service. We can use you. Whatever you might think about the regular army, we *are* organized now, and we're fighting your fight."

"I'll have trouble bringing some of the boys around."

"Trouble makers?"

"A few. But mostly they're like me. They signed up to fight against what I'm asking them to do."

"Good to know you've identified the problem."

"Yeah, well – "

"Sergeant, they'll do it if they want to win, because that's the only way we *can* win. If they don't want the Alliance sticking their noses up the ass of anyone who wants to carve out a place for himself, then they're going to have to come around."

"It's just that some of them can tear me apart."

"I don't doubt it."

"And they aren't easily controlled."

"I imagine."

"So what do you do?"

"You mean, how do you face down someone who's bigger and meaner than you and doesn't want to do what you're telling him to?"

"Yeah. Up till now, it's been about convincing them."

"Well, I'd like to say something glib like, don't let them know they're bigger and meaner than you, but, really it isn't that simple. There isn't any simple answer to that. You can't back down, but you know that."

"I surely do."

"How you handle it depends on the individual, and the situation. But, Sergeant – "

"Yes, Colonel?"

"That's not one of the things I'm worried about. You'll find a way."

"And those who won't be convinced?"

"They can give up their weapons and go their way."

"All right."

"And if they act as unauthorized guerillas, they'll be treated as common brigands, and we'll shoot them."

"Colonel – "

"We can't have it, Sergeant."

Mal sighed. "Can they at least keep their sidearms?"

"No."

"Most of those are their own personal weapons."

"Why are we still arguing about what's been decided? Is there anything else?"

After a moment, Mal said, "All right . . . sir. I'll have my people here in the

morning."

Bursa nodded. "And by the afternoon, you'll be in Lieutenant Siro's platoon, at point on the road north of Yeranton."

"Trying to get us killed right away, sir?"

"Nope. I don't need you killed, I need to keep the Alliance out of Yeranton, so they don't swallow up the one munitions plant we can count on in this gorram world. I need them kept out of there, Sergeant."

"All right. We'll do our part."

"I know. Pick up a coat and a rifle on your way out."

"I have a rifle."

"Pick up a new one."

"Yes, sir."

Eighteen months previous

The silky voice said, "Let's try it again, Miss Tam."

The silky voice always called her 'Miss Tam.' The sweet voice and the monotonous voice called her "River." The silky voice was the worst.

As it spoke, her skin tingled and colors danced in little spots before her eyes—colors that sounded deep and threatening and tasted of salt and gun metal.

"Now, Miss Tam, bring the lines together."

Only there weren't any lines, there were only dots.

"Focus on the lines, Miss Tam."

Something twisted inside of her head, and the dots became gray, their sizes pulsed, and she was falling, falling, falling into them.

She tried to scream, but there was something in her mouth.

She fell through one of the dots, which splintered and became infinite.

She wished she could scream.

Eight years previous

He hated this.

No, he really, really hated this.

The flying part was fine. He had no trouble with the flying part. He *liked* the flying part.

It was the part where people kept shooting at him that he had a problem with.

And then there was the ship. He wasn't fond of the ship. In general, the Vortec LC 9 "Gopher" was a fine mid- to low-level interceptor: fast and maneuverable in lower atmo once you learned her tricks, decently armed, and with truly astonishing vertical acceleration. But he just couldn't be happy flying a ship with a third of a wing and both rudders shot off by a SAM that had also taken out half her thrust.

"Pioneer Blue six. Mayday, mayday. Have taken hit from surface to air missile, am going down. Stand-by for location. Transmitting . . .now."

His weapons man's voice came into his left ear. "Hey, Chill, did I just hear you say something about us going down?"

"Well, Archie, the ship is going down. If you can think of a way to stay up here

without it, I'll be okay with that."

"We're over Alliance territory. We'll be captured for sure."

"Okay, Arch. You're right. I changed my mind. We'll just keep flying with no thrust and no control."

"Don't be mean, Chill."

"Sorry."

He slid in and out of a glide, managing to lose speed and altitude without quite stalling. Or, at any rate, only stalling intermittently.

"Okay, we're below mach one. Ready to go for a ride?"

"Not really. You sure we have to do this?"

There was a lurch that re-arranged Wash's backbone as the gravboot tried to suck up more than it could handle, gave out, and came in again as best it could.

"I'm sure. Eject! Eject! Eject!"

A moment later he said, "Arch?"

"Sorry, Chilly-boy. Something else is busted too."

"Can't eject?"

"Nope. How 'bout yours?"

"I don't know. Well, partner, this is going to be fun."

"What are you going to do?"

"Land."

"Chilly, you should bail."

"A little silence, please. The doctor is at work."

He fought with and against the ship, with and against gravity. The ground was coming up fast. "Like a leaf on the wind," he murmured.

Nine years previous

She found him on a makeshift road, just inside one of the guard posts. He seemed lost in thought, but greeted her with a nod.

"Well, that wasn't so bad, Sergeant."

"No, it wasn't. I could get used to seeing the Alliance run. The Colonel knows his business."

"Why, Sergeant, that's the first time I've ever heard you say a kind word about an officer."

"Probably the last, too."

"We held the town, anyway."

The sergeant glanced at her. "Okay, Zoë. What is it?"

"Well, we've survived a battle. I mean, not a hit-and-run grab at supplies, but a real battle."

"Right."

"And we even won."

"I believe we did, yes."

"And most of the men performed well."

"I noticed that same thing."

"A couple of minor wounds, and, compared to what we had before, pretty good medical care. The men are pleased about that, Sergeant."

"I hear a 'but' on the way, Zoë."

"Are we going to get a real meal sometime in here, Sergeant?"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I ought to check on that."

"They'd appreciate it."

The Sergeant nodded, started back toward the encampment, then stopped and looked down the road again. "We should move around behind them and take a shot at their supply line. Even if they have enough ducks to chase us out, it'll put the fear of God into them. They'll be running all the way back to Cheska by morning."

"Going to suggest that to the Colonel, Sergeant?"

"No need. He'll come up with it himself. Those poor bastards."

"Who? The enemy?"

"Yeah. They have no idea what they're going to run into."

"Lambs to the slaughter, Sergeant."

"That's the honest truth, Zoë," he said, and led the way back.

Three years previous

Kaylee heard her name called and pulled herself out from under the aft inertia interlock.

"Yes, Cap'n?"

The Captain and Zoë were standing there, flanking a tall, broad-shouldered man with a wide, sensuous mouth and bright eyes. *Yum*, said a little voice in her head.

She gave him her warmest smile.

"Kaylee, meet Jayne, our newest crew member. Jayne, Kaylee is our mechanic."

She stood up, wiped her hands on her coveralls, and stuck out her hand. He wrapped it in his massive paw and grinned.

"This deal keeps getting better and better," he said looking her up and down.

Kaylee frowned, glanced at the Captain, then at Zoë. "Huh," she said, and climbed back under the interlock unit.

"She always this friendly?" said the new guy.

"No, I think you're special," said Zoë.

"I'll introduce you to the pilot," said the Captain, and three sets of footsteps retreated.

I hate it when they open their mouths and ruin everything, thought Kaylee, and returned to her work.

Six months previous

I'm sending this with a twelve hour delay from a public terminal. By the time you receive it, we will be aboard a ship and well away from this world. Obviously, I'm not going to tell you our destination; the Alliance is, I am quite certain, carefully monitoring everything you receive, from every source, wherever you are. In fact, I have no way of knowing if you'll receive this; they may be interrupting your communication. If they are, then, may whatever Alliance officer is reading this *zai ta qiaoxiao diqiu de mianqian shoudao qian shang qian si de siwang*.

And, yes, as you know by now, River is with me.

She was tortured, experimented on, and damaged. By any reasonable definition,

she has been turned into a psychotic. And I do mean turned into: there are unmistakable signs of organic damage. They cut into her brain.

At times, she is my sister. I hope to increase the frequency and duration of these moments. At present, I'm trying different cocktails of psychotropic medication with varying amounts of success. Perhaps there is a corrective surgery that could undo the damage inflicted on her in that place, but we can't go to a real hospital without the Alliance finding her and putting her back in the Academy, where they would continue torturing and twisting her. This I will not allow.

I really don't know if you'll be reading this, and I don't know how you'll respond. I'm surprised to discover that there is a part of me that actually cares. I will, perhaps, have the opportunity to message you again when there are further developments with your daughter.

Until then, I remain,
Simon

Nine years previous

He usually liked hanging out with Shorty, because it made him seem taller, more cultured, and certainly more intelligent. Usually. Just now he wasn't enjoying it at all.

"Okay, Shorty," he said, "what I don't understand is why you went to so much work to make *sure* the alarm went off. If you'd ignored the gorram thing —"

"I was trying —"

Shorty ducked as three bullets raised a cloud of plaster dust over his head.

"Corn, I was trying to see if it had been fixed."

"Speaking of fixed," said Jayne, tapping his belt knife while glaring at the smaller man.

Shorty scowled and didn't dignify the threat with an answer.

Shorty was a foot shorter than Jayne, which wasn't really that short, but Jayne had given him that name to sort of remind him who was in charge. Shorty didn't much care for that, but so far hadn't objected.

"How many of them you think are out there, Corn?" asked Shorty.

"At least three."

"Between us and the door?"

"At least two. Probably all of them."

"And there have to be more coming."

"Yeah. The skimmer's running, though."

"If we can get to it."

"How much do you weigh?"

"Why? You planning to throw me past them?"

"Not exactly."

Jayne reached around and grabbed Shorty by his belt with one hand and the back of his neck with the other, then lifted him.

"What the —"

"You know, Shorty, I always hated it when you called me Corn."

He made a break for the door.

By the time he made it to the door, Shorty had been hit at least five times, and probably more. He threw the remains into two of them who were bunched together and

charged the third, taking a graze above the hip. Then he was on top of the third, then he was out the door, and, yes, the skimmer was running.

Thirty seconds later he was around the corner and headed out of town.

Jayne sighed. Not the best result for that job: couldn't get to the vault and the money in the tills wasn't anything to retire on. And he was bleeding. And his sister was going to need a new husband. And he was going to need a new world to live on.

He didn't waste time going home; just headed straight for the docks.

Four years previous

"You're a remarkable young man," said the woman.

"Ma'am?"

She seemed to be only a few years older than he was; too young to be calling him "young man." But there was something about the over-lit, antiseptic office, devoid of all traces of personality, that hinted at both power and wisdom, forcing on him the feeling that she had the right to address him that way; and, he realized, causing him to address her as "ma'am" without his having made any conscious decision to do so. Interesting. Who was she, anyway?

"Do you know why you're here, Lieutenant?"

"I haven't a clue. I was told to come in for an exit interview, but —" he made a point of looking around the large office, "— this certainly isn't an exit interview in any normal sense."

She nodded slowly. Her nose was sharp as a beak, which added to her effect, as did her short, regulation haircut, and the severe outfit she wore — civilian garb that nevertheless hinted at the military. And then there was the mark on the side of her forehead: unmistakable sign of near-miss by a splitter. And a laser burn on her neck.

"As I said, a remarkable young man. I refer to what you've picked up on."

"Excuse me, ma'am —" why fight it? "But the office, well, it seems obvious."

"That part, yes. I refer to everything else you've already put together about who I am, and who I represent. That would tell you what you're doing here, if you let it."

"I don't —"

"Go on, Lieutenant Merlyn. Tell me."

He nodded. If it was a test, well, he had always enjoyed tests. "You've served in the line, and been wounded at least twice."

"Go on."

"You were military intelligence at one time, but you're no longer with the Alliance Forces."

"Which tells you what?"

"Uh . . . some branch of the feds — that is, Alliance Security — that I've never heard of?"

"What sort of branch?"

"Doing what you did with military intelligence?"

"Very good. So, what are you doing here, at just the time you want to leave the army?"

He blinked. "You want to recruit me," he stated.

"Yes."

"I don't . . . I'd have thought that, if someone thought I was qualified for that, I'd

have been recruited during the war. Or at least tested."

"What was your last mission?"

"We were assigned to track down a renegade group of . . . oh."

She nodded.

"The lieutenant was one of us," she added.

"Which is why he kept making me make all the decisions."

"Yes."

"And the promotion meant I passed the test."

"Yes. And then, of course, they laid down arms."

"And I had no intention of making a career of this, and so —"

"Which bring us to my first question: why not?"

"Why not what? Become career military? I hate the army."

"Then why did you re-enlist?"

"The war was still on."

"So you enlisted as an idealist."

"Actually, I enlisted as a private."

"Out of a sense of conviction. Because of the cause."

"Ugh. If you want to put it that way."

"What would you call it, Lieutenant?"

"I—all right."

"You were born in a blackout zone in New Tuscany on Ariel. Most people from your background join the army because it's their only way out."

"I had an uncle —"

"We know about your uncle."

Kit nodded.

"My point, Lieutenant, is that the war is over, and the problems are just beginning. The Independents have surrendered; that doesn't mean there isn't work to be done. And, on top of that, what will you do? Beyond leaving the army, how far have your plans gone?"

"Well, I was thinking about a week-long bender on one of the core worlds."

"And after that?"

"I'm not sure. I'd been thinking about going into teaching."

She nodded. "I'm not surprised; you'd be a good teacher. You read people extraordinarily well. But you'd also be good at what you're already half trained for. Reading people is a big part of our work, too. And the pay is a little better."

"It shouldn't be."

"I know. You'd also get training I think you'd enjoy."

"Training in--?"

"Many things. How to break electronic codes, for starters; you seem to have an aptitude."

He shrugged. "Suppose I take you up on your offer. You say there's work to be done. What sort of work?"

She frowned. "There are things —"

"Excuse me. I asked that because I have some ideas of the sorts of things this department does, and —"

"And you want no part of them."

Kit nodded.

"I think we'll be able to find you work you'll be happy to do."

"Can you be a little more specific?"
"Not really; not until you're sworn in."
"By which time it'll be too late."
"You can always quit."
"Can I?"
"Yes."
Kit sighed. "You're good at your job, ma'am."
"Meaning?"
"In spite of all reason, something in me wants to trust you."

Seven years previous

"Colonel, we're just not getting the supplies."
"I know."
"And, so far, we've had four regiments assigned to the same position, with nothing but empty space on each side."
"I know."
"If they *do* try to come through — "
"They will. They're massing. If it isn't the biggest and stupidest bluff of the century, they'll be coming."
"Well, we aren't in any position to stop them."
"You spoke with Captain Baur?"
"Yes, sir. She gave me permission to talk to you directly."
"But couldn't be bothered to herself?"
Mal shrugged. "She has enough on her hands. She's trying to scavenge ammunition. And boots. And convince three other captains to take positions that weren't assigned to them, with no orders from upstairs."
"Okay."
"So, what in the gorram hell is going on, Colonel?"
"They're panicking, that's what."
"Who?"
"The high command."
"Great."
"But the good news is, they sent me."
"Yes, sir."
"And it is my intention to hold this valley."
"I don't — "
"Sergeant, you can tell Captain Baur, from me, that ammunition will be running by noon tomorrow. And we'll have the line straightened out by this evening."
"And if they attack this afternoon?"
"We're humped. But they won't; they always launch their attacks in the morning. You know that."
"Yes, sir."
"Oh, and plan on retreating."
"Sir?"
"We're out too far, which is fine, so we drop back. Slowly."
"Suck 'em in?"

"Whenever possible. Let them win a little, then hit them when they're taking a breath. We're holding the ground, not the positions. So be ready to fall back, in an orderly way. We'll be keeping our flanks connected, and hitting them every time they think we won't. The rest of the time, we make it hard for them to hit us."

"Yes, sir. But if we aren't dug in, I mean, if we retreat from our positions — "

"I came with fifteen batteries of anti-aircraft guns, and with a big bundle of SAMs. And I've been promised air cover."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. Go do your job, and let me do mine."

"Yes, sir. And sir"

"Yes, sergeant?"

"It's good to see you again."

Nine months previous

Supervisor White said, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mister Merlyn. Kit. Mind if I call you Kit?"

"No problem, Supervisor."

"Call me Jerry."

"All right, Jerry."

"What's on your mind?"

"I don't think I'm right for this kind of work."

White frowned. "What do you mean? Are you thinking of resigning?"

"Thinking about it."

"Can you tell me what's caused this?"

"My last mission."

"Hmm. I'm familiar with that mission; I was just looking over the report. Seems to have been completed satisfactorily."

"Thank you, Jerry."

"So, what's the problem?"

"When I was recruited, I was promised that I'd be doing work I could be happy about."

"Happy?"

"Work I could feel good about."

The supervisor frowned, as if Kit had just started speaking a border world dialect.

"I don't understand, Kit. What is there about that mission you don't feel good about?"

"Jerry, what was the net result of the whole fourteen months of work?"

"An entire region was opened up for settlers. And now it'll be irrigated, made fertile — "

"Jerry, it was irrigated before we started. And fertile. And there were settlers there. Families."

"And, according to your own information, at least ninety percent of them were Independent sympathizers."

"But they were — "

"That was a region that never surrendered, Kit. Until order was established, the

war was ready to break out all over again. You want to fight the war all over again?"

"Not especially."

"We could have moved in and just slaughtered everyone there. Would that have been more humane?"

"No."

"Then exactly what should we have done?"

"Just what we did."

"And so?"

"But I want no part of it."

"You admit it needs to be done, but aren't willing to do it?"

"Well put, Jerry. That's exactly it. Like I said, I don't think I'm right for this kind of work. I do the right thing, and I'm sick to my stomach afterwards. You want a tougher sort of guy than I am."

"According to your record, you're plenty tough."

Kit just shook his head.

"Okay," said the supervisor. "Look. I'd rather not lose you. You're good at this work, and I respect that you have a conscience. Speaking for myself, I'd rather these operations were carried out by people with some qualms now and then, instead of the polished thugs who usually go in for it. So let me make a suggestion."

"I'm listening."

"What if I give you an operation you'll like, and approve of, and be able to feel good about? You do it, and when it's done, we'll talk again."

"What's the operation?"

"It's on Hera, collecting evidence to arrest and convict a very bad man."

"Okay, I'm listening."

CHAPTER 4

MY OWN KIND OF STUPID

Serenity: Engine room

He found her in the engine room, of course. She was fiddling with something that required a large wrench in one hand and a dirty rag in the other. She looked up as he came in and gave him a big smile.

"Hello, Simon."

"Hello, Kaylee. Are you hungry?"

"A little. What did you have in mind?"

"I thought I might cook us up something to eat."

"Simon! You cook?"

He tried to decide if he ought to be offended. "There are some things I can make."

"And you want to cook for me?"

"If you won't be too critical."

She grinned her Kaylee grin at him, and he got that sensation in his stomach again. "When did you learn to cook?"

"Actually, River taught me a few things while we were growing up. She's the real cook."

"Wow! I never knew! Why hasn't she cooked here?"

"She's made snacks for me a couple of times, but, well, there isn't much you can do here."

"Why not?"

"For real cooking, you need a real stove, a real oven . . . you know, a real kitchen. The things they have in civilization."

She stared at him. She wasn't smiling any more.

"Actually," she said slowly, "I'm not really hungry."

She turned back to the engine. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it, then gave up and went to find his sister.

She was in her bunk, arms wrapped around her knees.

"River, are you hungry?"

"The preparation of food has been a community-building and interpersonal bonding activity since before the dawn of history. The rituals and devices associated with food preparation are nearly always, in all cultures, matters of pride and identity. You're an idiot."

"River."

"I think there are some protein chips left in the cupboard and some soy dip in the cooler."

Zoë and the Captain showed up just as he was setting out the dip. He set the chips down in front of his sister and sat down next to her.

"That was a good call, doctor," said Mal.

"What was?"

"About Jayne selling you and your sister out to the Alliance."

His heart sank. River picked up a chip and studied it intently. "It is carbon-based," she said. "That makes it organic by definition."

"What happened?" asked Simon.

"Sudden chatter on the Alliance security channel," said the Captain, "and there's no reason for that here. It's in code, but we can be pretty sure what it's about. It's origin is in the world, on this continent."

"What are we going to do?"

"Wash is checking the sky to see if we have a clear path out. No point in running straight into an Alliance ship."

"It isn't about me," said River.

"No," said Simon. "It's about what they did to you, and what they want to do to you again."

"No," said River. She looked at the Captain. "It's the Alliance agent. He's trying to find out who you are."

"Alliance agent?" said Mal. "What Alliance agent?"

"The one you met in the canteen today."

Mal looked at River, then at Simon, then at Zoë, then at River again. "Doctor, is your sister reliable when she gets like this?"

"Uh, I have no idea."

"She is completely reliable," said River. "She is only wrong about the important things."

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up," said Mal. He sighed. "A gorram Alliance agent. I'd be more doubtful if it didn't answer all sorts of questions."

The Captain and Zoë were looking at each other. Simon cleared his throat. "Feel like letting me in on this?"

"Nothing much to it," said Mal. "We saved the life of an Alliance agent today."

"Good going, sir," said Zoë.

Serenity: Dining room

He punched the intercom. "Wash?"

"I'm still checking, Mal, but it looks good."

"Skip it. Can you pinpoint the source?"

"Skip it? You mean, we're not running?"

"Wash, I need you to pinpoint the source."

"How close do you need?"

"How close can you get?"

"*Gao shenma gui, zenma hui shi?* I don't know. Give me a minute."

"A minute," said Mal.

He turned, leaned against the bulkhead, and closed his eyes. "*Wo taoyan fuza*," he said, and headed up to the bridge. Zoë fell into step beside him.

"For someone who hates complications, sir, you do seem to go out of your way to create them."

"You should be used to it."

"Oh, I am."

"Well then. I'd like to get paid."

"Paid would be good, sir. What about the fed?"

"What about him?"

"We're not going to do anything?"

"What would you suggest we do, Zoë?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Well, if you get any ideas, let me know."

"I have a question, though."

"Hmmm?"

"If that was a fed, who was trying to kill him?"

"Lot of folk on this world got no reason to love the Alliance."

"Yes, sir. But not loving them is one thing, killing a fed is another. And that wasn't just killing a fed, that was planned."

"There's something to that."

"So, what do you think, sir?"

"I think I want to get paid."

"Yes, sir."

Wash turned his head. "Paid? But I thought this job was legal. Are we supposed to get paid for legal jobs, too?"

"Did you find the source?"

"It came from about two miles away from us, Mal. I can bring up a map of town and show you the place."

"Okay, take us out of the world."

"What about being paid?"

"Don't give up yet."

"What course should I set?"

"None. Synchronous orbit; keep us right here."

"Okay."

"Sir?" said Zoë. "Why – ?"

"I'm taking the shuttle down. If something goes wrong, I want Serenity to be able to get away clean so we don't lose River and Simon."

"And you?"

"I'm in no danger."

"Of course not, sir. You're going to find that Alliance agent, aren't you?"

"Alliance agent?" said Wash. "What – ?"

"Zoë," said Mal. "Why would I go seek out a fed?"

"Because you're curious, sir, and can't leave anything alone."

"What fed?" said Wash.

"I'll tell you all about it, dear," said Zoë. She turned back to Mal. "But sir, I don't think –"

"You'll be waiting on Serenity. It shouldn't take long."

Wash cleared his throat, "If someone could –"

"Print out that location for me," said Mal.

Zoë looked at him.

"I just want to know what to avoid," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Wash generated the map, and handed it to him. He folded the e-paper, put it into his pocket, and said, "All right. Get us airborne, Wash."

"*You yi tian . . .*" said Wash, and turned back to the controls.

Zoë sat down in the co-pilot's chair. Mal headed back down to the dining room to tell the others.

Yuva: Sakarya's office

Rennes didn't seem so large when he stood in front of Sakarya's desk, trying not to tremble.

"Who did you send to do it?" he asked.

"Taylor and Falworth, sir. They've always been —"

"Idiots, Rennes. Like you. Big, slow, and stupid."

"Yes, sir."

"And what do you know about those two who broke it up?"

"I've got their names, sir."

Sakarya felt his eyebrows go up. That was fast work, for Rennes. "Do you? How did you manage that?"

"They came into the office — the other office — for payment."

"Payment? For what?"

"They're the ones we hired to bring the lumber for —"

"Them?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you paid them?"

"No, sir. I wanted your orders on that."

"I see. Good thinking for once, Rennes."

"Thank you, sir."

Sakarya considered for a moment.

"All right," he said. "Pay them in full."

"Yes, sir."

"Then get a crew together, follow them to their ship, and kill them."

"Yes, sir."

Yuva: Kit's apartment

Once he finished his report to Asher House and admitted to himself that staying in his home was no longer safe, it took him three minutes to shut everything down and get what he needed, and then twenty minutes to walk across town to the place he'd already prepared.

It wasn't the safest place, but it was safer than home. And he had installed enough gear to do a reasonable amount of work once he got it set up; and certainly enough to get hold of Asher House and say, *Why in the gorram hell did you just blow off my*

last eight months of work?

He did not, of course, get hold of the House and say that. The very best thing that could happen with such a course is that he'd get no answer. But he had the equipment to do his own checking.

Malcolm Reynolds, Zoë Washburne.

And if that didn't bring up anything directly, it would at least be a place to start.

Those bastards in Asher House had blown eight months of investigation right at the point where — well, maybe they had a good reason. They had better have a good reason.

In any case, they had trained him to sniff out and sift through facts he wasn't supposed to be able to get access to; so, one way or another, he was going to find out what the gorram reason was.

He set up the miscues and false addresses very carefully before entering the search parameters.

Two hours later he was scowling at the screens as if it were their fault. A little voice in his head told him that something the House went to so much trouble to hide must be too big for the likes of him.

But eight months of work, of *good* work, of *important* work, all washed away in an hour. No, no. If they were going to do that, he was bloody well going to know why.

He wiped his hands on his shirt and got down to serious work.

Serenity: Bridge

"So that's the short version," she said.

"You rescued a fed."

"Yeah."

"And now Mal wants to go back alone to get the payment."

"To get the payment, and, unless I miss my guess, to find out about that fed."

"He's being a hero again, isn't he?"

She nodded.

Wash gave the boat some throttle, and Zoë felt Serenity lift, followed by a small lurch as the I-grav kicked in.

"I don't like him going down there by himself," said Zoë.

"Yeah, well, the us being up here thing and the him being down there thing is a problem if anything goes wrong."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"Of course, what are the chances of anything going wrong?"

"That's the other thing I'm thinking."

"Dead certain?"

"Pretty much."

"So," he said, "what do we do? I could wait until the shuttle is launched, then land. I mean, once he's gone, you're in charge."

"I know."

"Mal won't like that much."

"I know."

They didn't speak for a moment, while Wash made the calculations for a geosynchronous orbit, and tapped it in. Then Zoë felt his eyes on her.

"Zoë, what are you thinking?"

She didn't answer.

"You're planning to go after him, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"I know."

"But you're going to anyway."

She nodded.

Her husband sighed and turned his attention back to guiding Serenity.

Yuva: Canteen

He was careful not to drink too much, confining himself to beer that he nursed carefully, and making certain to eat. There was something going on, and he was in the middle of it, and if he made misstep, it could cost him his freedom, or worse.

The feds knew he was here, but hadn't made contact with him. That was dangerous – it meant they might be planning to turn on him. They had once before, and he scowled at the memory. And Mal and Zoë were around, probably pissed as hell at him, and that was dangerous. And there was something strange going on, what with Mal and Zoë having saved the ass of someone he didn't recognize, and that was dangerous. It had obviously been a trap, but for who? For him?

He could cut and run.

He still had the ginseng sitting in a rented locker; he could sell that for enough to buy passage off world. Go back and call the feds again, try for another meeting? But if he'd just missed a trap, then he'd be committing suicide by walking into the security office again.

How did this get so gorram complicated?

He muttered and drank some more beer.

The money for the crazy girl would be good, so good. But what good was money if you ended up dead or in an Alliance lockdown?

He should play it safe. He should sell that ginseng and get passage out, right now. Tonight.

He went up to the bar to get another beer, brought it back to his table, drank some, and looked around the canteen, slowly filling up with well-dressed citizens – just the sort who could afford what he was selling, and would probably love to have a rare, fine tea. He could do it. He could be away from this gorram world by tomorrow morning.

He drank some more beer.

"Naw," he decided.

Serenity: Dining room

He looked from the doctor, to Kaylee, to River. "Okay," he said. "Here's the situation: Mal went back down in the shuttle to get our payment, and Zoë followed him in the other shuttle to keep him out of trouble."

He bit his lip, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable. "So, the question is, do we do what Mal wanted, or do we go down there?"

"We go after them," said Kaylee. "That's what the Cap'n would do if it were one of us."

"I know," said Wash. "Only there are two problems with that. The first is, it's really Simon and River who are running the risk. Second, what can we do if they're in trouble?"

Simon shifted uncomfortably. "As to the first," he said, "I should point out that, uh, you are all harboring known fugitives, so it isn't just us running the risk."

"You have a point there," said Wash.

"As to the second," said Simon, "I'm not sure. The thing is, I'm not sure what they'll run into, if they do run into anything."

"It just don't seem right to sit up here and do nothin'," said Kaylee.

"I know," said Wash.

"I'd feel better about disobeying the Captain if we had a reason. Are they in touch with us? Will we know if something goes wrong?"

"They're both talking to Serenity, but not to each other. Mal doesn't know that Zoë followed him yet."

"They won't be here for two days," said River.

"Mal and Zoë?" asked Simon.

"They want their thing," said River. "They're a long way off, but the dead travel fast."

"River?" said Simon.

"Two by two," she said.

River stood up and left the dining room, heading toward her cabin. Simon started to follow her, stopped, turned back to Wash, looked at Kaylee, and spread his hands. "Do whatever you think is right," he said, and hurried after his sister.

"Well, that makes it easier," said Wash. He sighed. A memory tugged at his sleeve, then, and he said, "You know, Kaylee, just a few days before we dropped off the Shepherd, we were sitting around reminiscing—"

"I miss him," said Kaylee wistfully.

"Me too. We were reminiscing, and he said something about how a lot of things would have been a lot easier if we had listened to River and just believed what she said."

Kaylee tilted her head and said, "Hunh."

"Yeah. I was about to ask him what he meant, but I got distracted by something. Landing, I think it was."

He shrugged.

"So," said Kaylee, "does that mean we should do what the Captain says and just wait up here?"

Wash nodded. "I'm pretty sure that's what it means."

"All right."

"But I'm not going to."

Kaylee smiled.

Wash sighed and headed back to the bridge.

Outside Yuva

It was evening on Hera when he nursed the shuttle to a standstill. He was glad Wash wasn't there to see the landing; but he was down safe, and nothing was damaged.

He carefully went through the shutdown process, leaving the comm on. "Wash? Let Zoë know I'm down."

"Will do, Mal."

He reset the comm for the local office, and spoke once more.

"This is Captain Reynolds. Anyone there?"

After a moment, there was an answer. "Yeah. We have your payment here."

"Going to be around for a while?"

"Another hour or so."

"I'll be there."

Then he shut down the comm, as well.

He pulled his pistol, checked the load, re holstered it. "Okay," he muttered. "Let's do this thing."

He left the shuttle, closed and locked it. Fifty feet away was the road; he took it.

Half an hour later he stood in the office, where the walls were white and clean and spacious, and everything blinked and hummed and flickered, and the few people who were working late were all dressed more or less like Kit had been. The place gave him the creeps.

A couple of questions led him to the right office, which turned out to be standing open. In it was a desk, and behind the desk a fat, pale man overflowed his chair, stubby hands typing at a keyboard. He looked up as Mal came in.

"Captain Reynolds?"

Mal nodded.

"Good. Sign here, please."

The fat man passed him a clipboard and a lightpen. Mal signed it, passed it back, and received a narrow piece of paper.

"What's this?"

"A check."

"I was told —"

"Sign the back. I can cash it."

He signed it, passed it back, and received a thick envelope. He opened it and counted, getting a look but no comment from the fat man.

"All here," he said.

The other nodded. "I'm to convey Mr. Sakarya's thanks."

Mal nodded. "If he needs anything else, he knows how to reach us."

"Indeed."

Mal stuck the envelope into his coat and left the room, heading back out of the office. *Okay, good. We've been paid. All is well, we can get out of here now.*

There were a few pedestrians on the street, most of them looking like office workers, and many of them, it seemed, heading toward the canteen.

He dug into his pocket, and found the map Wash had given him and studied it, relating it to the landmarks he knew. It wasn't easy.

What's the difference? I'm not going to go hunt him up. What's the point? He's a fed. Bad enough to have saved his life; there's nothing to be gained by having anything more to do with him. Nothing at all.

He stared at the paper and tried to work it out.

Pointless, he told himself.

He frowned.

Oh, right. It's about a hundred and fifty yards that way.

He went back to the main road and followed it most of the way out of town, turning to the right until he saw a low series of bungalows.

Yep, he said. *Has to be that one.*

His feet carried him that way, and right up to the door.

CHAPTER 5

MY OWN KIND OF QUESTIONS

Yuva

He was just about to knock on the door when he heard a crunch behind him. He turned quickly, reaching for his pistol, then stopped with it half out of the holster.

"Zoë!"

"Yes, sir?"

"What the *xuexing de ta ma de diyu* are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Had you expected me to wait on Serenity while you spoke to the fed by yourself?"

"Well, seeing as how I gave that order, I sort of figured on it, yes. What about the rest of them?"

"I took the other shuttle. They're still up in close orbit, geostationary."

"All right. Well, as long as we're here —"

"Our friend isn't."

"Hmmm?"

"The fed — assuming that's what he is — left half an hour ago."

"Oh. You've been waiting here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't suppose you know where he went?"

"Yes, sir."

"You do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Follow me, sir."

It was fully dark by this time. They walked through the darkened back streets of Yuva for about fifteen minutes, until they stopped in front of what seemed, in the little ambient light there was, to be a large, black object of indeterminate shape. "Here, sir," whispered Zoë.

Mal whispered back. "What is it?"

"In the light, it seemed to be a warehouse for the landing field."

"How big?"

"Not terribly."

"Okay."

He dug around in his coat pocket for a minute, then whispered, "Got some light?"

Zoë kept the light dim, but they were able to spot the door. Mal positioned himself on the side with the latch, Zoë took the other. They both drew their weapons.

Mal found the latch with his left hand, turned it. The "click" seemed very loud. The door was also loud when it opened. He waited to see if anything would happen.

When the floodlights came on, he let himself fall backward, staying near the wall, then rolled, coming to rest on his stomach, pistol pointing toward the door. Zoë was clearly visible, on one knee, pistol and head swinging back and forth.

A voice emerged from the doorway.

"I'm not going to shoot at you. I'd appreciate it if you'd be equally reserved."

"Who's there?" called Mal.

"It's me. Kit. I didn't know who you were when I hit the lights."

Mal lowered his pistol, pointing it at the ground next to his foot. Zoë pointed hers at a spot on the ground midway between her and the door.

He came out, showing empty hands, though there was a pistol tucked into his belt. "I take it you were looking for me?"

"That we were."

"And I assume you didn't save my life six hours ago in order to kill me now, so, would you like to come in?"

Mal glanced at Zoë, who stood up, holstered her gun, and shrugged. Mal stood up and holstered his own. "Well then," he said.

They followed him inside, Zoë closing the door behind them. Kit flicked a heavy switch just inside the door, presumably turning off the floodlights. They followed him down a badly lit hall to a small office, with comm equipment, monitors, and keyboard set about here and there.

"Get comfortable," he said.

Zoë rolled her eyes. "Is it all of Hera, or just Yuva where no one believes in chairs?"

"I get the chair," said Kit, "because I got here first."

Zoë leaned against the wall, Mal took a corner of the desk. "Is this a hideout you've used before, or was it spur of the moment?"

"I've had it in mind, just in case."

Mal felt Zoë looking at him. "Best to have a bolt hole, in your line of work."

"Yes, indeed."

"Just what is your line of work?"

Now it was Kit studying him. "I'm a dentist," he said at last.

Mal shrugged. "Look, you don't have a cover any more; all you can do is wait to be retrieved, and hope that happens before they find you and take another shot. What harm is there in telling us?"

"I'm wondering if you're the ones who blew my cover."

"And then saved your life?"

Kit shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know what your angle is. Feel like telling me?"

"You'd never believe it," said Zoë, staring at a spot over Kit's shoulder.

"You don't have to tell us anything," said Mal. "We're not going to threaten an Alliance officer. And we are surely not going to try to beat it out of you. But we came into the middle of this. We want the rest of the story. If you feel like telling us."

Kit leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "What brought you to Yuva, anyway? I've learned who you are, but that only starts the questions. You aren't miners, and I haven't seen you around the office. I'd say security, but you aren't wearing —"

"I captain a transport ship. We were hired to pick up some lumber for Mister Sakarya."

"Yeah, that matches what I learned. But is it true?"

"Sure," said the captain. "Why not?"

"Okay. You picked up some lumber. And then?"

Mal shrugged. "We were waiting to get paid, saw those two in the canteen, decided to interfere with their fun."

"Mister Sakarya," repeated Kit.

"Yes."

"What do you know of Mister Sakarya?"

"Well, I gather he's not burdened by excessive kindness toward his employees."

"You could say that."

"He seems like a thousand others I've seen. Big king in a little kingdom. Probably enjoys it too much."

"Yeah, well."

"Well what?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing you can tell us about him?"

"Sorry."

"Or about what you're doing?"

"Sorry."

"Aren't you curious about how we blew your cover?"

"Did you?"

"Not on purpose."

Kit shrugged.

Mal said, "But then, someone tries to knock you on the head the day we show up here, and it hasn't happened before, or you'd have been armed and expecting it. Bit hard to call it coincidence, isn't it?"

"What's your point?"

"That you might be curious about how it happened."

"Maybe I am."

"And if you tell us what you know, and we tell you what we know, we might both learn something."

"Sorry. Can't do it."

"I suppose you couldn't justify revealing anything to anyone without clearance for it."

"Close enough."

"A shame about that."

"I suppose it is."

"Do you have to tell them?"

"Yes."

"But you are curious, aren't you, Kit?"

"I'll admit to that. But I'm afraid, well, you know. I'm sorry I couldn't be more help, Captain Reynolds."

Mal pushed himself away from the wall, nodded to Kit, and headed out. Zoë fell

into step next to him.

"I have a question, sir."

"What is it?"

"Did we learn anything?"

"Well, we have a lot more questions than we did before, but, yeah, we learned some things. We confirmed that he's a fed. And he was on sort of mission here that had something to do with Sakarya, and something about our arrival here messed up his mission and almost got him killed."

"I see. Something about our arrival."

"Right."

"Then I have another question."

"What's that?"

"Any objection if I hunt down Jayne and blow his head off?"

"He's off the crew."

"So?"

"Can't blame a snake for slithering, Zoë."

"No, sir. But if you blow its head off, you'll slow it down some."

Yuva: Canteen

He sat in the canteen, nursing his beer, and tried to work it out. Having decided to stick around and go for the gold, he really had to know what was going on.

Okay, what exactly were the events, in order?

First, he'd made contact with the Alliance, and been told that an agent would be meeting him in the Canteen. This was the only canteen in town. The other place, down the hill, was just called, "The bar." So, he was in the right place.

Second, he'd come here, and waited about half an hour in a place that was completely empty except for the bartender. If the bartender was a fed, which didn't seem likely to begin with, why hadn't he said something?

Third, two guys had come in. They *could* have been feds – they were armed, and certainly looked like they were there for business. But why two of them? He hadn't been told there would be two of them. That's why he'd put his hand on his pistol the second they'd come in. But they'd ignored him completely, instead watching the door.

Fourth, Mal and Zoë had come in. He'd damn near opened fire when they'd walked through the door, figuring they'd found out what he was up to and wanted to stop him. But they'd pretended he wasn't even there.

Fifth, the other guy came in, the one in the fancy clothes. He could have been a fed. But then those two other guys made their move, like they were going to kill him, and Mal and Zoë had saved him. No way Mal and Zoë were going to rescue a fed.

It didn't make sense.

None of it made sense.

But he had to figure it out, because he couldn't go into a high-risk operation like this without any idea of who was on which side, or even what the sides were.

Well, okay. Let's just think this through.

Could Mal showing up there be coincidence? Well, sure; if they were stuck waiting for something, like payment for the job, how many other places were there? But what about that guy they saved? Mal and Zoë saved him, so no way he was a fed; that much he could count on.

So, if he wasn't a fed, who *was* he? And who wanted to kill him, and why?
Why hadn't the fed shown up, anyway? Whatever their attitude toward him, Jayne, he *knew* they wanted the doctor and his sister; they wanted them bad. So why didn't they show?

He leaned back in his chair and sipped his beer, nursing it.

Outside Yuva

They were nearly back to the shuttle Mal had flown.

"Okay, sir, now we know."

"Yeah."

"At least, we might know some of it."

"Right."

"So, do we do anything about it?"

"Yeah. We've been paid, so I fly you back to Shuttle One, we get back to Serenity and get off this world."

"Good plan, sir."

"Glad you approve."

"Only one problem with it. Do you really intend to do it?"

The shuttle was there, and appeared undisturbed.

"Yeah," he said. "This is none of our concern."

"That's what you said before, sir."

"And I was right, too."

"Yes, sir."

Mal punched the combination and door opened. They went in. Mal sat down in the pilot's chair, flipped on the comm, and found the channel for Serenity.

"Wash?"

"Right here, Mal."

"We got paid, and we're on the way home."

"Uh"

Zoë looked at Mal, who said, "Wash? Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem, exactly."

"Talk to me, Wash."

"Well, for one thing, Zoë went down after you."

"I know. She's with me now."

"Oh, good. All right then."

"What else?"

"Else?"

"You said for one thing."

"Oh. Right. Well, that's a little hard to explain."

"Wash."

"Sir," said Zoë. "We might want to hold off on this."

"Why is that?"

"Because I just caught a glimpse of something metallic out there."

"Wash, I'll call you back."

He disconnected and drew his weapon; hers was already in her hand, though she had no memory of pulling it.

"You only saw one?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. One glint. Shouldn't we get out of here?"

"Yes, unless there's a weapon trained on the door, waiting for us to go over there and close it."

"You want to find out?"

"Not especially."

"Should we just stand here forever?"

"Not such a good idea either."

"We should have closed the door when we came in, sir."

"Good thinking."

Zoë shrugged and knelt down by the side of the door. Mal stood behind her.

"Ready, sir? I'll get it."

"I'll get it."

"No, sir. I can —"

Mal lunged across the threshold, rolling and coming up on the other side of the door.

With a small part of her brain that wasn't otherwise occupied, she thought, *You never get used to the way bullets kick into things around you so much sooner than you hear the report.*

There was no need to speak. There were at least three of them, the weapons were semi-auto, and they were firing at three different levels. No way were they going out there.

The door swung closed.

"You good, sir?"

"Didn't even feel a breeze."

"Good, then."

"I'll fire it up," said Mal.

"Let me, sir."

"All right."

She slid herself into the pilot's seat. Bullets continued striking the side of the shuttle. She disengaged the guidance lock, engaged the power, and armed the controls. It wasn't as smooth as Wash would have done it, but it didn't take a lot longer.

She put her hand on the throttle, kicked in the grav boot, and said, "Well, now what?"

"Uh, now we get out of here?"

"Not going to happen, sir."

"Uh . . ."

Zoë got up and briefly inspected the area opposite the hatch, nodded, and sat back down. "One of those shots that came in through the hatch knocked out the g-line. We're not going anywhere, sir."

"Ah. Well. And just when I thought everything was perfect."

An occasional bullet hit the hull, with a sound like a hammer hitting an anvil through a pillow.

Mal frowned. "I wonder how long we can stay in here and just let them shoot at us."

"Until they realize that we're just going to sit here, and go and get explosives."

"That sounds about right."

"Or, depending on who they are, they could just bring up artillery."

"You're full of good cheer."

"Well, they aren't asking us to surrender, so we don't have to worry about whether they're going to trick us."

"Now that's a good cheery way to look at things, Zoë."

She squinted through the window. Was that . . . ? "I think they're getting reinforced."

"Oh, that's good. I'd hate to think we weren't outnumbered."

"We wouldn't want that, would we."

"If we knew where they were coming from, and who they were," said Mal, "we might be able to guess how soon they'll be able to get explosives."

"Yes sir. And something else bothers me."

"You mean, who it is trying to kill us?"

"Yes, sir. If it was Sakarya, he wouldn't have paid us."

"Yep."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"We could use a new plan."

"We could at that," he said.

Yuva: Warehouse

The conversation with the captain and his first mate ought to have given him a lot more information than it did. He stared at the comm gear.

What was it about that ship that had gotten Asher House so excited? There were no active warrants on the captain, just a string of dropped charges; so what else did they have? Or who else?

Could it be a who? There had been the instructions to meet with someone and negotiate a price for information. The captain didn't have the information, so someone else on the ship did. Someone who would what, sell out that captain? But the same problem kept returning, in new forms: what could the House want so badly that they'd blow an eight-month operation for it, just at the point it was about to pay off? And how could he have never heard a whisper of something that big?

He turned back to his gear and pondered.

Serenity: Bridge

One eye on the beacon, one eye on the glide plane, he slid through the increasingly thick atmo. It was just as well that this sort of flying required almost no thought, because his mind was on everything else.

What was going on with Zoë?

He knew that tone Mal had used — that too-too-calm sign-off. There was something going on.

His hand twitched toward the comm, then back.

Gorram it, he would *not* break into whatever they were in the middle of, just because he was worried. He would *not*. It wasn't as if they hadn't been in tight scrapes before. And it wasn't as if there were anything he could do that he wasn't doing — that is,

getting back there as fast as he could.

As fast as he could would be a good ten minutes. A lot could happen in ten minutes.

What was going on with Zoë?

He heard a footstep behind him, and almost lost his groove. He spared a glance over his shoulder.

"River! Uh, hello there."

"You should."

He looked at the yoke, the I-set, the gravlock, the attitude controls, and realized suddenly how little pressure it would take on any one of how many things to send them crashing onto the world. "Maybe this isn't the place you should be right now."

"You should call," said River.

He spared her another look. Her eyes were slightly wide, her hands were in fists at her sides, and she wasn't moving at all.

"I should . . . you mean, I should get hold of Zoë and Mal? I'm still ten minutes away, there's nothing I can do yet. And if I interrupt them in the middle of something —"

"You don't fix faith; it fixes you," she said, and turned around and left the bridge.

He let out his breath, not having been aware of holding it, and checked his glide path again. All was well.

You don't fix faith

Now what did *that* mean?

CHAPTER 6

MY OWN KIND OF FLYING

Outside Yuva

The comm crackled. "Mal? What's going on down there?"

"Hi hun," said Zoë. "Nothing much. We're being shot at."

"Oh, is that all?"

"Pretty much."

"Are you shooting back?"

"Haven't quite figured out how to do that, yet."

"Then why you aren't out of there?"

"Can't. The g-line got shot out."

"*Bei yachi yange de shuiniu de ziniü.* Can you get out of the shuttle?"

"Not just at the moment. There are at least six of them, I think, and they're sort of shooting at the door."

"You could turn the shuttle around."

"Without the grav-boot?"

"Yes."

She could almost see the Captain's ears perk up, and he silently mouthed, "You can?"

"Wash, tell me how."

"Over-ride the wing controls so they don't extend. You know how to do that?"

Zoë looked over the controls. "I don't –"

"Left side, under the console. It's a small silver switch labeled S.E. Over."

"Got it."

"Okay. Nose all the way down. All the way, like you're doing a full power dive. Then you give it some juice. Just a little; too much and you'll flip her."

"Okay."

"Then both bow attitude jets on full, then yank the yoke hard around in whichever direction you want to turn. You'll have to cut the attitude jets fast when you get about forty percent of the way to where you want to be."

"Forty percent? How –"

"Guess."

"Okay, Wash. I've got it."

She began setting it up, going over the controls carefully.

"Hey, Wash," said the Captain.

"Yes, Mal?"

"What did you call about?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"It was something the Shepherd said, about believing River."

"You're going to have to explain that to me later."

"I'll try."

"Ready, sir," said Zoë.

"Talk to you later, Wash," said the Captain. Then, "Zoë, let's get some outside light. I want to see if we can find some cover on the starboard side. If this works, we're going to have to make a fast break for it."

She flipped on the externals while he stared out. Several more bullets thwanged into the shuttle. "*Hundan* are trying to kill an innocent shuttle," he said. "Okay. See that rock, the big one?"

"I see it."

"Lot of trees around it. That's what we make for."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded and positioned himself by the door once more.

She ran her hands over the controls she'd need, in order, twice.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Me, too."

"You'd better hold on to something, sir."

"I'm holding. Let's do this thing."

"Yes, sir."

She pushed the yoke forward. No response, of course, beyond a little pressure. She took a deep breath, and, as she let it out, and gave it some throttle, then a little more, then — .

The vessel shuddered, and the tail rose; she was looking hard at the ground. Behind her she heard the Captain catch his footing.

She fired up both attitude thrusters and spun hard, and there was a lurch that couldn't possibly have been right. She felt panic for the first time in ten years, killed the attitude jets and straightened the yoke. As she was catching her breath, she heard the door open.

"Move!" said the Captain.

She wanted to explain that, in fact, it hadn't worked; that she'd panicked, they were still facing the same way, and he was about to charge out into more massed firepower than they seen since the war. There were only two problems with doing so: one problem was that the Captain was out the door already, and the other problem was that so was she.

Outside Yuva

He spotted the rock, right where it should be, and made for it. He took the last few feet in the air, rolled, and came up to one knee. An instant later, Zoë was next to him, also on a knee, weapon out.

"Good job, Zoë; that was the perfect spot."

"Thank you, sir."

"Any idea what direction the other shuttle is from here?"

"Yes, sir. Past this one, and past all of them."

"I see. Long way around then."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. Time to run."

They did.

Lights occasionally flickered near them, and from time to time there were reports of shots. It reminded her too much of the aftermath of Belerophon, when defeat had first kicked her in the teeth, when she'd really learned what it was like to be on the losing side.

She shook her memories aside, and concentrated on running; that was hard enough. A little light from a pale, thin half-moon and even less from the sliver of another gave just enough light to avoid the trees, if she was careful; her eyes told her enough to stay with the captain.

The terrain cleared a little. "I don't suppose that you have any idea if we're near the other shuttle?"

"No, sir. I landed a quarter of a mile east of you, but I'm afraid I don't know how far we've gone."

"Okay, then . . . what's that sound?"

They both stopped to listen for a moment, then, "Horses," said the Captain.

"They'll catch us easy in the open."

"Yes, they will. I wonder if we can make it back to the trees."

Serenity: Bridge

"Zoë? Did you try that?"

He boosted the engine a bit to slow his decent. The altimeter, calibrated for this place, said he was only about nine hundred meters from the deck.

"Zoë? Mal? Are you there?"

Nothing

He gave it more power and came to a stop, hovering just over the tree line. He turned on the floods and checked the view below. The shuttle was there, its door open. No sign of any activity. An infrared scan picked up the slowly cooling engine, the rapidly cooling electronics, and nothing else.

Well, if they'd pulled it off, they wouldn't be in the shuttle, would they? They'd be heading to the other shuttle, which was . . . looked like a quarter of a mile east.

"Zoë? Mal?"

Nothing. Well, in any case, they weren't there yet.

He killed the light but kept on the infrared, and headed east, slowly.

He found them almost at once—they had to be the two bright spots, pursued by . .

..

Yes. They were on horseback, and those little flashes had to be gunfire.

He hit the lights and dropped lower, then lower still.

They scattered nicely.

He rose, made a sharp one-eighty, and came back again. There was a group of three. He dropped toward them, and three horses were running wildly, and without their riders. The shooting had stopped.

He went back for another pass. "Swoop," he said to himself. "Swoop, swoop. It's like waltzing."

He realized that he was smiling.

Yuva: Canteen

There weren't any gorram answers.

That's what it came to: no gorram answers at all.

He finished his beer, and yelled for another one. The bartender didn't hear him, or chose to ignore him, so he pushed past the good citizens of Yuva up to the bar. He started to order another beer, then changed his mind and made it whiskey. He started to bring it back to his table, then shrugged and downed it. It was surprisingly smooth, burning just a little on his tongue, the back of his throat. He ordered another and looked around the room.

Upright citizens, one and all. All of them polite, and none of them looking like they could be pushed into a ruckus. Sad. He'd really have enjoyed a chance to get some of his frustration out.

He finished the whiskey, blinked, and noticed that the room was getting a little fuzzy around the edges.

Good.

He ordered another, drained it, wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

There were a lot of people here; there must be *someone* in the room who'd be willing to tussle, if pushed right. He turned back to the bar, and stumbled against it. He ordered another.

The bartender said, "Maybe it'd be better if you slowed down a bit."

Jayne grinned slowly.

Yuva: Warehouse

His brain tapped the keys while his hands absorbed the information.

Bring it up, send it off, knock it down, check the signal for listeners or intruders, move on to the next: order and process, logic and vision, waiting for the slap of epiphany if it chose to come, but keep poking and prying and figuring until then.

This was what he did; this was what he was good at. Collect the pieces, make sense of them, look for the fact that didn't fit in, then follow it wherever it led. That his target was now his own people was no longer even a consideration; the work was everything, it had become its own goal.

Names and figures and data-points of history flashed before him, the search becoming wider and wider, then sometimes narrowing into a tight beam until possibility became negative, and the search widened again.

The goal had vanished long ago; the process was now all there was, and he reveled in it.

Serenity: Cargo bay

Kaylee was waiting when they came in, both of them out of breath.

"Cap'n! You're bleeding!"

"Not too bad," he said. "We need some work on shuttle two."

"Okay. But you're dripping on the floor."

The Captain glanced down at his upper thigh and shifted his weight. He squished audibly. "First we have to get it back aboard. And I'd like to recover the other shuttle first."

"I can do that, sir," said Zoë. "Go get fixed up."

Wash came rattling down the stairs and wrapped his arms around Zoë.

"Good job, Wash," said the Captain.

Simon appeared next, looked them over, and said, "All right, Captain, let's get you to the infirmary."

"I don't think we . . . " he paused in mid-sentence, wavered on his feet, and said, "All right." Simon put an arm under the Captain's shoulder and led him off.

"I'll be right back," said Zoë.

"You'll be what?" said Wash.

"I need to get the shuttle."

"Honey-pooch, you just got back in, and there are people out there who want to shoot at you. Why don't I bring Serenity to the shuttles?"

"The fuel cost."

"*Gan zhe xie ranliao fei.*"

"The Captain said —"

"*Ba yi ge ranliao dianchi lai cao chuanzhang* . We can just —"

"Okay, compromise. Give me an exact location on the one we're almost on top of, I'll go get it, and meet you next to the other one."

Wash exhaled slowly. "All right," he said.

Kaylee tried not to smile. Wash was so adorable when he was being protective.

"I'll get my tools," she said.

Twenty minutes later, she entered shuttle two, nodding to Zoë.

"Did they shoot at you any more?"

"No sign of them."

"Good."

"Ohhhh."

"What is it?"

"One of the bullets knocked a piece of the bulkhead through the hydraulics. We've got fluid all over the place. How did you get the grav-boot to work?"

"We didn't."

"Oh. Okay. It'll need to be welded. And I hope we have more fluid somewhere."

"Need any help?"

"No, thanks." She grinned. "Unless you want to help with the cleanup."

"I'll pass, thanks."

She pulled out the welder and goggles, setting them next to the bullet hole. Almost without thinking about it, she moved back to the engine to close the valve, then up to the controls to make sure that everything was powered off.

The drill was in her hand, bolt puller inserted, and then the panel was off, exposing the damaged line, fluid still dripping from it. She sighed and rubbed her hand along the bulkhead. "Poor li'l guy," she said.

Serenity: Med bay

"You've been wounded here before," he said, his probe hovering over the injury.

"Shrapnel," said the Captain. "Dhu-Kang. Is it the same spot?"

"Near enough."

"That a problem?"

"I don't know, yet. Can you not —?"

"Sorry."

The Captain visibly relaxed against the exam table and stared up at the ceiling.

Simon opened the wound and studied it. "Interesting," he said.

He felt the Captain looking at him.

"Oh, sorry. Clean entry and exit, but, it's odd."

"Doctor, there are certain sorts of pain your anesthetic isn't dealing with."

"Yes. Your previous injury, or, rather, the scar from your previous injury, pushed your artery a quarter of an inch to the left. Otherwise you might have bled to death before you got here."

"So then, that means I'm not going to bleed to death, right? I just ask on account of I'm interested."

"You'll be fine. I'm going to clean it out, sew you up, and you'll be ready to have more holes put in you."

"Good. I'm looking forward to that."

"Please try not to move your leg. It didn't miss the artery by all that much."

"Son, do you enjoy this?"

"Patching up bullet holes?"

"Well not that as much as, well, yes."

"Do you enjoy getting them put in you?"

"Not so much."

"There's a satisfaction when someone comes in —"

"I don't mean the afterward. I mean while you're doing it."

"Oh. Um, ask me another time. I'm sort of busy right now."

"That's what I thought."

CHAPTER 7

MY OWN KIND OF LOVE

Serenity: Bridge

She took herself up to the bridge, sat herself in the co-pilot's chair, and waited. She knew what was coming, and trying to avoid it would just make it worse. Her husband stared through the front window. Serenity was doing what Wash called "sleeping" – as close to a full shutdown as she could get without requiring hours to warm up. The comm was still up, though the keyboards and setting were locked, and if you concentrated, you could just feel the gentlest of vibrations. Everything was very quiet; the co-pilot's chair gave a squeak as she leaned back.

Eventually, he said, "I know you have to take risks."

"I hear a 'but' coming."

"But can't Mal manage to keep the risks down to what's necessary, instead of –"

"That's just what he does. I've never known the Captain to take an unnecessary risk."

"Now that's just not true."

"Well, okay. I've never known him to take risks he didn't think were justified."

"Like sending you out to get that shuttle when the woods were full of –"

"They were disorganized and confused, thanks to you. The best time to retrieve the shuttles was right then, before the enemy could regroup."

"Regroup. That's one of those army words, isn't it?"

"Sweetie, sarcasm is not one of your more endearing traits."

Wash muttered under his breath. Then he said, "Look, I think I've been very patient –"

"With what? With me being what I was when we met?"

He stared out at the trees and the sky for the space of several breaths. "You're right," he said.

She nodded.

"But I don't like it."

She nodded again.

"Is there ever going to be a time when we stop?"

"And do what?" she said. "Think you could be happy if you weren't flying?"

"No."

"Neither could I."

"Think you could be happy if you weren't almost getting killed quite so often?"

"How do you plan to arrange that? We work the border worlds, because that's where we can get jobs, and stay off the Alliance's radar. And that's how things are out here. We work for people looking for an edge, and that means sometimes they try to kill us for it."

"I know."

"I hate it when you look so glum."

"We've been paid, haven't we?"

She nodded.

"How long until we leave this rock?"

"That's up to the Captain."

"Any idea what the delay is?"

"I think he has to make a decision."

"What decision?"

"I'm not exactly sure." She wondered how much to say, then decided that the truth was probably the safest. "Something's bothering him, and I can't begin to figure out what it is."

He nodded.

She stood up from the co-pilot's chair, leaned over and kissed the back of his neck. He looked at her and his eyes were smiling. It did something to her when his eyes smiled like that.

"Want to head to the dining room?" he asked.

"Hungry?"

"I was thinking we could stop at the kitchen, pick up a snack, circle the dining room table to pick up some speed, then slant back to our bunk."

Her pulse quickened just a little. "My man, the navigator."

Serenity: Dining room

Simon nodded to Wash and Zoë as they entered the dining room and rummaged around briefly in the kitchen. They each gave him a quick smile, and maybe a bigger one to his sister, then they were gone, Wash walking around the table once, very somberly. From Zoë's expression and the wink she gave River, it was some sort of private joke between them.

With the exception of Jayne, who, it seemed, was no longer part of the crew, no one appeared to resent River. Everyone liked her. Sometimes, it seemed even the Captain liked her; at least, as much as he could like anyone.

At the moment, she was staring down at a plate of protein and soy and artificial pork flavoring, making designs in it with her chopsticks. Just like a four-year-old child, except that the designs were anything but random doodling: the movement of the chopsticks was deft, precise, and deliberate, using both of them like an artist using two brushes at once.

"What is that?" he asked her.

She stopped what she was doing and stared at it for a moment, frowning. She tilted her head, and the frown deepened. Then she picked up the plate and hurled it at the wall.

She stared at the place on the table where the plate had been.

"The distinction between abstract and representational art is arbitrary to the point

of meaningless. Only then why was the distinction ever made?"

Simon went into the kitchen and got a bucket and a sponge. He picked up the plate and started cleaning the wall, glad no one else had heard the noise and come to investigate. He felt his sister's eyes on his back.

"I'm sorry, Simon," she said.

He dropped the sponge in the bucket, sat down next to her, and put his arm around her. "It's all right, mei-mei." She leaned into his shoulder.

He said softly, "Can you tell me what it was you were drawing?"

"A map," she said.

"A map of what?"

She spoke into his chest. "How you get from a Colonel to a monster and back. But what good is a map when you aren't going anywhere?"

"We'll be leaving here soon, River."

"No, we won't."

"River —"

"But it's all right. You'll protect me. You always protect me."

There was a lump in Simon's throat.

He got up, went back to the bucket, and continued cleaning the wall. River found another sponge and knelt down to help him.

"Art," she said as they wiped it away.

Simon looked at her.

"It's the second person present singular form of the verb 'to be,'" she said.

"I knew that," he told her.

Serenity: Catwalk

The Captain was standing above the cargo bay, staring at nothing. "Hey, Cap'n," she said. "The shuttle is fixed, but I used the last of the fluid to refill her lines. We're going to have to get more."

He nodded, his eyes still fixed off in the distance.

She almost asked him what was wrong, but didn't. She continued back to the engine room, and, just because it made her nervous to be low on fluid, she checked all the hydraulics.

"Well, if that isn't . . ."

She shook her head in disgust. All that checking on the a-grav, and it was nothing more than low fluid in the control line. You'd think Wash would have noticed the control was sluggish. No, that wasn't fair; it was her job to keep up on these things.

And now they were out of fluid.

She rubbed the bulkhead. "I'm sorry, honey," she whispered. "Sometimes I'm just stupid."

She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. She could apologize to Serenity later; now she had to come up with a solution.

Solution.

Yes.

Just what exactly was the solution for hydraulic fluid, and how much tolerance was there? And could she rig up a filter for what she'd cleaned up from the spill? Well, sure; a filter would be easy enough: just take a spare intake filter and reverse spin on the wet-pull she'd used for the clean-up. The hose itself would work to channel it. And she only needed a little—just a bit more than a liter, most like.

She patted the bulkhead.

"Don't worry, hun. We'll have you fixed up right in no time."

Serenity's low, clear purr seemed to say that it was all right, that Serenity trusted her.

If anyone had asked, she'd have said that she knew very well that such feelings were all in her imagination. But she was glad no one was around to ask the question, because she hated lying.

Serenity: Shuttle two

As Kaylee headed back toward the Engine room, he made his way into the shuttle. He knew he didn't need to inspect her work, but he also knew she'd appreciate it if he did.

He saw the unrepaired, harmless indentations from the bullets, but saw no sign of Kaylee's repair work. She really was very good. He was gorram lucky to have her.

He left the shuttle, and crossed over into the other one, telling himself he ought to give it a once-over, just to make sure it was ready to go.

It was bare, empty, and functional, just like shuttle two, only more-so, because shuttle two had no memories of ever having been anything else.

Am I really still smelling incense in here, or is it my imagination? It has to be my imagination.

He sat down in the pilot's chair, and touched the controls.

He stood up again, balling up his fists and relaxing them again, shaking his head.

If Inara were here, she'd be calling him six kinds of an idiot for even thinking about doing anything but taking the money and blasting. And she'd be right.

And he'd make some remark about how much experience she had in this sort of thing, and then she'd give him that look . . .

He swallowed and looked down at his hands.

Stupid.

He *was* being stupid. Why waste time thinking about Inara, when he had decisions to make, decisions affecting his crew, his boat, his future.

And, put that way, the decision was easy. Zoë wouldn't hesitate: get out of the world. Wash and Kaylee wouldn't understand why he even had to think about it. The doctor might have an idea, if he thought about it, but he wouldn't think about it. And River, well, who knew how her mind worked anyway?

It ought to be an easy decision.

Except that for all Inara would tell him he was a fool to be thinking about it, she was the one he'd have trouble looking in the eye if he just let it alone.

What would he have told her, if she were here? Nothing. He would have done everything he could to avoid the conversation. "Well, you see, Inara, it turns out this guy who hired us is a real, first-class bastard. In his own way, worse than Niska. Forced

indenture. You know what that means? That's slavery under another name, Inara. He's running his mines on slave labor. Sure, all we did is bring him wood, but then we saved the life of a fed who was trying to shut him down. And now I have to decide if that means we're involved in this. And if we are involved, how?"

What would she say? Nothing, because he wouldn't have had that conversation with her. He'd have said, "I'm just pondering some things."

And she'd have put most of it together, gorram her anyway. And she'd have said something snide, and he'd have gotten mad, but part of him would have listened, and —

And when had he assigned the role of conscience to a —

The word refused to quite form in his mind. He almost laughed, realizing it. He'd called her that to her face often enough, but now when she wasn't even on the boat, he couldn't.

Shipboard romances complicate things.

But they ought to stop complicating things when they were over.

He wondered what she was doing right now. Then he guessed, and started to smash his fist into the bulkhead. He stopped as he imagined trying to explain the injury to the doctor, and the damage to the bulkhead to Kaylee.

He turned abruptly and left the shuttle, making his way to the Engine room, where Kaylee was doing something incomprehensible involving the wetpull.

"The shuttle looks good, Kaylee," he said.

"Thanks, Cap'n. If you can give me a couple of hours, I should have the I-grav smoothed out. Though it isn't really important. I can always —"

"A couple of hours? We can do that."

A couple of hours more to make up his mind; that was good. He could use the time to wrestle with his conscience. He chuckled.

"What did you say, Cap'n?"

"Hmmm? Oh, nothing, I was just muttering to myself."

A whore for a conscience indeed!

He took himself to the bridge long enough to make sure the boat was securely buttoned up, then went back to his bunk to lie down, close his eyes, and try to think.

CHAPTER 8

MY OWN KIND OF LIE

Serenity: Wash and Zoë's quarters

He gave Zoë a kiss on the cheek, got up, and dressed. She rolled over and sighed. He smiled, made his way to the bridge, and leaned back in the pilot's chair. He partially woke up Serenity and did some checks: nothing on the perimeter, no transmissions had come in. Good.

He tapped the intercom. "How we doing, Kaylee?"

After about ten seconds, her voice came back. "Just about there. She should be smoother into and out of real grav now. If you can give me another ten minutes, she'll be ready to fly."

"Okay. So far as I know, we aren't going anywhere right away."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I wish I knew."

He sat facing the front window.

There had been times he had wanted to smack Mal hard. There had been times he would probably have done so, if he hadn't known that Mal could and would have pummeled him into the deck without breaking a sweat. But this was different; there was something wrong with Mal, and whatever it was, it was working its way through every aspect of life on Serenity. It was like trying to fly with controls that might do what you expected, or might do something entirely different. No one could fly like that.

He'd been scared before. Many times. He'd been scared the first time he'd soloed, on his first (and only) combat mission, and more times than he could count since joining this crew. But this was different; this was intangible, and therefore much worse; this was a fear he couldn't look at it. *Something* was wrong, and therefore *something bad* was liable to happen, and there was no telling what.

He stared out through the window, wishing he had some sort of idea, until one of the small red lights below the nav started flashing.

Serenity: Mal's quarters

The intercom crackled and Wash's voice emerged from it. "Mal, we have a visitor."

His eyes still closed, he found the button, pushed it. "I'll be right up."

He opened his eyes, heaved himself up and made his way to the bridge. Wash was staring at the console, fine tuning.

"Some sort of armored vehicle," he said. "About half a click away, coming on slow. Should I deploy the guns?"

"We don't have any guns."

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting that. Why don't we have any guns?"

"How long to warm up and go?"

"Uh . . . two minutes, if Kaylee is ready."

If Kaylee is ready, thought Mal. Well, she'd said a couple of hours, and that usually meant ninety minutes. He checked the clock, then hit the intercom.

"Kaylee, we ready?"

"Any time, Cap'n."

"Take us up as soon as you can, Wash?"

"Out of the world?" he asked, even as he was running through the warm up.

"No, we're just going to scoot a bit."

Wash didn't answer. It looked like something was bothering him, but there was no time to worry about it now.

"Wash, give me sound."

It took Mal a moment to identify the sound of trees rustling in the wind, followed by a low motorized hum.

"Is it in sight yet, Wash?"

"Uh . . . no. But it has to be close. I'm trying to bring it . . . there it is."

"Yeah, all right. Armored car, single-mount squatter on it. Could be worse."

"How?"

"Well, the squat could be pointed at us."

"Isn't it . . . ?"

"Yeah, it's turning. Are we warm?"

"We're warm."

"Go."

Wash pushed the throttle and a roar filled the bridge.

"*Mafan ni ba waitou de shengyin guandiao*, Mal?" said Wash.

Mal reached forward clicked off the external, and the sound abruptly died.

"Thank you," said Wash.

"Bring us up to five clicks."

Zoë came in to the bridge. "So, we're leaving?"

"We're avoiding a squatter," said Mal.

"A squatter, sir?" Zoë frowned, and Mal saw her mind working

"Mounted on what looked like a frog, unmodified."

Mal watched her mind work, reconstructing the frog, and when they'd last faced one, and putting things together, and then deciding not to ask any questions.

"Bring us to the other side of town, then set us down."

"Mal, you think it was Sakarya?"

Count on Wash to ask the question Zoë chose not to.

"If it isn't, I'm curious about who else has access to old military gear. If it is, I'm curious about why he bothered paying us first."

"Oh. Good then," said Wash. "And just why are we setting down again, seeing as how we're paid and all?"

Count on Wash to ask the question Zoë had been choosing not to ask all day.

"The client," he said at last. "Sakarya. There are things about him, what he's doing. I want to find out a little more before we leave."

"Oh, you mean, he might not be a real nice guy, like most of the people we work for?"

Mal glanced at him, but didn't answer.

"Mal, when did this become our business?"

"When — "

He broke off. "Just set us down, Wash."

"Yes, sir, Captain, sir."

Mal clamped his mouth shut. He felt Zoë not looking at him. Serenity began her descent.

"Huh," said Wash. "I don't know what Kaylee did, but this is smoother. I hadn't even noticed the jerkiness until it was gone."

Serenity touched the ground with barely a nudge, then settled like a cat.

"Want her to sleep, Mal?"

"Same as before. Save some fuel. I don't expect to be off world for a while, yet."

"Then you've decided, sir?" said Zoë.

"I've decided I at least want to know more. We'll stay here and get some sleep until morning, and see if they come back. If they do, take us up again."

"Mal, why don't we do some checking on this guy? I can at least see what's public on the Cortex."

"No, there's no point . . . yes there is. Good idea. Do that."

What am I afraid I'll find out? he wondered.

Serenity: Dining room

The next morning, when Simon thought he was the only one awake, Zoë came walking through the dining room, a distracted look on her face.

He said, "Are we taking off soon?" Zoë stopped and looked at him. He continued, "We seem to have gone up, then back down. I'm wondering — "

"I don't know. We learned something, but I don't know what effect it will have on the Captain's decision."

"Learned something? You mean, in the last few minutes?"

"Last night. Wash did some checking on the Cortex."

"Oh. What did we learn?"

"We learned that Sakarya is a right bastard."

"Sakarya?"

"The guy we delivered the lumber for."

"Oh. What difference does that make? I mean, we've worked for plenty of right bastards before."

"Not on this level. He owns everything on this side of the mountain, and runs it like a slave camp. They dig the bauxite, send it away for processing, and move the topsoil to his farms. He's making money hand over fist from the mines here, and slave-labor on the farms. Most of the kids work on the farms."

"Kids?"

"Ages eight and up. Sometimes younger, if they're big."

"Aren't there laws against that?"

"Supposedly. Anyway, it isn't pretty. In Yuva, where he lives, we don't see the worst of it. I don't think we want to."

"I still don't see —"

"Neither do I. There's something more, and I haven't figured out what it is."

"Something more?"

"The Captain is, well, it's like something's bitten him. It isn't just being here, there's something else. Something he saw on the Cortex."

"Didn't you —?"

"He quashed it after he looked at it."

"You could —"

"Yes, but I won't."

"What did you mean about being here?"

"This world. Hera."

"What is it . . . Oh. Yes. This is where it is, isn't it?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Serenity Valley. It's here, isn't it?"

"Other side of the world."

He nodded. "Is that affecting the Captain? I mean, being here again?"

"This is the second time we've been here since the war. It didn't seem to bother him much the first time."

"That's something I'm never going to understand. I mean, what it must have been like."

"No, you never will."

"What about you? I mean, does it affect you to be back here?"

"Are you a trauma specialist, or a psychiatrist, doctor?"

"Just curious."

"Can you be curious about something else?"

"Yes. Are we going to be out of here before the feds show up looking for River?"

"Has the Captain ever failed to see that River was safe since you signed on?"

"No. But the Captain hasn't been himself lately."

"As long as he hasn't become Jayne, I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"It's hard not to worry."

"How has she been?"

They always asked that, and he never knew how to answer. How has she been? Compared with what? Ten years ago? Ten minutes ago? Did they want to know if she was recovering, or just if she were about to do something crazy?

"There haven't been any, uh, incidents. But she says things that I can't follow, but that I'm sure make a sort of sense to her. It's like trying to crack a code."

"That's been going on for a while."

"More since we landed here. She talks about ghosts, and maps."

Zoë nodded. "If she's looking for ghosts, she came to the right world."

"I imagine. But when she talks about ghosts, I don't know, it doesn't make sense."

"No, ghosts don't make sense. What's your point?"

"Shepherd Book told me about a time she tore his Bible apart. Literally. Ripped pages out of it, because it didn't make sense."

"And?"

"And how do you rip apart the Bible because it doesn't make sense, but still believe in ghosts?"

Zoë leaned against the table, folded her arms, and studied him. "Doctor, aren't you asking too much, when you expect her to be consistent?"

He sighed. How to explain? He'd been more and more getting the feeling that, in her own way, she *was* consistent. But Zoë wasn't someone who responded well to people having feelings about things.

"I think she's using 'ghost' as a metaphor," he said at last.

"A metaphor for what?"

"I don't know. Maybe something she's afraid of."

"So, what is she afraid of?"

"Being caught and sent back."

Zoë nodded.

"And," said Simon, "I think she's afraid I'll resent her."

"Do you?"

"Are you a soldier, or a psychiatrist?"

"Just curious. Do you resent her?"

"No"

"I heard a 'but' there."

"I'm afraid someday I might."

"Let someday take care of itself, doctor. We have to worry about today."

"I know," he said. "I know."

Serenity: Engine room

"Well nuts," she said to the empty engine room. "We never cleared atmo; how am I supposed to know if this works?"

Serenity was back on the ground, and seemed as disappointed about it as Kaylee. Serenity wanted to fly; she enjoyed flying. Sitting on the ground was something she had to do once in a while to get the wherewithal she needed to swim through the black.

Kaylee sighed.

She re-checked her work on the I-grav, and it seemed fine. What kept going through her mind was what would happen if she'd made some silly mistake: the first sign would be a shimmy, and then Wash would notice that he was having trouble getting lift, and then the grav-boot would just quit, and then

Wash was a good enough pilot to give them a good landing on jets alone; she was sure of it.

But it wasn't about crashing and dying; Serenity would never do that. It was about all the little things that, if she got them wrong, might leave Serenity where she was now, on the ground; might leave her consigned to the scrap heap, and all of them without a home. The Captain took care of the crew, but without the ship, there was no crew to take care of; and that meant, suddenly, she was no more. They were all nowhere.

She hated these times when they were just sitting, giving her too much time to think.

She re-checked her work on the I-grav one more time.

Serenity: River's room

Sometimes she dreamed that they were staring at her, from the inside. Sometimes she dreamed that they were walking around inside of her, poking her with needles. Sometimes she dreamed that Serenity was inside of her mind, which was inside of the Academy, which was inside of her mind. When that happened, she became confused.

Then she'd wake up, and she'd feel the drugs running through her, and she'd wonder what they were doing. She'd become lucid, for a while, and remind herself that she had to trust her brother, but then he would change into hands with tubes and needles, and she'd see things with her ears, or know things without knowing how; there would be voices that the drugs couldn't keep quiet.

Sometimes the voices just spoke; sometimes they whispered, and sometimes they sang. When they spoke, it was to ask her questions she didn't understand. When they whispered, it was secrets she didn't want to know. When they sang, it was all numbers, and she heard the truth of the numbers but didn't dare believe them.

And then the voices would be quiet again, leaving her with the drugs and the memories of white tile and steel and long tubes and sensations that wouldn't go into any categories, leaving her inside of herself like a cat in a rain-soaked cardboard box.

Then the effects of the drugs would fade, leaving her with only her memories. Then she would huddle on her bed and shiver.

Serenity: Cargo bay

She stood there and waited; he appeared in about three minutes. "I'm ready, sir," she said.

"So I see. What are you ready for?"

"To go look around, see if we can find out what's going on."

"I do believe I'm becoming predictable."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's go, then."

The doors slid open, and for the hundredth time, she noticed how slowly the ramp seemed to descend at times like this. For the hundredth time, she wondered how it was that she was still alive, not to mention having the use of both eyes, both ears, and all four limbs. Hell, she wasn't even all that scarred up.

And her man liked the scars she had.

Focus, Zoë!

"Town is that way."

Zoë nodded, turned to match the Captain's stride, then stopped. The Captain went on a pace, then stopped himself. "What is it, Zoë?"

"Sir, did you leave instructions?"

"Instructions for —?"

"For when that big moving cannon shows up here and starts shooting at Serenity while we're in town."

The Captain blinked. "Right. Those instructions." He picked up his portable comm unit. "Wash?"

It crackled. "Yes, Mal?"

"Keep the boat warm. If there's trouble, get up and out and keep the ship safe."

"All right."

"Wash?"

"Yes?"

"That's an order."

"Okay."

"That means that, if you decide to ignore it again, and put my boat at risk, I will come back and break both of your arms."

"Mal, I can't fly with broken arms."

"Make it legs, then."

"Okay, legs I can deal with."

"Wash, do it."

"All right. Understood."

"Say it back."

"If there's trouble here, I'll get Serenity up and safe."

"Out." He clicked off the comm. "Think he'll do it, Zoë?"

"Fifty-fifty, sir."

"*Gaisi fanshang de wangba . . .* All right."

They continued walking toward Yuva. The weight of the weapon at her hip comforted her.

"Sir, mind if I ask what we're going to do?"

"Don't mind at all."

After another half a dozen steps she said, "I take it that you don't have a plan."

"Don't I always have a plan?"

"No, sir. You usually make it up as you go."

"That's not true. I've had a lot of plans."

"Yes, sir."

"It's just that they don't always work out exactly."

"Yes, sir."

"My plan, such as it is, is to poke around and see if something comes up. In particular, I'd like to have a talk with Jayne."

"With Jayne, sir?"

"Do you know how much of this he set off?"

"No"

"Neither do I. And I'd like to."

"What do you think he might have done?"

"What were we all thinking he'd do?"

"Call in the feds on River and the doctor. But how could that have had anything to do with this?"

"I have no idea. And I'm a bit curious too. Aren't you?"

"Now that you mention it, yes I am."

They continued walking.

How often had she wondered what would happen if and when she and Jayne had to face off? Well, now it might happen. She discovered that she was mildly curious, but not especially nervous about the idea.

"Any worries, Zoë?"

"Worries, sir?"

"About Jayne."

How did he keep doing that?

"No, sir."

No, a fight with Jayne wasn't what she was worried about; that would go as it went. But, as she walked, she did what she had done a hundred times before: she prayed to a God in whom she just barely believed that she wouldn't let the Captain down.

CHAPTER 9

MY OWN KIND OF CHOICES

Yuva: Canteen

The door to the canteen swung open at noon, and he and Zoë were waiting. The bartender, keys still in his hand, glanced over his shoulder as they entered. "Well," he said, "off to an early – oh."

"I see you remember us, Mark."

He stopped a few feet from the bar, his eyes went to the comm unit next to the cash box, then he turned back. "Mal, and Zoë."

"You have a good memory for names."

"I'm not looking for trouble."

"Shiny," said Mal. "We didn't bring any."

"All right. I'm going back behind the bar now."

"No one is stopping you. I would take it as a kindness if you didn't make any calls, though."

The bartender nodded, went behind the bar, and closed the flap that completed it. He dropped the keys next to the register, and turned around, moving slowly as if he had weapons trained on him. Mal and Zoë had kept their weapons holstered, but Mark clearly hadn't forgotten.

"Okay," he said. "What's your pleasure?"

"Just a question or two."

His eyes narrowed. "All right, ask."

"There was a fellow in here last night. Big, heavy drinker, stranger. You asked if we were with him –"

"I know who you mean."

"We're looking for him."

"He should be easy to find."

Mal felt Zoë looking at him. Although she probably didn't realize it, that look meant the bartender was safe; she'd never have taken her eyes off him otherwise. "Care to explain what you mean?"

"He's either at the aid station or the lockdown. I think the lockdown; he didn't seem to be hurt too bad."

"What happened?"

The other shrugged. "He got drunk, took a swing at me, started beating on customers. I had to call the Locals. If he was a friend of yours, I'm sorry. I didn't have

any choice. He should have had his drink down the hill, with the miners, if he wanted to cut loose. He was busting up – "

"No," said Mal. "He's no friend. But I would like to talk to him. Any idea what the charges will be?"

"Drunk and disorderly, I suppose."

"Okay. I should see about the fine."

The bartender shifted on his feet, and looked down at the bar. "Uh, Mal"

"Mmm?"

"That isn't how things work here."

Mal studied him, then looked at Zoë, and then back. "Okay. Maybe you'd best go ahead and explain how things do work here."

Yuva: Town jail

He managed to reach the aluminum toilet before his stomach emptied himself. He straightened up, reached the aluminum sink, and rinsed out his mouth. The taste of the water made it only barely an improvement. He made it back to the aluminum bench and stretched.

He closed his eyes, opened them, and cursed long and creatively. He took an inventory of his pains, and nothing hurt too much; the worst were the knuckles of his right hand, where he'd clocked that fat *lūzi de jiba*.

There was a rattle, a pause, and the door swung out. They were good – they looked before opening the door – but they unlocked it first, so they weren't all that good.

But he wasn't about to try anything now; he wasn't in shape for it, and didn't know enough.

When the door opened, there was an unarmed guard there. He swung to his feet, and saw an armed guard a few paces behind him. Okay, so they knew their business.

"Jayne Cobb?" said the guard.

Jayne waited.

"Is your name Jayne Cobb?"

He continued waiting. The guard shrugged. "You're charged with two counts of battery and one charge of public drunkenness. Anything to say? If you aren't Jayne Cobb, now's the time to say so, except I was on duty last night when you were hauled in, so it doesn't much matter."

"Anything to say? What, you're my judge?"

The guard nodded. "We handle minor administrative matters at this level. If you'd killed someone, we'd have to – "

"Do I get a – "

"No."

Jayne glared at him. "Well, you just do what you do."

The guard nodded, and read from a clipboard. "Jayne Cobb, you are hereby sentenced to five weeks of indenture to Heracorp – "

"Indenture?" Jayne rose to his feet. The second guard took a step forward and swung his shotgun so it was a bit closer to pointing toward Jayne.

He estimated his chances. He didn't like them. He shrugged. Five weeks in the mines wouldn't be any fun, but he'd lived through worse. "All right," he said. "Maybe

we'll have a talk when I get out."

The guard smirked.

Jayne wasn't always the best at reading people, but he knew what a smirk meant. He glared at the guard.

"All right, how does it work?"

"How does what wo—"

"Hump that fayyu. How do they do it?"

Yuva: Canteen

"It varies," said Mark, "but there's always something. Maybe you show up five minutes late for work, that's another six months. Maybe you leave for lunch a minute early, that's another six. Pushing another worker, two months; pushing at a guard, another year. Obscenity—"

"Okay," said Mal. "How do they get away with that?"

"Who's going to stop him?"

"What, does he have an army backing him?"

"Call it a large security force."

"Huh."

The bartender reached under the counter, but emerged with nothing more than a damp cloth, with which he absently attacked some of the splotches on the stainless steel counter in front of him. "What about you?" he said.

"Hmmm?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Delivering cut maple."

"Ahh." The bartender smiled.

"You know what it's for?"

"It's for me. I've been wanting a new place, and he's been promising me one for most of a year now. A real saloon, made of good wood. Know what I mean? And I want swinging doors, holo windows, a dart board, a flyball booth, maybe a couple of pool tables. So, what was that ruckus about last night? Those two guys you picked on were on Mister Sakarya's private security staff."

Mal felt a quick glance from Zoë, and checked his tongue, then said, "A personal matter."

"For your sake, I hope it stays personal."

"I'm like to feel the same way. Where is the lockdown?"

"Back of the security office, just down the street."

"The security office for the company?"

"That's right."

"They house the lockdown for the Locals?"

The bartender nodded.

"Well. You have to like it that they make no effort to hide it."

Mark stared down at the rag in his hand.

Mal shrugged, nodded to Zoë, and they made their way out the door.

"Sir—"

"I need to talk to Jayne."

"Sir, tell me you aren't thinking about breaking Jayne out of a lockdown."

"I just need to talk to him."

"And when they don't let us see him, which they won't?"

"We'll think of something."

"Think of something, sir?"

"Yep."

"Okay. Well. Smear me with engine grease and call me Kaylee. I'm just full of optimism."

"There it is; that's the security office. Are we supposed to knock?"

"Couldn't say, sir."

They went in. Two men sat behind desks, facing each other. Both looked up as they entered.

"Good afternoon," said Mal. "Can you tell me where to find the lockdown?"

The bigger of the two said, "You want to be put in jail?"

"Not exactly," said Mal. "There's someone you have here. How do I arrange to visit him?"

The two security officers looked at each other.

Two minutes later, they walked out again.

"Don't say it, Zoë."

"I have to, sir."

Mal sighed. "All right. Say it."

"Now is when you need to think of something."

"Feel better?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

He stopped when they got back to the street, not sure which way to turn.

"He has an army, sir."

"A small one, sure."

"To pull a jailbreak would be suicide."

"Did you see that place? You and I could walk in there and walk out with him."

"Then what? They have an *army*, sir."

"Well, I suppose they do, kind of."

"You don't owe Jayne anything."

"It isn't about owing Jayne, it's about needing to ask him some questions."

"Sir, what makes you think he'll answer?"

"If we break him out of jail, he'll answer."

"Would you mind telling me what you want to ask him?"

"I'd like to find out what he might have done that set all this off."

"I think it's safe to say he tried to call in the Alliance to get the reward on River and Simon."

"I'm sure he did, Zoë. Then what happened?"

"You think he'd know?"

"All right, Zoë. How would you suggest we find out?"

"I'd suggest, sir, that we don't. That we get back to Serenity and get off this gorram world."

"Can't do that, Zoë."

"*Anzhao yi tou bei yange de liniu de shuzui xiwang* why not?"

He closed his eyes. "Let's go back to the canteen and have a beer while I think about this."

"Yes, sir. I'm good with two out of three."

Yuva

She matched paces with the Captain as they headed the short block toward the canteen. Her eyes never stopped moving, and her mind never stopped working.

She was, by now, very much aware that there was more than one thing going on. Yes, the Captain had been behaving oddly ever since Inara had left; but that wasn't all of it. There was something else, and it was something that could get the Captain killed – not to mention Wash, herself, and the rest of the crew.

She was also very much aware that she was closer to the Captain than anyone else: she knew him better, and he'd accept things from her that he wouldn't from anyone else. But there were lines that she'd never crossed, and he had put those lines there for a reason. She knew why the walls were there; she had her own walls that permitted her to live in Serenity Valley. It had taken a long series of accidents and tremendous effort to let Wash inside as far as he was. And Wash understood enough of those barriers and lines to respect them, and to love her anyway; that was how they survived.

The Captain didn't have anyone; had consistently pushed away Inara when she'd come to close to them.

And now, it seemed, she was going to have to break those lines, or jump right over them, or none of them would get out of this.

She wasn't sure she could do it.

The Captain opened the door, and they entered the Canteen.

Yuva: Town jail

The cell door shut with a clang. They'd be back in a while, after "processing" him, and then it was off to the mines. Was he going to have better chances of making a break here, or from the mine itself? Well, making the attempt here didn't mean he couldn't try later. And getting off the world, or at least off the continent, was going to be a problem in any case.

If he had the chance, he should stop by the public lockers and pick up his bags; he wanted his guns, and the cash from selling that ginseng might make the difference. Good thing he'd nabbed it.

Out of habit, he looked around the cell for anything that might become a weapon. The chair, the bed, the toilet, and the sink were all one piece and built in. The drain in the floor was welded.

He was wearing a one-piece, light blue cover-all that closed with Velcro.

On the positive side, he knew the procedure they used when opening his cell. He had a pretty good chance of taking them both out, if he was fast. Then he'd be armed. After that . . .

How many were there? And what gorram direction did he need to go? Maybe, from the hall, he could see. The building wasn't all that big; how hard could it be?

He closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and tried to think.

This sort of thing just never was his strength; that's why he'd always hooked up with someone else to do the planning, to do the figuring. That's why it had worked so well with this last crew, up until Mal had decided to be a *ru aixiao de zacao de chui xia*

yinjing about the gorram ginseng.

No point in thinking about that now. No point in thinking about what he wasn't good at, he had to concentrate on what he was going to do.

The door rattled, clunked, and opened.

His idea of a sudden lunge at the door vanished at once; there was a whole crowd back there.

"Here he is," said one of them.

A fat man stepped forward and said, "Ah. You."

It took Jayne a moment, but he recognized one of the two security officers from when he made the call to the Feds. "What the gorram hell do *you* want?"

"You're a popular man, Mister Cobb."

"Yeah. They put up a statue of me on —"

"Pay attention. You might be able to get out of this."

Jayne glared. "All right, I'm listening."

"It'll take some talking. Stand up and hold out your hands."

He hesitated, looked at the odds again, and cooperated. They manacled his wrists, then attached those to fetters, and locked both to his belt, permitting him to take small steps, and hardly to move. They led him out of the cell, three in front of him, two behind. The two behind him held shotguns, and he could tell by their footsteps that he wouldn't have had much of a chance to get to them even if he hadn't been hobbled.

He kept close track of where they'd gone anyway, just in case.

They reached a small office. The fat one gestured Jayne inside, then said, "Wait here," to the others, and shut the door.

"Go ahead, Mister Cobb. Sit down. Let's see if we can do some business."

"You got the guns. I'm listening."

"Did you know you're wanted for questioning in the murder of an Alliance officer, and aiding the escape of two fugitives?"

"What? I never killed no —"

"Maybe not, but one was found dead in a hospital on Ariel, with skin under his fingernails that matches your DNA."

Jayne felt a scowl growing on his face, and tried his best to suppress it.

"Fortunately," the officer continued, "we're not Alliance. We don't much care what you did on Ariel. We have you good for what you did right here."

"What, getting drunk?"

"Didn't they tell you the charges?"

"They told me."

"So you understand your situation."

"What's the gorram offer?"

"Yesterday, you came into my office and demanded contact with the Alliance, and then we find you have a record of having murdered a Federal officer."

The office had a glass window, and didn't look like it was intended to be secure. But there were those restraints. This guy had the key. He measured the distance across the desk.

"So what's going on with you and the Alliance?"

"What, I tell you that, and you let me go?"

"Let's just say it's a start."

"What's the rest?"

The officer shook his head. "No. Tell us what you know, then we'll talk."

Jayne considered his options. There appeared to be exactly two: he could tell them what he knew, and hope they kept up their end of the bargain, or he could lunge across the desk at this guy, hoping to take him down in spite of the restraints, and get a weapon from him, and get himself unlocked before reinforcements showed up, and then fight his way out.

Either way, he didn't like it much.

Yuva: Warehouse

He leaned back in his chair, staring at pictures of Simon and River Tam, along with pertinent facts. On another screen was the translated readout of a secure and heavily coded file detailing certain relationships between Parliament and the Blue Sun Corporation.

Special Deputies dispatched to Yuva, on Hera.

Yeah, okay, great.

Now what?

He deleted all references to his research, and certainly the results, from his machine, and then went over it again to remove the electronic traces that he'd even been looking for them. He was thorough; it took a good two hours to do, but this was something he was good at. When he was finished, all the information he'd gathered was gone.

Except that he still remembered it.

Now what?

Serenity: River's room

Two by two, hands of blue.

They were coming. And if they reached her, they would take her back, and she'd never get out again.

She didn't want to go back. More than anything, she didn't want to go back.

But there were the ghosts, too.

She had told them about the ghosts, but they hadn't listened. They couldn't listen, because they didn't have the math to understand, and she recognized that the one skill she didn't have was that of a teacher. The Shepherd had been able to teach, but his path of probability had led to different intersections, so now there was no one to teach, and they had to learn if they were to deal with the ghosts.

She couldn't deal with the ghosts, because they weren't her ghosts. She could maybe help them deal with the ghosts, but if she did

Two by two, hands of blue.

She didn't hear him come in, but when she looked up, he was there, his face, as always, smiling, and worried.

"Mei-mei, are you all right?"

He asked it as if it were a question that could be answered, as if an infinity of variables could be encompassed in a single constant. She struggled to translate, to simplify, to determine essence, and to rephrase the question into terms that could become a single, determinate answer that he would understand, and that would be as

little a lie as she could manage.

"I'm torn between probability vectors with mutually exclusive benefits and the likely destruction of different targets and I can't find a trajectory that avoids all of the negative outcomes without a radical shift in the entire matrix, which we haven't the capability to carry out anyway, and I have a headache."

Simon hesitated. "I'll get you something for the headache," he said.

Yuva: Canteen

Mark gave them their beers and then acted as if they'd never met. Mal led Zoë to a corner table and sat down.

"It's a bad idea, sir," she said.

"Most like it is."

"Okay. How are we going to do it?"

"I guess we should see if Wash can find us a layout of the local lockdown."

He felt Zoë studying him. "You don't like this either, do you sir?"

"Not all that much."

"Is it really necessary?"

"Your beer's getting warm."

"Thank you, sir. I wouldn't want to get killed with the taste of warm beer in my mouth."

"Zoë —"

"Maybe I should order a raw egg."

"Zoë--"

"Think they have raw eggs here? I mean, real ones?"

"Zoë —"

"A fake egg in my beer before dying wouldn't be at all the same thing. Don't you agree, sir?"

"Zoë, what the gorram hell are you doing?"

"Trying to figure out what the gorram hell *you* are doing, sir. I can't back your play if I can't see it."

"Zoë, I can't —"

"You need to let me in, sir. I can't help from the outside. Not this time."

Mal leaned back in his chair and stared at his beer, trying to keep all expression off his face, so Zoë wouldn't see that he was feeling the walls closing in. She waited, silent, with all the patience she'd learned in the war, waiting for attacks that they knew were coming, but never knew when or what form they'd take.

Patience was a powerful force. They drank their beers and waited for each other. Eventually, Mal started speaking.

Serenity: Bridge

The alarm never went off.

The first warning he had, less than a minute after disconnecting with Mal, was when Serenity shook and pitched about three degrees to starboard before righting herself again.

"*Wang ba dan*," he said, his hands already finding the emergency warm-up sequence. With his first spare fraction of a second he punched the intercom and said, "Kaylee!" and checked to see which indicators were blinking red, which were solid red, and which were green.

The grav-boot was still good, the engines would fire, and —

In less time than it took to think about it, Serenity was off the ground. She wasn't happy about it; she moaned, and the controls fought him and complained, and he didn't dare leave atmo. But they were airborne before whatever it was that had happened had time to happen again.

Kaylee's voice came back. "I'm looking."

"Hull integrity is breached, so we can't get too high, but I can go up. I need to know if I can count on all my attitude adjusters."

"Top of the list, then. Ninety seconds."

"Go."

Her voice sounded icy calm.

Serenity fought him; a sensation he liked not at all; somewhere not too far below the surface was the panic you feel when you try to open your eyes but they're already open; when you reach for a glass and your arm doesn't move. And not too far below that was the memory of the one other time he'd felt controls act like this; and the knowledge that there was no ejecting from Serenity.

Three kilometers up the air was noticeably thinner; the ship tried to grasp and claw at what there was, and hated it that there was nothing to hold on to.

Kaylee's voice came back. "I found your control problems. Half the starboard extender is gone."

"Copy that, Kaylee."

Damn. If it was the whole extender; or, better yet, both extenders, this would be much easier. No wonder she was fighting herself.

"I'll get you more when I have it."

He didn't dare take her any higher. And he wasn't terribly excited about trying to land her. And he couldn't keep control of her of this way for much longer.

His whole body was committed to keeping her in the air; leaving his mind free to reflect on which way to go, when all the ways led the same way: down, and much too fast.

CHAPTER 10

MY OWN KIND OF COURAGE

Yuva: Jail

"So then, Mister Cobb—if that's your name—what will it be? Spend the rest of your life digging bauxite, or answer a very simple question?"

"I don't know. Sounds kinda complicated to me. I'm a pretty simple guy at heart."

"Of course, you might not be digging bauxite; you might be hauling topsoil. A sack at a time, on your back. That sound like fun?"

"I always did like the outdoors."

"I'm losing patience, Mister Cobb."

"Yeah, well you're breaking my heart, Mister—what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't."

"Well, ain't we gonna be friends?"

The officer's mouth worked, then he said, "Rennes. Officer Rennes."

"Yeah, well my heart is breaking, Officer Rennes."

"It isn't your heart we're going to break."

"Careful. If you scare me, I might faint."

"You aren't in any bargaining position, Mister Cobb. If you don't want to tell us, that's fine. We don't need to know."

"That's ruttin' good, because I don't need to tell you."

"Are you sure, Mister Cobb?"

"Yeah, tell you what. I'll answer your questions *gen wo de jiba jiangu de cha zai ni de zuiba*."

Officer Rennes punched a button on his desk. "Come take this man back to his cell," he said. Then he shook his head, sat back, and folded his arms.

Serenity: Engine room

It took her about five minutes to conclude that there was no way to fix the extender without landing, so she turned her attention to the ugly hole in the aft hull, starboard side. It had come right through to the Engine room, not three feet from her hammock.

Wash's voice came through. "Kaylee, is there anything you can do to give me some stability? I can't hold this much longer, and there's no way we survive a landing like this."

"I could maybe boost the attitude adjusters, but I'd have to run them parallel to the thrusters."

"Which means?"

"More engine, more juice, more I-grav, more gees, more thrust, more power on attitude, less control, more—"

"Okay, I get it. How long to set it up?"

"I don't know. I've never tried it before. The engine's going to cut out while I'm hooking it up."

"Kaylee" She could hear the strain in his voice. She'd never heard that from him before. "If the engine cuts out, we die."

"I'm only talking about half a second or so, while I switch lines."

"Half a second? Okay, maybe I can hold her. Set it up, but let me know before you do it."

"I will."

"And Kaylee, it would be very helpful you could hurry on this."

"It'd be easier out of atmo, so we'd stop bucking."

"Kaylee, I can't hold this much longer, and the airtight won't respond from here."

"I'll go close it; I'm right there."

"*Chui lei fo, ni jiu shi!* Kaylee, get your pressure suit on!"

"I know that, Wash. I will."

"First!"

"All right. Give me a minute to get suited, then I'll work on the AT lines."

"Hurry."

No question about it. Wash was scared. Kaylee would have been too, only there was no time.

Yuva: Canteen

"Okay, Zoë. We ready to do this thing?"

"Ready."

On the table in front of him were the notes from Wash about the layout of the security office, and the lockdown behind it. He gave the notes a last look, folded them up and put them in a pocket, then stood up. Zoë was with him.

They exchanged nods with Mark on the way out of the canteen.

They reached North Street; there wasn't a great deal of activity. As they approached the security office, Zoë said, "That wasn't there before, was it?"

"Nope."

"Looks like the sort of thing you'd transport a prisoner in, doesn't it, sir?"

"Yep."

"We might be too late."

"It's possible."

They were within fifty feet of the hovercraft when the office door opened, and there was Jayne: shackled, fettered, with a guard in front and one at each side.

"Or we could have come at just the right time," said Mal.

"We changing plans sir?"

"Don't we always?"

"Pretty much."

"What do you think about taking the hovercraft?"

"Should work."

"You get the driver."

As it went down, Mal decided, it played out far smoother, and even slicker than it had any right to: the security guards loaded Jayne into the back of the 'craft, by which time Zoë had secured the driver. The security guards locked the door and found Mal's weapon pointing at them. A few words were exchanged, and the three security officers were on the

ground with their hands clasped behind their necks.

Mal stopped long enough to remove a set of keys from one of them, hoping they were the right ones but not caring too much, then he climbed into the passenger seat, and they were out of there before he had time to close the door.

Then he flipped on his comm and said, "Wash, get her warmed up."

His only response was static.

He boosted the signal and tried again. Then boosted it still more, and then maxed it.

Wash's voice, when it came through, was very faint.

"Yeah, Mal. Well, there have been some developments."

"Wash, where are you?"

"About seven clicks from your position."

"All right."

"Straight up."

Yuva: Outside the jail

He pulled himself to his feet, muttering generalized curses toward the driver of the 'craft. They'd taken off before he'd even had time to sit, knocking him onto the floor. He made it to one of the opposing sets of built-in steel benches, and sat down.

He needed to relax, to be ready, from the minute the door opened, to note where he was, what the conditions were, and to begin planning his escape.

Why didn't I just tell them what they wanted to know? he asked himself for perhaps the fiftieth time in as many minutes. *It isn't like I owe the captain anything.*

No, there was no point in thinking about that. He needed to be at his best, to get the information, to formulate a plan.

Except that formulating plans was never his best game.

No, now was not the time to think about that, either.

Be ready, Jayne. You need all your gorram wits about you from the instant that door opens.

It was sooner than he thought. The abrupt stop almost knocked him to the floor again, but he kept his seat.

The back opened, and the light struck his eyes.

"Okay, Jayne," said Mal. "Let's see if any of these keys fit. It'll make running easier."

Outside Yuva

She kept an eye out for their pursuers, who couldn't be all that far behind, and, as Mal unlocked Jayne, she tried to spare half an eye for him, as well.

"Running?" he said. "Why don't we take—"

"Okay, Zoë . . . we're good."

"What about the hardware?"

"Good idea."

Mal gathered up the chains and restraints and set them in the vehicle, then closed the rear door and nodded to her. She leaned into the hovercraft, set it, strapped down the throttle and jumped back. The 'craft took off down the road, wobbling a bit from the open door.

"They have a trace-lock on it," said Mal. "Into the woods now, and let's run."

Before they had gone fifty meters, two patrol vehicles came humming up the road; fortunately, they continued after the 'craft without even slowing down.

"I hear horses," said Mal.

Zoë nodded, and they continued running.
 "Anyone got a spare gun?" said Jayne.
 "Let's just run for now."
 "I like running more when I got a gun in my hand."
 A few minutes later they stopped and listened.
 "Nothing yet," said Mal.
 Jayne said, "About that gun"
 She looked at the Captain. As far as she was concerned, Jayne unarmed was much better company than Jayne armed.
 "Yeah," said Mal. "Let's talk about that."
 "Don't need no ruttin' talk," said Jayne. "I need a ruttin' weapon."
 "We'll see."
 "If you weren't planning to give me a weapon, why'd you bust me out of there?"
 "For your mind," said Mal. "We need all kinds of your wisdom."
 "What the gorram hell are you talking about?"
 "I'll explain later. Right now, I want more distance. Let's run."
 "A gun—"
 "I'll give you a gun *uguo ta ka zai ni de gangmen zhong er ni hai neng pao de hua*, Jayne."
 The big man scowled, and they ran some more.
Good call, Captain .
 Half an hour later they stopped and listened again. Still nothing. Mal found his comm link. "Wash? You there?"
 Crackle and hiss and, "Just barely, Mal."
 "Can you get a fix on us?"
 "Mal, if I let go of these controls long enough to do that, we're going down hard."
 "All right. If you get the chance, we're staying here for a bit."
 "Copy, that."
 "All right, Jayne," said the Captain. "Let's talk."
 Zoë folded her arms, her fingers brushing the butt of the backup pistol under her left arm; she kept a close eye on Jayne.

Serenity: Dining room

"I'm not sure what's going on, mei-mei," said her brother, "but I don't think it's anything we can help with."
 "She's been shot," said River.
 "Who?"
 "Serenity."
 "Oh. Yes, I felt that. But we managed to take off, and now I'm not sure—"
 "The others are waiting for us, and we can't get there."
 "I don't—"
 "The hole is too big, and the repairs are too slow. We can't land in time."
 "Mei-mei, there's nothing we can do."
 Every once in a while, in all the conflicting rhymes and rhythms and colors and equations and smells that made the criss-crossing interference patterns that were her thoughts, something came through clear and clean, almost painful in its sharp contrast to everything else. It was never a sight, an image; sometimes it was a chord progression, sometimes it was tactile. This time, it was like becoming a sine wave with the tide of battle coming in, and there were moments trying to float in on her. She was as aware of them as one could be aware of a single match in a room of pure darkness.
 It was a moment, and the wave would advance, and then recede, and maybe

something would still be there, and maybe it would not.

She could taste it like a single drop of lemon juice.

That one place, that one time.

And all she had to do was something she had never done before.

But it was not as difficult a decision as it could have been, because for her, failure would mean little pieces of herself scattered about Hera, and They would never be able to touch her after that.

Her hesitation was so brief, her brother didn't even notice it.

"Yes there is," she said. "I can save them."

Outside Yuva

Mal clicked off the comm, looked at Jayne, looked at Zoë, and shrugged.

"Did you catch any of that, sir?"

"I picked up that your mister is a busy guy."

"Yes, sir."

"And it seems like my boat has got a hole put in it."

"They found her with the gun."

"Speaking of guns—" said Jayne.

"So it seems," said Mal to Zoë. "And someone wasn't paying attention to the proximity—"

"And they put a camo field up in front of her."

Mal stopped. "A camo field? Where would they get technology like that?"

Zoë stared at him.

"Oh," he said at last. "Yeah, we ran into a few of those, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not five thousand miles from this here spot."

"Yes, sir."

Jayne cleared his throat. "I know Zoë carries a backup piece under her arm. If you could maybe—"

"Jayne, I'm getting to you. In the meantime, your job is to create as large a field of silence around you as you can manage. Is the idea coming through?"

Jayne scowled loudly.

"So, what now, sir?"

"I don't know. My boat has a hole in it, and we're stuck on the gorram world I hate the most, where we've just busted a fugitive out of jail after saving the life of an Alliance agent, and I'm trying to resist the temptation to put a hole in the fugitive we've just rescued."

"What did I—"

"So I'm open to suggestions, Zoë."

"I suggest you answer Jayne's question, sir."

"Answer his question?"

"He was asking what he did."

"That's what I'd like to know," said Mal.

"Exactly," said Zoë.

"Oh. Right." He turned to Jayne. "What did you do?"

"Huh? I didn't do a ruttin' thing! I got a little drunk and clocked a loudmouth—"

"No, Jayne. I'm not talking about last night."

"Then what are you . . . oh."

"Yeah, oh."

"You kicked me off your gorram ship! I wasn't on your gorram crew!"

"So you couldn't wait to find out what you could get for River's scalp."

"So?"

Oddly, Mal realized he was not suddenly taken with the urge to kill Jayne. He was suddenly taken with the urge to shoot Jayne in both kneecaps, let him lie there for a while, *then* kill him.

"All right," he said, keeping his voice even—which required more effort than he'd used in several near-run skirmishes. "We'll get into that later. Right now, I want to know what happened."

"Huh? You know what happened. I called the feds on that *wangu de shagua gen ta shenjingbing de meimei*. What else do you need to know?"

"How did you call them?"

"Huh? I got hold of a comm unit—"

"What comm unit? Where?"

"In that same gorram security hut you just busted me out of."

"They have a direct link?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I thought they were a private security force."

"They are, and they're also the Locals."

"That's right, so they are. All right, what happened?"

"How 'bout we talk about how I didn't do nothing wrong, seeing I wasn't on—"

Jayne broke off as Mal drew his pistol and leveled it at Jayne's face from a distance of around three inches. Mal heard the familiar sound of Zoë's carbine coming from her hip, and knew he was covered.

"There are a number of things going on right now, Jayne, and I need to learn what they are, and so I need you to answer questions. The only thing I want to do less than talk about anything else is explain to you why I need those answers. So you're going to tell me what I want to know, or I am going to start putting holes in you, and I'm not too particular about where they are, or how many. Now do we have a meeting of minds on this subject?"

Jayne glowered. Mal waited.

"You keep saying what happened, and I keep telling you. So—"

"So tell me how it played out."

"I walked in, said I wanted to get a message to the feds. They set up the link—"

"Just like that?"

"I had to do some convincing."

"How did you convince them?"

"I asked them how it would go down with them if they didn't let me."

"All right. Then what?"

"They gave me the mic. I told the Feds about the crazy girl."

"Uh huh. And what did they say?"

"We negotiated."

"They wanted the details?"

"Yeah. I said I wanted money first."

"Did you tell them who she was?"

Jayne barely hesitated. "Yeah."

"And?"

"They said they'd have someone there to meet me and we'd agree on a price."

"When?"

"They said an hour."

"Right," said Mal. Yeah, okay. No way there was a fed station that close. And if they wanted to send someone special, it might be days. So they'd grabbed up the nearest agent, knocked him off whatever assignment he was on, and—

"And all this time, what were the security officers doing?"

"Huh?"

"While you were talking to the feds, where were the officers, or the Locals, who set you up with the connection?"

"What do you mean? They were just sitting there."

"Just sitting there."

"Yeah."

"Listening."

"I suppose they might have been."

Mal sighed. "You know, Jayne, you've done some stupid things from time to time."

"Maybe."

"I think this time you pegged the meter."

"What the—"

Zoë spoke for the first time. "Sir, could they have put it together, got word to Sakarya, and set it up that fast?"

"In an hour? Why not? This isn't the Alliance, this is just one guy running things himself. And he's someone who believes in moving fast."

"Yes, sir. That he is."

Jayne said, "What in the—"

"Shut up," said Mal.

"Now what, sir?"

"I don't know. Now we try to not get caught until we can figure a way out of here."

"What about him?" she gestured toward Jayne.

"We could kill him."

"Hey!" said Jayne.

"Yes, sir. Or just shoot him in the leg and let him get caught."

"Maybe there's a reward."

"If that's a joke," said Jayne, "I ain't laughing none."

"And what if it isn't a joke? Then you gonna laugh?"

Jayne stared at him. "You gonna do me, go ahead and do me. Quit yakking."

"I gotta figure some. You got any special reason why I ought to let you live, Jayne?"

"I didn't mention you or the boat."

"When?"

"When they questioned me. They said they'd drop the charges and let me go if I told them everything."

Mal searched the big man's face. As well as being stupid, Jayne was one of the worst liars he'd ever met. This time, oddly enough, he wasn't lying.

"Why didn't you?"

"Hell, I don't know. I just didn't."

Zoë said, "Sir, I'm hearing a buzzboat."

Mal glanced up. "Yeah, okay. Let's find some cover."

Zoë said, "Sir, if they have infrared—"

"Unlikely. Too much bounce from this topsoil during daylight."

"But if they do—"

"Then we're humped. Let's go."

"What about him?"

"He comes with us for now."

"I don't think you can take the chance with him, sir."

"Sure I can. Let's try this way."

Outside Yuva

Jayne followed Mal, keenly aware of Zoë and her sawed-off behind him the whole

time. He didn't feel any special resentment for Zoë's being so determined to kill him; he knew well enough it's what he would have done. He wasn't sure why the Captain hadn't just done it, but he never did quite know what the Captain would or wouldn't do, or why. He knew the Captain had some sort of code he kept to; but he had never been able to figure out what that code was. It made things gorram confusing. And it was impossible to figure out how to use that code against him.

So he followed Mal toward cover, and tried to forget about the weapon behind him. If he had the chance, he'd turn on Zoë, take out Mal, and—

No, in fact, he wouldn't.

He wasn't sure why, but he wouldn't. He'd go along with them, and try to get out of this with them, and if they killed him, that's just how it came out.

He wasn't exactly sure why he made that decision, but neither did he spend much time trying to figure it out.

They found a tree with a particularly thick covering of branches, and ducked under it.

CHAPTER 11

MY OWN KIND OF HATE

Outside Yuva

The buzzboat was now clearly audible, moving slowly, just a little ways east and about two hundred meters off the ground.

What was the Captain thinking this time?

Letting Jayne live was just crazy. And if he believed that story about not having given them away to the Locals, then he was completely off his nut.

Of course, it might be part of some larger plan; but if it was, she'd appreciate being let in on it.

Jayne, as part of the crew, was like a barely controlled element, always just a bit more likely to save them than to get them killed. Jayne, not as part of the crew, was just dangerous; any little slip and he'd turn on them both without giving it a second thought.

What was the Captain thinking?

He had betrayed members of his crew – twice. He had proved, over and over again, that he cared nothing – *nothing* – for anyone except himself. He had endangered the Captain, and, by now, Wash, Kaylee, and Serenity herself.

He was doing no good to anyone still walking; there was no possible reason for allowing it.

She kept under the cover of the tree, holding her weapon on Jayne, and hoping the buzzboat didn't have infrared scanners. It was so tempting to just pull the trigger.

So very tempting.

She put her trust in the Captain and waited.

Outside Yuva

The buzzing vanished off to the east, and he saw Mal breath a sigh of relief; Zoë didn't seem to react.

"Safe for a while," said Mal.

"You guys are safe," said Jayne. "What are you – "

"Haven't decided yet, Jayne."

"Sun sets in a couple of hours," said Zoë. "They'll be back with infrared."

Mal nodded. "With any luck, by that time we'll be . . ."

"We'll be what, sir?" asked Zoë when Mal didn't finish the sentence.

Mal flipped on his comm link. "Wash, how are we doing?"

There was an agonizing delay – maybe two seconds – then Wash said, "Still flying, Mal."

"Going to be able to come fetch us?"

Another pause, then, "No. Not soon. Maybe, if Kaylee . . . take a while."

Mal disconnected. "We're on our own," he said.

Jayne thought about asking for a gun again, but decided it would be a waste of breath.

Helpless. I'm ruttin' helpless. Locals chasing me to make a ruttin' miner for life of me, and a gorram carbine at my back, and all I can do is sit here and wait for what happens.

"Okay," said Mal, with the sort of finality in his voice that indicates he'd decided on a plan.

Mal had a plan

Now I'm really humped.

Yuva: Sakarya's office

Mister Sakarya's office was full of open spaces, windows, natural woods, and padded chairs. His desk was wide and wrapped around in a gentle curve to the big window that looked out on a shallow hill leading down to a pond. A few trees flanked the pond, and a family of ducks floated in it. There was one chair facing the desk, and it was, at present, unoccupied; the heavy man in the gray uniform stood, sweating. Sakarya sat, glowering.

His voice was barely controlled as he said, "How did they do it, Rennes?"

"It was well-planned, and well-timed, Mister Sakarya. We were transferring the prisoner for transport, had just gotten him loaded, when they were there. They got the drop –"

"Well-timed," repeated Sakarya. "You say it was well-timed."

"Yes, sir."

"Who knew when you'd be doing the transfer?"

"Sir?"

Sakarya closed his eyes and counted to eight.

"How many people knew the transfer schedule, and who were they?"

"There was no transfer schedule, sir. We finished the paperwork, then moved him –"

"Then how could it have been well-timed, you piece of ga-sa?"

Rennes wilted, sputtered, and said, "I meant –"

"You meant they got the drop on you because you weren't expecting him to be rescued, and so you were all going through the motions without paying attention. Is that correct?"

Rennes cringed and looked down.

"Is it?"

"Yes, sir."

Sakarya nodded. "All right. What are we doing about it?"

"Three buzz-boats, roadblocks, and we've put a detail on searching the woods east of town, since that's . . . that is to say, we think they're hiding —"

"You think?"

"We found the vehicle they hijacked, and it was empty. Backtracking along the —"

"You've messed this up just about every way you could, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Sakarya let out a long, slow breath.

"All right," he said at last. "Keep me informed, and try not to screw up any more."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Sakarya nodded and waved him out of the room. When he was gone, Sakarya hit a button on his desk. A voice came back at once: "Yes, Filo?"

He grimaced. "Miss Wuhan, Officer Rennes is on the way out. Have someone get him, slap him with indentures, and send him to Site Four. I don't want to see him again."

"All right."

"And we'll need someone to take over his post. Promote whoever is his second in command."

"All right."

Silence fell like a curtain in his office.

The whole thing *had* been bungled from the beginning. It wasn't just the escape: that man, Cobb, should never have been processed anyway. And that ship should never have been permitted off the ground. Cobb should have been questioned, fined, and released. Didn't those idiots realize that the gorram *Alliance* was here? And that this Cobb was, one way or another, connected with it? That everything he had could come tumbling down just because these idiots refused to think, refused to change tactics when the situation changed?

The whole thing would have to be crushed, and fast. Cobb would have to be killed. His rescuers would have to be killed. And, above all, that bloody damned, snooping, sniveling little spy for the feds would have to be found and made to vanish. And once all that was done he was going to have to find a way to lie very, very low for a while; he'd have to change his whole operation, which would cost him, well, a lot.

He turned and faced his window. He felt like ordering the ducks killed, but he knew he'd regret it later.

Yuva: Warehouse

Finally finishing a rutting exercise in rutting futility, he disconnected his rutting comlink, which held all the rutting information he'd gathered in eight rutting months.

It was a fair question which bothered him more: the eight months wasted on the investigation; the fact that he was within a couple of weeks of having it sewn up when he was required to blow his cover; the stupid reason for blowing his cover; or the fact that if they didn't show up to retrieve him soon, he'd probably die on this stupid rock.

It was one thing to know, in the abstract, that field work was risky; it was another thing to know that he was being hunted like an animal and could be snuffed out at any

moment. And all because some pissant bureaucrat decided some pissant fugitive was more important than eight months from his life, eight months from the life of his three-man support staff back home, at least a quarter of a million credits, and, above all, the job of seeing to it that this bastard didn't get away with what he was doing.

Not even taking into account what a successful prosecution might do to the – probably dozens, maybe scores of – bastards doing the same thing on their own little worlds.

Being hunted didn't frighten him only because he was too busy being pissed off.

Whenever he could concentrate on the big picture, he liked what he was doing: he was making a difference, he was making lives better for people who couldn't stand up for themselves, he was taking down the bad guys. But it was hard to keep his mind on the big picture when every detail ranged from bungling stupidity to outright evil.

The cure was better than the disease, he told himself.

But just barely.

Outside Yuva

Zoë said, "What's the plan, sir?"

"Well, seems the three of us can't do much against the whole passel they're throwing at us."

"True enough, sir."

"Especially as we're not keen on giving Jayne a firearm."

Jayne said, "Can we reconsid –"

"So I figure we need reinforcements."

"Good call, sir. Got a battalion in mind?"

"Better than that. Major reinforcements."

"How many?"

"One."

"Hooray, sir. We're saved," said Zoë.

Jayne stared at him. "You're going to bring the gorram fed in on this."

Mal cocked his head at the big man. "Damn, Jayne. When did you get higher order cerebral function?"

"I don't know that math stuff."

"Sir, you aren't really –"

"Yes."

"Do we have any way of reaching him?"

"Sure. We walk back to Yuva and find him."

"Walk back to . . . I think it's a bad idea, sir."

"Maybe, but we're doing it. Let's head to town."

"I think you ought to reconsider, sir."

"Zoë, I'm not used to having my orders questioned."

Zoë looked at him and waited.

"All right," he said. "I *am* used to having my orders questioned. But we're heading back to town."

"Yes, sir."

Jayne said, "Why should I go back there, if you won't even give me a gorram gun?"

Zoë poked him in the back with her carbine.

Mal took his lack of reply for agreement.

They were still in deep woods when the sun set. They kept listening for buzzboats or horses, but they heard only the sounds of whatever wildlife had been imported to make the woods seem natural.

Every once in a while, he thought as he walked, I get tired of sounding confident when I ain't. It's almost like lying to them, making it seem like I know what exactly I'm doing, when all I have is an idea that's just a bit better than any other idea. And it doesn't help that Zoë knows damned well what I'm doing, and goes along with it anyway; almost makes it worse.

He mentally shook himself. *What's going on with me? Why am I doing this now?*

"Damn this whole world," said Zoë. "I hate being on it, I hate marching on it, I hate —"

Mal looked at her.

"Sorry, sir."

"No, it's just I was having those same thoughts."

It was full dark, so they had to slow down a bit; the light from two of the moons, one of them almost full, was just barely enough to keep them from walking into trees. They stopped from time to time to check the direction, and to listen.

"I think we're getting close," said Zoë. Jayne, blessedly, didn't say anything.

"Once we leave the woods, we have about a quarter of a mile to cross. We go slow and steady, like we belong. Once we hit town, we head to that warehouse, and hope the fed is still there. Keep to the shadows. I doubt they're looking for us in town, but be careful."

He felt Zoë nod, and heard Jayne grunt, and they moved forward. The woods ended abruptly, leaving them on rocky, broken hills that reminded him of other parts of this same world. Memories wanted to flood him; he focused on the task at hand.

Gorram this whole world.

Yuva: Warehouse

Something rattled on the window.

He'd have turned the light out, but it was already off. He waited for a few minutes, then carefully looked out.

There were three figures standing there, out in plain sight, like they were waiting. Even in the dim light, he recognized two of them from their shape.

Well, all right then.

He armed himself, went down the hall, opened the door, and stepped out. He kept himself next to the wall. They were still there, and still silhouetted. Only one was holding a weapon, and that weapon was pointing squarely at the back of the largest of the three.

He stepped away from the wall. "Good evening," he said.

"So far," said Captain Reynolds. "Going to invite us in?"

"All right. Come in."

He stuck his pistol back in his belt and led them inside, down the hall, past the office he'd taken over, and to a second office, which had the advantage of being windowless. He turned on a light, and waited while all of their eyes adjusted; then he focused on the big man.

"You were supposed to meet me in the canteen."

"Figured," he said.

Mal said, "Kit, meet Jayne. You already know Zoë."

Kit nodded. "What brings you to my little sanctuary?"

"We need your help, and you need our help," said the captain. "Seem like that gives us grounds to do some bargaining."

Kit studied the captain, wishing he had access to a full psych workup of the man. He didn't seem like the trickster sort; but a good confidence man never did. So: play it careful, pull out what intel he could, give away the minimum, commit to nothing.

"Let's start with the part where I need your help," he said. "I imagine you could explain that if you tried, so I'll do the listening."

"You have people coming to pull you out," said the captain, as if he knew it for fact, which he almost certainly did not. Kit waited, giving him nothing one way or the other. Reynolds went on, "You don't much cotton to leaving the job unfinished, on account of you were behind this one personal."

Now that was either a daring guess, or some pretty sharp deduction. If it was deduction, it meant either this man had a way of tapping into some files there was no way he could get to, or . . .

"You know a lot about him."

"Just what's on the Cortex."

"You start out lying now, Captain, and it's going to put a severe strain on our relationship."

"Mostly what's on the Cortex. Some other stuff, too."

"All right. I'm still doing the listening part."

"So, we help you finish what you started, you help us get the gorram hell out of here alive. That's the deal. You want it?"

"Get you out alive? Okay, now, last I heard, you had a ship. What's keeping you here?"

"The ship got hit, and had to break sky. She's hanging up there now with the best pilot in the 'verse fighting to keep her there. Can't land on account of a big hole in her hull and too many control surfaces shot to hell."

"What do you imagine I can do?"

"Get us to a safe place until my boat is working again. I know you got people coming."

"You do."

"I do."

"All right, suppose I do. What do you mean about helping me finish the job?"

"We can take him out."

"Take him out."

"Yeah."

"You're offering to commit murder to an agent of the Anglo Sino Alliance?"

"What, that offends you?"

"There's this thing called the law, Captain Reynolds."

"Yeah. The Alliance enforces it; it doesn't seem to much care about following it."

"We will argue politics another time, Captain. For now, I'll just say that I decline your offer. We do not commit murder." As Reynolds started to speak, he said, "Very well, if you prefer, *I* do not commit murder."

"You must have a nice set of problems with them that employ you."

Kit shrugged.

"All right, so you don't want to kill him. What do you want?"

"I'm afraid I can't—"

"Evidence, right? Proof of forced indenture, child labor, safety violations. That's what you're after, isn't it?"

"Suppose it is."

"Suppose we can do that?"

"How?"

"That's our business."

"There are a couple of problems. The first is that I'm not going to believe you can do it unless you tell me how you're planning to go about it. The second is, I have no way to get you off this world until my people show up, and that won't be for a couple of days. And Sakarya's people are looking for me as hard as they're looking for you, and, between them, I don't see any way they aren't going to find us both before then."

"Yeah, well, that's a problem. How close are they?"

"From what I've picked up of their code, they're going to be starting a building by building search tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning. That's . . . what?"

The one called Zoë spoke for the first time. "Six hours, sir."

"Six hours."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, isn't that just shiny."

"Yes, sir."

"You were out of town, weren't you?" asked Kit.

"Yes."

"East?"

"Yes, how'd you know?"

"They found tracks. By now, the perimeter is sealed."

"I see."

"So you've humped yourself pretty good, Captain."

"It's a specialty. You have a tap into their line, I take it?"

He hesitated, then, "Yes."

"And their code?"

"Most of it."

"Impressive."

"It's a specialty."

"I like yours better. Where's your gear?"

"Next office down, but there's a window, so no lights."

"Can you see at all in there?"

"A bit filters in from the moons."

"Okay. Mind if we go there?"

Kit shrugged and led the way.

When they reached the other office, he fired up the link, listened on the headphones for a bit, and said, "Nothing new."

"Good to have, though."

Kit nodded. "It's how I learned about the jailbreak."

"So, you know who we are."

"I take it you mean, I know who you're carrying. Yes. Simon and River Tam."

"I see."

Kit felt the weight of his sidearm, and wondered how long it would take the captain to draw his. Zoë had hers out, but it was still pointed at the big man.

He leaned forward to make a meaningless adjustment on the comm, and in so doing moved about two inches to his right, positioning himself so the big man was squarely between him and the sawed-off, and kept his eye on the captain.

"And what do you plan to do about that?" asked the captain.

"My only orders were to meet with your man Cobb and negotiate a deal. I've already reported that that fell through."

"And so?"

"If you had a way out of here, we might have something to deal with after all."

"What, us rescue you? That's not what I had in mind. And if you don't mind my saying so —"

"You're safer with me dead."

"Seems like."

"Only you don't do that."

"I don't?"

"Nope."

"What, you have a psych make-up on me?" The captain almost smirked.

"For this, I don't need one."

Reynolds shrugged. "Maybe you're right and I don't much care for the idea of shooting you cold. Still don't mean I'd cross the street to save you, even if I could, now that I know who you are."

"I have something to bargain with."

"What's that?"

"Simon and River Tam."

"I don't —"

"I can throw them off for a while."

He felt the intensity of Reynold's stare. "I don't get it," the captain said at last. "Are you that scared?"

"No," said Kit. "But if I live through this, I still have a chance of taking down Sakarya."

The captain rocked back, almost as if he'd been hit. He recovered quickly, though, and said, "Okay, don't see as it matters much; we got no means to —"

"Sir," said Zoë.

The captain frowned and looked at her. "What is it?"

Zoë was looking out the window. "I think we have the means."

Everyone followed her gaze. A small, close-range shuttle was settling down outside the office.

The four of them stared at it, frozen in place, until the door swung open and a small figure emerged.

Zoë was staring at the captain, as if he could produce an explanation for what she clearly considered impossible. Jayne's mouth opened and closed.

"*Na, zhan wo zai qiaokeli dang zhong, jiu song wo dao leisibian gei tamen chi ba,*" said the captain.

"Let me guess," said Kit. "I'm about to meet River Tam."

CHAPTER 12

MY OWN KIND OF LANDING

Yuva: Warehouse

The fed grabbed a small disk and stuck it in his pocket.

"The evidence?" asked Mal.

"What there is of it. Nothing else here matters."

"All right then," said Zoë. "Someone probably saw the shuttle land. Maybe we should move."

Mal nodded. "Let's hurry; she'll take off a bit sluggish with five on board."

"Five, sir?" said Zoë.

"I'm taking our friend the fed up on his offer."

"Yes, sir. Five?"

"Oh."

Mal looked at Jayne, who stared back at him. Then he turned back to Zoë.

"Five," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said, managing to put a full hold's worth of disapproval into the words.

Mal ignored her, and said to Jayne, "Nothing is settled."

Jayne grunted.

River met them halfway to the shuttle.

Mal decided that any questions would wait until they were back on Serenity. Or at least in the air. Or at least buckled in.

"River, where in the gorram hell did you learn to fly a gorram shuttle?" he said.

"The operation of an LS-seven type Coreless A-drive is implied by the width to force ratio of the main thruster, the number and position of the attitude jets, and the limited number of control surfaces. Wash has a book."

"A book?"

River beat him to the pilot's chair without appearing to try; he decided not to argue, and slid into the co-pilot's seat. She turned around and looked at the fed like he was a curious species of spider. Then she turned back to the controls.

"A book?" said Mal.

River fired up the shuttle like, well, like a pilot.

"He loaned it to me."

"When did you read this book?"

He was pressed back into the seat as the nose pointed up, then she hit it and they leaped skyward.

"About an hour ago. The book had some mistakes," she added.

"We will never speak of this again," said Mal.

Above Hera

She made a few mental notes to pass on to Kaylee: the calibration of the guide-scope was off enough to make lock-on bumpy if it were followed, the spinner was off-balance, and the engine kept wanting to cough. With another part of her attention, she followed the guide-scope (making mental adjustments), bringing the shuttle closer to the lockdown point. With another part of her attention she considered what design improvements might be made on the shuttle – or, more precisely, what she'd have to study in order to make reasonable suggestions for such improvements. With another part of her attention she tried not to think about the men who were coming closer with each minute; that took a fair bit of attention: not thinking about something.

And with the rest of her attention

It was so much better when she was busy.

When her mind and body were both occupied, the voices didn't have time to get inside her. Everything was quiet, and she could *do* and she could *think* and she could *be*.

People spoke about "freedom" but they didn't know what it was. Freedom was being able to do what you were meant to do. Just that; no more.

And most of them didn't appreciate it, because most of them had never been without it.

Simon didn't understand that. Wash didn't understand that, though he'd been held captive. Even Zoë didn't understand.

Mal, though. Mal understood.

Sometimes, when she could spare the attention, she cried for him.

She made the last adjustment and the shuttle slid home with a "click" and the voices came back.

Serenity: Near shuttle bay

The Captain told Jayne to stay in his quarters when they got there.

"Can I get some food?"

"Yeah. Get it, bring it back to your bunk and stay there till I come get you."

As the shuttle door opened, Zoë was running through the locations of the firearms on the ship, and how many of them would be between the airlock and Jayne's bunk. At least one, she decided, which was way too many.

Simon was waiting when they stepped out of the shuttle.

"River! What did you *do*? "

Though River's back was to her, Zoë could imagine the frown. "Is that a trick question?"

The doctor took his sister's arm, and the two of them went off toward the med

bay, Simon's voice gradually climbing in both pitch and volume. Zoë shrugged and tuned them out.

She made her way directly up the stairs, past the bunks and up to the bridge, heavier by two pistols, which she set down in the co-pilot's chair.

"Wash!"

He didn't turn around. "Hey, baby. Come look upon the empty shell that was once your big, powerful love machine. It's been pretty ugly up here."

"You're all right?"

"Depends what you mean by all right. When this is over, I'm going to sleep for three weeks."

"But you made it? We're in a stable orbit?"

"You'd have had a fun time docking the shuttle if we'd still been bouncing around."

"Yeah, did you know River was going to take the shuttle?"

"Not exactly. She asked if she could look at the LS-Seven manual, and half an hour later —"

"Yeah. The Captain almost had a coronary when it landed, and she stepped out."

"She's scary."

"That she is."

"Well, I'm glad you're back."

"With company."

"Oh?"

"We brought a fed with us."

"A fed? On the ship?"

"It's a long story."

"Where is he?"

"The Captain put him in Book's old room, and asked him to stay there until we figure things out."

"Oh. Are we ever going to figure things out?"

"Unlikely. How are things here?"

"Kaylee is trying to get us in shape to fly. Or at least limp to somewhere we can get fixed up. She's outside now, working on a patch. We—"

He frowned at something, muttered, and flipped a couple of switches. For the next several seconds, she could see him fighting with the ship in a way she'd never seen before; some of the jerkiness of the movements penetrated the inertia field, and Zoë had to shift her feet to keep her balance. Then he nodded, scowled, shut things down again, and continued with what he'd been saying as if there had been no interruption. "The engine room is sealed off, so she's trying to work in a suit. Can't be fun. And I haven't quite figured out why we didn't just get away from this world when we could have."

"It's complicated," said Zoë. Wash started to say something, and she had the sudden feeling that this was going to go somewhere she didn't like; somewhere involving the Captain, and explanations, and loyalty. "Also, Jayne came back with us," she said.

It worked. "He's back on the crew?" he asked.

"No. At least, not yet. But he's on the ship, anyway. Not sure where it goes from there."

"Straight down," said Wash.

Zoë nodded. "That much is pretty certain," she said.

Serenity: Engine room

It really was hard to work in a pressure suit.

It wasn't just the loss of manual dexterity, or mobility; it was that there was the sense that she couldn't actually touch Serenity. It was surprising how much she learned just from contact; feeling the rhythm of her engine, the constant little adjustments of the artificial gravity, the re-balancing of the inertia guide.

And now she was without it, and Serenity was hurt; hurt worse than Kaylee had ever seen. To say, "structural damage" just didn't express it. There was a *hole* in Serenity. The black was inside her, when she existed to keep the black out there. Her heart beat as smooth as ever, and life-support still worked, and, after a bit of work, she had inertial thrust.

But she wasn't supposed to be rigged that way, like a guy trying to walk on one foot and one hand while eating through his nose. She could do it for a while, but she didn't much like it, and pretty soon now she'd just *quit*.

Kaylee didn't much care to be out here, either; surrounded by the black, Hera there huge and swirling green above her, like she was going to grab Serenity and drag her down; and below her feet Serenity with her gaping wound, only magnetic boots and a lifeline keeping her secured while Wash made his adjustments.

And she really wanted to scratch her nose.

She should come up with a way to wipe one's brow while wearing a pressure suit. It really couldn't be that hard to do. Then she could work on a way to scratch one's back.

Okay, never mind, back to the job.

Kaylee laid out the welding gear, and the pieces of scrap she'd found in the hold, and eyed the big wound that was, if not her biggest problem, then at least the next one she had to fix if she was to get to the others.

She started filing away at the jagged edges. "I'm sorry, baby," she murmured.

Serenity: Near shuttle bay

"Is Kit your real name?"

"Why would that matter?"

"Don't figure it would, just asking. So, how d'you see this working?"

"You mean, getting me back into the hands of my people while you go on your way?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean."

"Or do you mean how am I going to bring down Sakarya now that I'm off the world and my cover's blown."

"I might mean that, too."

"Or maybe how I'm going to singlehandedly end all poverty, injustice and disease in the 'verse, including among as yet undiscovered alien species."

"That's less likely."

"You never know."

"How is it going to work?"

"Get on the Cortex, I'll give you the code, you arrange a meeting with an Alliance vessel, we make the transfer, you go on your way."

"Okay, second idea."

"And the problem with that is?"

"They know about us."

"You sure about that?"

"Jayne told them he had the Tams. The Locals have connected Serenity with the Tams. All the Alliance —"

"Serenity," he said.

"That's the name of the boat."

"I was there," Kit heard himself saying.

"What?"

"Serenity Valley. I was there. Some of my first intel training — sussing out your positions, trying to figure any weak spots. They made me . . . it was tough."

Mal didn't say anything.

"You made a hell of a fight," said Kit.

After a moment, Mal said, "All the Alliance has to do is tap into the Locals' comm, which is about the first thing they'd do, yes?"

"Yes."

"After that Jayne could put it all together. I'm not getting next to an Alliance ship, whatever guarantees you give me. If they need to, they'll lie to you to get to the Tams. Won't they?"

Kit hesitated, then nodded.

"So," continued Reynolds, "what's your next idea? We can set you down somewhere, either on Hera, or somewhere else, and then let them know where you are."

"I guess that's what we'll do, then."

"You hungry?"

"Starving."

"Me, too. We have protein in nine different flavors and some dried apricots. I'll show you where the kitchen is, then I'm going to go check on my mechanic, see how she's doing."

Something went off in Kit's head, then — that feeling that, all of a sudden, he had all the pieces if he just put them together. He nodded to Reynolds, and followed him to the kitchen, his mind racing.

Captain Reynolds knew; there was no other explanation.

And that put an entirely different light on things.

The captain headed down toward engineering. Kit followed him absently, but his mind wasn't on it. He needed to think this through.

Serenity: Engine room

The airtight door opened, and Kaylee was standing there, still in her pressure suit, but helmet off.

"Fixed?" he asked.

"Sort of," she said. "Still needs some work, and she isn't going to take to being put on the solid with half the starboard extender missing, but —"

"Get some rest, Kaylee. Rest, eat something, relax."

Kaylee leaned against the bulkhead, closed her eyes, and nodded. "Okay, Cap'n. What are you going to do?"

"Try to come up with the right questions, so I know where to put all these answers I got."

Kaylee shook her head. "That almost made sense."

"Yeah," said Mal. "That's about how I've been feeling for some time."

Kaylee stepped up and kissed him on the cheek, her pressure suit bumping his collar bone. "It'll work out, Cap'n."

"Now we got two witches on this boat?"

She just smiled, shook her head, and thunked off toward her bunk. For one crazy moment, he wanted to follow her. Not to sex her, but just to lie down and close his eyes and be next to her for a bit.

He took a deep breath and let it out slow, then made his way to the Med Bay, the fed still with him. As expected, River and Simon were both there, River staring up at the ceiling with a glazed look; she just barely responded with he walked in.

"River, you did good today."

"Captain," said Simon, "she needlessly risked —"

"No needless about it, Doctor. We were humped down there. You planning to fly the shuttle to get us?"

"Wash could have —"

"Wash left the bridge a minute, and this boat'd be scattered all over the world, and you with it."

"I don't want her —"

"Your wants ain't got too strong a hold on my intentions, Doctor. I'd think a bright young fellow like you would have sussed that out by now."

The doctor stared at him for just long enough to let him know how he felt about that, then said, "River says they're coming."

"Who?"

"She didn't say. She just said, 'they're coming.'"

"Well, lest she's just spouting gibberish, I'd guess it'd be the feds, and we were figuring hard on that already. Now, if she knew *when* they were coming —"

"Tomorrow, early afternoon," said River.

Mal looked at her, then at the doctor, then back at River. "Something creepifying about you," he said.

River didn't answer; she seemed to have fallen asleep.

Mal shrugged, turned, and made his way up toward the bridge. As he walked, he noticed that the fed was still with him, and still looking impenetrable.

"Well, any thoughts?"

Kit looked up. "Plenty. How would you feel about letting me make contact with my people?"

"Your people means the Alliance, don't it?"

"Yes."

"I told you about —"

"Not to arrange a pick-up. I just want to make contact."

"Don't seem like that would be in my best interest."

"Doesn't seem like it, but it would be."

"You want me to just trust you?"

"Yes."

"When do you need to do this?"

"Before you do whatever it is you're going to do."

"I'll think on it. Meantime, I'm heading toward the bridge. You can be in the dining room, or your quarters. I catch you anywhere else on my boat and I'll kill you."

"You don't need to threaten me, Captain. I know where I stand."

"Do you?"

"I told you, I was there."

"Yeah, you did at that."

Mal left him in the dining room and headed up to the bridge.

"Don't mind me, you two. I'll just stand here and wonder why there are two weapons in the co-pilot's chair."

Zoë and Wash broke their clinch, Wash giving Mal something of an annoyed look.

Zoë said, "Keeping them out of Jayne's hands."

"Ah. Good decision."

"Thank you, sir."

He said, "Just letting you two know that we need to be out of here by tomorrow afternoon, according to a highly reliable source I don't trust at all."

"Mal," said Wash, "can you tell me why we aren't leaving this place now?"

"No, I'm not sure I can."

"Oh. Well. All right, then. That's all I needed."

"There's some things that got to be settled on that world."

"Why?"

"Cause," said Mal.

"She's handling a little better now," said Wash. "Kaylee did something."

"She'll do that," said Mal. "Can you get us on the ground as things stand?"

"Not sure," said Wash. "But we're two and a half days from Tagwyn."

"Tagwyn?"

"An orbiting repair dock, around —"

"No, on the ground here."

Wash stared at him. "Are you serious, Mal?"

"Just want to know if you can do it."

"Mal, I can't keep my eyes open any more. I can't land a handkerchief on the floor. I could maybe, if I got lucky, punch in the coordinates to Tagwyn and start us there, but without being here to monitor —"

"Go to bed, Wash. We'll talk in the morning. Zoë and I can take shifts keeping us in the sky."

For once, Wash had no remarks. He raised his arm, and Zoë took and hauled him to his feet, kissed him, and escorted him toward the door.

"I'll be back to work out shifts after I've put my exhausted man to bed," she said.

"Exhausted?" said Wash. "If I sleep for five years I might make it up to exhausted."

Mal nodded and sat down in the pilot's chair, and stared at the line of dawn on Hera through the front window — an ugly world, full of sickly greens and oppressive blues. Yuva appeared down and off to the right; in Serenity Valley, away on the other side, the sun would just be setting.

He watched Hera like a snake watches a rabbit.

Then he tapped the intercom for the dining room. "Anyone there?" No response.

He tried the room he'd given Kit, the Shepherd's old room. "Fed? You around?"

Kit's voice came back. "I'm here."

"Once we're on the ground, come on up to the bridge and make your call," he said.

Serenity: Bridge

"Good morning, sir."

"You're a good relief, Zoë."

"Anything?"

"She's doing a bump and grind; you have to knock off the autopilot, bring her back to the grid, then turn it on again; seems like every twenty minutes or so. It isn't too bad."

"All right."

"Wash?"

"He was snoring before he was horizontal."

"He did a good day's work. A good week's work."

"Yes, sir."

He stood and stepped out of the way so she could take the pilot's seat, then he picked up the two pistols and held them while he sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"I'm going to talk to Jayne," he said.

She barely nodded, concentrating on checking the auto-pilot's settings, and the position grid.

"Zoë, I want this guy."

This time she made no pretense of nodding; just continued checking the board.

"Zoë?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You know why, don't you?"

"The war's over, sir. I seem to remember hearing you say that once or twice."

"It's not about the war."

"Of course it's about the war, sir."

He leaned back, and stared out as Hera drifted slowly from his right to his left, until he was staring into the black.

"You don't think it's maybe about what's happening on that there very piece of ground below us?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"So, I take it you want no part of it, Zoë?"

"I didn't say that, sir."

"Then —"

"I'd just feel better going into this if you knew why we were doing it. I'll back you either way. But I'd rather you knew."

"Ain't no one to tell me. Maybe if the Shepherd were still here, he'd explain it."

"You'd ignore him, sir."

"Most like I would. So, you going to tell me?"

"I would if I could."

"I just know I got to do this. I can't let it alone. It's everything. It's the war, it's the . . . it's everything."

"You're bringing Jayne back on."

"Might be."

"And working with an Alliance agent."

"Yeah."

"What do you believe in any more, sir?"

"My crew."

"And what does this do for your crew?"

"*Wo zenmayang bei la dao zhege huati dang zhong?*" He stared out into the black. Serenity lurched; though buffered by the artificial gravity, he could still feel it. Zoë killed the auto-pilot, re-settled Serenity on her course, and re-engaged the auto-pilot. She turned the pilot's chair and faced him.

"I have to put it away," he said.

"Sir, three days ago, you didn't even know —"

"Yes, but now I do. And it makes it all different. All of it. All the way back, and what's happening here and now. It isn't one thing, it's all of it."

"Yes, sir. But what about the fed?"

"Funny you should ask."

"Sir?"

"He's just been trying to figure me out."

"Ah. I see. Well, that must have been entertaining."

"I did figure him out."

"Sir?"

"I figured out why he's doing this."

"He wants to take down Sakarya, because he likes beating bad guys?"

"That's part of it."

"And the rest?"

"Simon and River."

"He wants them?"

"No, he wants them to get away."

"I don't —"

"He went and found out who we were, and who they were, and he figures it ain't right for the Alliance to come down with all the law and everything for someone who decided to drop out of school."

"But he's Alliance."

"Yeah, he is. Puts him in a nasty spot, doesn't it?"

"So, he'll help us?"

"Not directly. He can't. He's a believer."

"He still believes, even though —"

"Even though."

Zoë shook her head. That sort of conflict couldn't happen in Zoë's world. In Zoë's world it was people, not ideas. For people like the fed it was both, and it was no fun when they smashed into each other. That was a feeling Mal could understand.

"Zoë?"

"Sir?"

"Thanks."

"Yes, sir."

"I'd best be about my business."

He stood up and looked at the two holstered pistols in his hands; it took him a

moment to remember why they were there.

Serenity: Dining room

He and Mal had the place to the themselves.

"Go ahead, Jayne. Sit down."

"I'd been about to, but thanks for the invite."

Jayne sat heavily.

"Okay," said Mal. "Let's talk."

"Why are you worrying about me when you have a gorram fed ten feet away from loony girl?"

"Because the fed ain't never been on my crew, Jayne."

"Yeah. What you want to talk about?"

"They offered you a deal?"

"Who, the Locals? Yeah, I told you. I didn't take it."

"I'm still working on calculating why not."

A few lies went through his head, but there was Mal, looking at him, and . . . "I didn't like how they asked me."

Mal nodded. "I don't deny that you been useful to have around a time or two."

"Well damn, Mal. Them's the nicest words you ever sent in my direction."

"Likely they are. But you been a lot of trouble to me and mine."

"What did you expect? You threw me off your gorram crew. You think maybe I'd run out and buy you flowers?"

"Always have liked chrysanthemums."

"Zoë tries to kill me, Mal, I'm gonna —"

"Zoë ain't going to do more than I tell her to, Jayne, 'less you put your foot bad wrong."

"That's a comfort."

"We're going into something, Jayne."

"Into what?"

"Settling some old business. Could use another gun in this. You can be back on if you want."

"Any money in it?"

"Not a credit, not a cent."

"Well, there's a powerful inducement."

"There any inducement in this, you suss it out on your own."

"What about my ginseng?"

"You give it back. We live through this, we return it."

"It's in a locker in town, along with all my gear."

"Maybe we'll have the chance to retrieve it."

"What about that fed?"

"What about him?"

"He in this?"

"That's up to him. He don't take to us killing no one, and I intend some violence to take place."

"That's why you want me back?"

"No, I want you back cuz someone might want violence to take place toward us."

"What if I say no?"

"We'll try to get you somewhere safe, out of the area. No promises."

"Do I got some time to decide?"

"All the time you want till we start to move."

"When will that be?"

"About a minute. You're asking a lot of questions, Jayne."

"Yeah, and you aren't giving a lot of good answers."

"That mean you're out?"

"Naw, when have I ever been able to stay out of a fight?"

"Whenever you couldn't get anything out of it."

Couldn't argue with that.

He remembered the cell, and remembered what he'd realized there: there wasn't any point in fighting it, he just wasn't any good on his own.

"Yeah. I'm in," he said.

Mal set the two pistols on the table, and slid them down to him, one at a time.

Serenity: Bridge

After a sleep that lasted around ten hours, he felt worlds better, and as ready as he ever would be.

He played around the upper edges of atmo for a few seconds, just to test how she was responding. He wasn't entirely happy with the result, but—

"Can you do it?" asked Mal.

"Think so," he said. He badly wanted to add, "but I can't think why we want to," but he bit his tongue and concentrated on flying.

The upper atmosphere of Hera smacked Serenity back and forth hard enough to penetrate the artificial gravity; he felt her bucking and kicking and wanting to put her nose down and tumble. The first chance he got, he leaned over and dialed down the cabin temperature, because he was sweating a lot. A fan kicked in, and a cool breeze struck his face, and it felt so good he almost smiled.

The atmosphere thickened, making the resistance stronger but less variable: a Firefly was not built for aerodynamics; she ought not to be subject to updrafts, and cross-winds, and buffeting. At least not this much.

He gave her an attitude adjustment just as she bucked the wrong way, and for a horrible second, Serenity almost flipped and tumbled, internal and external inertia wanting to combine to shoot her like a watermelon seed. A plastic pterodactyl and triceratops fell from his console and hit the floor.

He brought Serenity's nose back up, too busy for the moment to curse.

The intercom crackled with Mal's voice. "Wash! What the gorram hell is —"

He shut it off and fought the air, the ship, the world.

Mal had said, "Try to set us down east of Yuva, if you can find a clearing in the woods."

He had said, "Mal, if I can get us down in one piece it will be—No, I'm not looking for a clearing in the woods, I'm looking for the biggest flat empty space I can find, and then I'm praying like hell."

Mal had, for once, just accepted it.

Why were they doing this, anyway?

Because Mal was the captain, that's why. And because, however stupid some of Mal's stunts had been, somehow they had always pulled through, and kept flying.

He wasn't sure exactly where he was, but, that *was* a clear space below them. *Okay, time for the fun part.* He flipped the two side thrusters into landing position and spun the engine faster, getting more thrust to fight gravity. The shake through the yoke rattled his entire body.

If I crack a tooth, I'm going to be annoyed.

He focused on a single point on the ground through the primary scope; the true-alt numbers falling much too fast. Still more thrust, still less control – and he almost forgot to lower the landing gear, which would have been an embarrassing way to wreck the ship.

Too much thrust to land; too little to fight the instability from the broken extender. At fifty meters: much too close to the ground to play, but still high enough to easily kill them all. At least the placement was good, and the angle was, had been good a second ago, was good again, but how did we get to one-fifty and, all right, she could yaw as much as she wanted to, but please don't pitch down to seventy maybe just a bump careful careful too much and we'll be on our belly and dead before you can say brontosaurus okay that one helped at the expense of fine, fine yaw can do what it wants until yes reduce that extra thrust so we come down to *don't roll!* attitude good good just maybe if we swoop a bit we can get to the magic three meter mark and drop and just crack the landing gear which would okay stop that, nose is good again hold it hold it right there sweet baby *please* work with me one time one time and *now* nose down then up two meters? *Cut cut cut! Nose up for the love of –*

He clicked on the intercom.

"We're down, fellow travelers. No sweat."

He leaned back on his chair and closed his eyes and if Mal had been on the bridge Wash would have punched him right in the mouth.

CHAPTER 13

MY OWN KIND OF ANSWERS

Serenity: Passage

He walked with the captain, passing the glazed, exhausted, nearly stumbling pilot on their way to the bridge. The captain stopped as they passed. The pilot and the captain exchanged a few words, but he couldn't quite make out what they were. Kit continued on to the bridge, where the captain joined him a moment later.

The captain gestured toward the comm gear and said, "I take it you know how to use this stuff?"

Kit bit back a sarcastic answer and just nodded.

"The Alliance gave you all the training," observed Reynolds.

Kit nodded and waited for the whatever point was coming.

"And so," continued the captain, "I guess that's a good reason for you to sell your soul to them."

"Are you looking for an argument, captain?"

"More curious about why you'd do something like that."

"Would it mean anything to you if I said job satisfaction?"

"Might. But I have to wonder what sort of job satisfaction there is in —"

"Shutting down people like Sakarya?"

The captain shrugged and fell silent.

Kit set the right channel on the comm, set up what little masking signal was available on this gear. It took a couple of minutes to pick up the WHORU; he sent back the IM and appropriate codes. It took another couple of minutes to get full access, then he settled in to ask his questions. The captain sat next to him, saying not a word, making not a motion.

Kit made the first request, and waited. Into the silence he said, "There is one thing I've learned about Sakarya, and that's that he's good at what he does."

"How long you been on this?"

"Eight months."

"Don't seem like so much."

"I also got enough facts and figures to indict."

"Well then —"

"Not enough to convict, though. Not reliably."

"My way is easier."

"Your way can be turned on you. Any time you piss off someone with the Alliance, we use your way, you could just be shot down. You like that idea?"

The captain didn't answer.

"You got some indictments against you," Kit continued, "but no convictions. You going to complain that we insist on evidence?"

The captain shrugged.

"But you missed the point about Sakarya being good at what he does," said Kit.

"Tell me."

"Part of being good at it is keeping careful records."

"The sort that could convict him?"

"Yep."

"So, how do you get them?"

"I'm working on that now."

As Kit worked, the captain said, "What I'm not sure of, is why you care."

"It's what I do, go after the bad guys."

"Some might say we're bad guys."

"You got no convictions on your record."

"No. But there's talk we're harbor —"

"You trying to talk me into arresting you, Captain Reynolds?"

"You wanted to do that, you would. I'm just satisfying some curiosity is all."

"So am I."

"About what?"

Kit checked the signal strength and started the next cross-load.

He looked up at the captain, and thought for a bit about how honest an answer to give. What the hell, he decided. "About why Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds, or Captain Malcolm Reynolds, who spends his time steering clear of the Alliance, and most of his energy keeping two badly wanted fugitives out of Alliance hands, went out of his way to save the life of a federal agent."

"Oh, that," said the captain.

"Yes."

"Was an accident. Didn't know what you were."

"I figured out that part. It still doesn't answer the question."

"Yes, it does."

"Then who did you think you were rescuing?"

"Didn't know; I just didn't like the look of those two guys who were sitting around waiting to do someone."

"But it wasn't any of your —"

"They irritated me."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Okay," said Kit. "Maybe because you walked in there and figured what they were doing, and you couldn't stand not to let them know how bad they were at it?"

The captain didn't answer, which, Kit decided, almost certainly counted as an affirmative. He returned his attention to the next and last cross-load he needed.

"Okay, got it," he said a minute later.

"Oh, good," said the Captain. "Then our problems are solved."

Kit didn't reply; he was thinking over what he'd learned, and trying to come up

with a way to use it.

He was pretty sure there was one, and he didn't much care for it.

Yuva: Sarkarya's office

Annalee Wuhan had been his personal secretary for five years, which was more than three times longer than anyone else had survived on his staff. She was efficient, loyal, unambitious, keenly observant, and had no sense of humor. She also had a long list of irritating traits, headed by a refusal to call him anything but Filo, which was how she had first been introduced him, in a small schoolhouse where she had taught not twenty miles from this spot.

She walked into the room, and sat down without being asked; which was another of the irritating traits.

"Good morning, Filo," she said.

"Good morning, Miss Wuhan. What do we know?"

"There is strong reason to believe the agent es — "

"The traitor, Miss Wuhan. Let's call things by their right name, shall we?"

"Certainly, Filo. The agent escaped with the fugitive from Serenity in — "

"What?"

"Serenity. The ship. The agent and the fugitive escaped in a short range shuttle last night, and it is all but certain that they are now back on Serenity."

"Serenity."

"Yes."

"And is — Serenity — gone?"

"As yet, we have been unable to confirm that. There has been no sign of a major thrust from that region escaping Hera, but they could, for one reason or another, have used low thrust, and we wouldn't know."

"Or they could still be there."

"They could indeed."

"And the ship is certainly injured."

"A clean shot, but she was able to break atmo."

Sarkarya sighed. "It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't Filo?"

"We know about the traitor, and he knows we know. That removes his usefulness. Why would he stay? And why link up with — "

"We don't know that they're still here."

Interrupting him was another of her annoying traits.

"No, but we're going to assume they are until we have proof they've left. And we do know that they're all together. What could bring them together?"

"You could, Filo."

"Me?"

"They'd come together because they both hate you."

"They?"

"I looked up the ship, Serenity."

"How did you learn the name?"

"Sir, you hired that ship."

"I hired it?"

"I hired it, in your name. To get the lumber for your son's new Canteen."

"I see. Serenity. Interesting name."

"Filo, the name isn't a coincidence."

"What — ?"

"Here's the file."

He took the e-paper from her hand, automatically reached up to forward tab to skip to the second page, where the guts of the information usually started, but he stopped himself. It was right there, on the title page. "Serenity," it said. "Firefly-class transport. Captain Malcolm Reynolds."

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Well," he said.

"Yes, Filo."

"Well, well, well."

"Yes, Filo."

"Bring me my new head of Security."

Serenity: Med bay

"I saw Jayne walking by with a gun —"

"He's back on the crew," said the captain.

"Uh . . . okay."

"We're going in. Stay with the ship, watch your sister, and be ready to patch us up when we get back."

"Aren't I always?"

"You are at that."

"What's the caper this time?"

"Caper?"

"Is that the wrong word?"

"Come to the dining room."

"Should I get River?"

"She's already there."

Simon nodded and followed the captain up the stairs and then forward.

Everyone else was there, including Jayne, and including someone he hadn't seen before: a stocky man with a neatly trimmed beard and mild eyes; he reminded Simon of a biology professor he'd liked quite a bit. He was speaking to River, who was looking at him as if he were a laboratory specimen of something completely new in the 'verse. He started toward her, but she looked up and caught his eye; she appeared to be all right.

There is such a thing as being over-protective, he reminded himself, and took a seat next to Kaylee, who gave him a smile that made his heart skip a beat. He looked at the captain, who was standing at the head of the table, looking like —

God! He reminds me of my father! No wonder I don't trust him!

He missed the first few words the captain spoke; when he came back to the present, he heard, ". . . just to be clear, there's no money involved. It's something I gotta do."

Wash said, "Mal, is this —" then he broke off. Simon noticed Zoë's hand on his arm. Wash and Zoë looked at each other, but Simon couldn't read whatever might have

passed between them.

Simon said, "Do we get to know anything about this, other than you might get us killed?"

"Sure, Doctor. Might get us caught by the Alliance, too."

As he said that, his eyes shifted to the stranger.

"Uh, not to be rude," said Simon, "but can you tell me —"

"Kit," said the captain. "His name is Kit."

"He's a fed," said Zoë.

"But he's on our side," said Jayne.

Simon's mind reeled. "He's a *what*?"

River said, "Technically speaking, it isn't treason if there are no violations of the law or explicit orders, or actions clearly contrary to the interest of the body to whom one owes loyalty."

"Thank you for that," said the captain.

"She's right," said the one who'd just been identified as a fed.

"She often is," said Simon.

"Let's focus on the job," said the captain.

"Good idea," said Simon. "Let's just ignore that there is an Alliance agent sitting —"

"Yes," said the captain. "Let's ignore that."

Simon said, "I don't think —"

"Good. That's how I like you best."

"Sir," said Zoë, "I think he deserves an explanation. It's his sister —"

"It's his sister," said the fed, "who I am pretending does not exist, as part of a bargain I made with the captain, and if any of you ever tell anyone I said so, I'll make it my life's work to hunt you down and make you regret being born."

Simon's biology teacher had never sounded like that.

River said, "Technically speaking, it isn't treason if there are —"

"It doesn't have to be," said the fed.

"Let's move on," said the captain. "I want to know if everyone is in."

"I'm always in," said Kaylee.

"I'm in," said Zoë.

"Already told you," said Jayne.

Wash said, "Can I just find out *why* —" then he looked at Zoë, shrugged, and said, "All right, I guess I'm being told I'm in."

"Good boy," said Zoë.

Simon felt the captain's eyes on him. He hesitated, then said, "If someone comes in hurt, I'll patch him up. Is there something else I'm supposed to do?"

"Yes. Tell me you're with us."

"Does that have some practical effect I don't understand?"

"No, I just want to hear it."

"Without letting me know what it is? What it's about?"

"Sakarya is a bad guy, and we mean to take him down."

"Now we're in the business of taking down bad guys?"

Kaylee said, "What's wrong with that?"

"Well, for one thing, we're criminals. Doesn't that make us bad guys?"

"I expect it might," said Mal.

"But, what, he's worse?"

"All kinds," said Mal.

Wash cleared his throat and glanced at Zoë. When she didn't give him a sign, he said, "This has something to do with stuff I found on the Cortex, right? Forced indenture, child labo —"

"Yes," said Mal.

"I just want to say," said Simon, "that if you're asking me to sign up for things, I'd rather be told what's happening as it happens."

The captain said, "Doc —"

Simon looked at Kaylee, who was looking right back at him, her eyes very large.

"Okay, I'm in," he said.

The captain nodded. "All right. River?"

"River has never been out," she said.

CHAPTER 14

MY OWN KIND OF CLEVER

Yuva: Sakarya's office

It wasn't over yet.

There was no way to know what was coming, how it was coming, or when, but it wasn't over.

That had always been the problem with the gorram Alliance: they just couldn't leave a man *alone*. And they kept coming. They'd found a way to put a man on the inside, but he'd been exposed, making him useless; so now they'd come up with a new way.

He turned around, facing out at his pond, and watched the ducks.

Now *that* was the question, really: why had they let their man blow his cover? The Alliance had never been sneaky: just big, clunky, big, determined, and big. It rolled over you, it didn't try to outfox you. If they had pulled their man, it wasn't a trick, it was because they needed him for something else.

Question one: What was the something else?

Question two: Did he actually need to know?

The ducks swam in single file, around and around the pond. Occasionally the mother would turn her head, and was maybe giving out an instructional quack. He should get some microphones installed out there, so he could hear them. Duck sounds would be pleasant, from time to time.

A direct attack?

Probably not; that isn't how agents work. But then, there were things going on that he hadn't figured out, yet. He needed to plant someone in with them so he could find out. He'd have done it long ago, if he'd had any idea they were interested in him. But that was for later; for now, he'd put his security forces on alert, just to be safe.

And that ship, *Serenity*. It was a wild card. Had they slipped off? No, he just didn't think so. If they couldn't be found in the sky, it was more likely they'd . . .

Yes, gorram it. They'd landed. They'd come back. Not the Alliance, but Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds, *that* was what had been bothering him all day.

Yep. No doubt about it: he needed his security forces on high alert, and he needed to be hunting for that gorram ship. The only way to stop someone like Reynolds was to get to him first, and hit him *hard*.

He pushed a button on his desk, and began giving the necessary orders.

Serenity: Dining room

"Okay," he said. "Kit, let's see those plans."

The fed nodded and unrolled a sheaf of paper on the table.

"Here are the entrances," he said, pointing to five spots, "plus ground floor windows here, here, here, here, and here."

"Where do we go in?" said Jayne.

"We don't know yet, Jayne" said Mal. "That's what we're trying to figure out. You know, make a plan and all that."

Kit continued, "The perimeter guards are here and here, a pair each, and another two pair making a circuit, covering every point every two minutes. Any given spot might be out of sight of live guards for thirty seconds, max, though there are still cameras."

"Looked at where?"

"Guard station in the house, here, and also in the security office, though there's a fair chance no one in the security office is bothering to look at them."

"Can't count on that," said Mal. "Sakarya's probably putting them on alert."

"Think he knows we're coming?" said Kit.

"I'd count on it."

"All right."

"How are they armed?"

"The guards have rifles, sidearms, and shockrocks. The rest of the force on duty, about forty a shift, are quartered here, between the house and the security office. They can deploy and be anywhere in the house or on the grounds within about three minutes after the alert is given."

Wash said, "Are they Locals, or private security?"

"Both," said Mal and Kit at the same time.

"Forty," said Jayne.

Kit nodded.

"Let me think. Forty of them, four of us. That's . . . uh, more of them."

"Can't get one past you, Jayne," said Mal.

"So, we blow up the barracks?"

"Don't think that's like to happen," said Mal.

"Why not?"

Zoë said, "Jayne, we're not going to blow up forty Locals. We're not at war with the Locals. The Alliance won't take to us blowing up forty Locals. They'll notice. They'll —"

"The Alliance? Now we're worrying about the Alliance? If we were worried about the Alliance, why did we invite a gorram fed to this party?"

"In fact," said Kit, "it's the gorram fed inviting you to his party, and he isn't entirely sure why he's doing it, but he promises you it'll be a bad idea to blow up forty Locals."

Jayne said, "Not if we start out by blowing up the fed."

"Jayne," said Mal. "Your questions been answered."

"All right," said the big man. "So what do we do?"

"We could give up," said Wash. "Surrender. Throw ourselves on their mercy and beg forgiveness. Maybe if we sound really sincere —"

"How do they get word?" said Mal.

"Hmm?" said Kit.

"If the manor gives an alarm, how does the barracks get it?"

"Oh." Kit frowned. "I have the frequency, if you're thinking we could jam it."

"Was thinking that. They have a backup system?"

"Don't know."

"Could you jam it, Wash?"

"Yep. Course, someone figures it out, he could work around it."

"How long would that take?"

"Depends how good he is. Thirty seconds? Five minutes? An hour? There isn't any way to know."

"All right. Let's say we can keep them reinforcements out. We still need to get past the guards on the perimeter, and in the house."

Jayne said, "Can we, like, shoot somebody? Or we just going in waving our guns around hoping to scare 'em to death?"

"Disarm them and immobilize them," said Mal. "Defend yourself if you have to. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. I'd rather get past as many of 'em as we can."

"You could take the shuttle," said Wash.

First Jayne, now Wash. Sometimes his crew could be really dense. "We're going to take the shuttle, Wash," he said patiently. "The point is, how to find the right place to set it down, and then the right way in, and then how we —"

"No, I mean, you could take the shuttle all the way."

"I don't get what —"

Wash stabbed at a place on the plan. "That's the office, right?"

"Yes"

"So, take the shuttle right in."

"Wash, the windows are only —"

"*Niao zai* the windows. Look at the plans. The walls are eight centimeters thick where the studs are, and hollow everywhere else, and you said the place is built of cedar. I could land on top of his desk, if you can tell me where the desk is."

No one spoke for a long moment.

"You know," said Kit, "that's not a half-bad idea."

"Wash, can you really bring us through a wall?" said Mal. "With you flying, there will be five in the shuttle. It's going to be sluggish."

"He can do it," said Zoë before Wash could answer. Wash just nodded.

"How much weight will the floor take?"

"What does the shuttle weigh?"

"With five of us in it? About eight tons."

"What about getting out again?" said Mal.

Wash shrugged. "Spin, go out the way we came. If the floor will hold."

Kit frowned and looked over the plan some more. "Reinforced cedar. Eight tons distributed over . . . I think we'll be all right."

"There's something to be said for it," said Mal. "You can't figure they're looking for it. Kit?"

"I'm good with it."

"Jayne?"

"What, smashing through the wall of a guy's house? What part of that could I not like?"

"Okay, sounds like a plan. Kit, what do you know about timing?"

"You mean, when are we likely to find him sitting at his desk?"

"Yes."

"He does most of his work early morning, or early afternoon."

"What is local time right now?"

"Almost eleven," said Kaylee.

Kit said, "I've got some numbers. Give me a few minutes to run them, and I'll give you an ideal time."

"Good. Wash, can you show Kaylee how to jam that signal?"

"Easy. I can set it up so she just has to hit the power."

"Good, then. What else?"

"Sir," said Zoë. "What are we going to do when we get in there?"

Kill him, he thought. "We'll see," he said.

Serenity: Jayne's quarters

He sat on his bunk, and was not entirely happy with the state of the 'verse.

It was a hell of a time for Vera to be locked away in a gorram storage locker. And all of his other hardware with her. All he had were two pistols, one with three spare magazines, one with four. And with this sort of work, a rifle could make all the difference.

On the other hand, if they were all killed crashing through the wall, it wouldn't matter what sort of weapons he was carrying. That was comforting.

He stripped, cleaned, and re-assembled both weapons, enjoying going through the motions his hands knew so well.

That was comforting, too.

But if things went wrong—

No, that was stupid. Something like this, how could things *not* go wrong? The only questions were, how many things would go wrong, and which were they? And that sort of figuring, he knew, was not his particular skill.

He put the spare magazines for the Century Marauder VI in his right-hand coat pocket, and the ones for the Devtrex SI-4 in his left. *Right Century*, he repeated. *Right Century. It's the right century. Heh. That's funny.* The Marauder went into his belt, the SI into his left-hand pants pocket. He'd use the Marauder first, of course. They built a good weapon; you could drive nails with the butt, then drive more nails with the barrel, and you'd still have a weapon that would fire clean and hit what you aimed at. The Devtrex, well, it would fire most of the time, if it was kept clean.

Mal had a plan. The Fed had a plan, too. Okay, then. Fine. If they landed alive, and got out of the shuttle alive, he'd just start shooting, and stop when everything in sight was dead.

There, he thought. *Now I have a plan, too.*

Serenity: Shuttle one

It's all in the details, he reminded himself.

He was looking over the shuttle, studying the position of the seats, and the distance from each to the door. There was the door control itself, and that's where someone would be standing to operate it. Therefore –

Gorram it. There too many variables; too many unknowns; too many things that could go, if not wrong, then at least *different*. And that would be plenty to upset any plan he could come up with more general than, *take any opportunity to make things work out right*.

He checked his sidearm.

In the seven years since the end of the war, he had never fired a shot except at the range; had never come close to needing to. And now . . .

He'd always thought of himself as a plodder.

There were field agents who could go into situations where there was liable to be shooting and stabbing and close escapes. And there were field agents who could appear at a crime scene and put together what had happened like rolling a vid. He had never thought of himself as either of those types: he went in, took as much time as was needed to establish a good cover, took as much time as needed to gather the evidence, assembled the information in neat, clear, and precise reports, and then, if necessary, testified in court.

You don't fire up an ASREV to jump from the core to the border. You don't pull the pin on a grenade to tap into someone's Cortex transmission. You don't use a tranq-gun to search a database for signs of tax fraud.

He was a tool of the Alliance, and he was fine with that; but he was the wrong tool for this job. Only, if he didn't do it, it wouldn't get done. And if it didn't get done, he'd not only wasted eight months of his life, but he'd blown the first assignment he'd ever actually cared about.

Gorram those rutting bastards to hell. Why couldn't they have just let him do his job, instead of bollixing the whole thing just to rip over some poor girl who had yet to be even suspected of a crime?

He couldn't save her, of course. The Special Deputies were coming, and he knew something of how they worked. They didn't get stopped. All he could do, as a salve for his conscience, was to try to complete his mission before they arrived. Once they were here, he wouldn't be able to . . .

Now there is an interesting thought. I wonder if that could work.

He looked around the shuttle again, and considered.

He took a close look at the comm equipment.

Yes, it just might work.

He left the shuttle and went off in search of River Tam. When he knocked on the door of her room, she said, "Come in, Agent Merlyn." The captain was right, she was a bit "creepifying."

He said, "River Tam . . . may I call you River?"

She nodded, watching him closely, as if he were a peculiar object; not something to fear, but something to study. He wasn't entirely certain he liked it.

"I have a question for you. Do you already know, or shall I ask it?"

"Both," she said.

"You said they'd be showing up in the afternoon. Can you tell me more precisely –"

"They'll hit lower atmo, near enough to pick up on Serenity's gear, at 13:18 local

time, which will put them seventeen point three minutes from nearest landfall."

"Thank you."

He stood up and got out, because, gorram it, she *was* creepifying. He went off to find the pilot. Then he had to talk to the captain, now that he knew what to tell him.

Serenity: Bridge

"And that," he said, "ought to be all you need. When it's time, hit this. If that light goes green, it's working."

"What if it doesn't go green?" asked Kaylee

"Then it isn't working."

"But what do I do?"

"Call me."

"You're going to be able to tell me how to fix it while you're in the middle of landing a shuttle through a wall inside a building?"

"No, but I'll know to panic."

"Wash, are you worried?"

"Worried? No, not at all. So scared my sphincters have slammed shut, but not worried."

"Wash—"

"Kaylee, I know you want me to say something reassuring. And believe me, I'd love to. But this is the most insane thing we've ever done. And what with one thing and another, that bar has been set pretty high."

Kaylee sat down in the co-pilot's seat, and turned away. Her shoulders shook.

"Kaylee—"

"I just don't want you to die. All of you. And I don't want you to die when I'm not there. What am I suppose to do if you all get killed in there? And what are you doing it for?"

"Why did you say you were in?"

"Because . . . I don't know. I just did. I am. I'm not going to say I'm not in."

"Well, if things go bad, I'll bet River could learn enough to fly Serenity out of here."

"Wash!"

"I know. That isn't what you mean."

"You'll be in touch, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

"If things get bad, will you let me know?"

"Why?"

"Cuz."

"Kaylee, what are you going to do?"

"If you die, I can put River and Simon into the other shuttle and . . . what do you care, anyway? You'll be dead."

Wash stared at her for a moment. He knew what she meant to do; the question was, how to talk her out of it?

"Actually," said someone whose voice he didn't recognize at first, "I have an idea for something that would be much more useful, and leave you alive at the end of it. Maybe us, too."

Wash looked up and saw the Alliance agent, just entering the bridge.

"What are you doing up here?"

"Looking for you. You're Hoban Washburne, right?"

"Wash," he said. "And what were you looking for me for?"

"Like I said, I have an idea."

"I'll have to ask the captain, whatever it is."

"How about if you listen first, and then decide what you want to do about it. And you – Kaywinnet Frye?" Kaylee nodded. "You listen too, because if it works, you're going to have to do it."

Kaylee nodded again, and they listened.

Three minutes later, Wash looked at Kaylee. She looked back at him with an unusually serious expression; her eyes were just a little red, but they were dry.

"On the other hand," said Wash. "Maybe we don't have to ask Mal after all."

Serenity: Bridge

"That sort of puts it on me, don't it?"

"Well," said Wash. "In a manner of speaking, from a certain perspective, I suppose you could say that your rôle –"

"Yes," said Kit.

"I was getting there," said Wash.

"Can you do it?" asked Kit.

"Oh, easy."

Wash stared at her. "Kaylee, sometimes you . . . all right. I'll set it up."

"And," said Kit, "I should get back to the shuttle."

"I'll walk with you," said Kaylee.

She felt Wash's puzzled look on her back, but didn't want to take the time to explain. Besides, she had no idea what the explanation was.

When she hadn't said anything by the time they passed the dining room, Kit said, "What's on your mind?"

"Why do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Work for the Alliance."

"Oh. That. I thought you meant why do I betray them by not reporting that I know where a pair of badly wanted fugitives are."

"No. Well, that too."

"I think it's a good idea that people like Sakarya be stopped. Don't you?"

"Well, yes, but does that mean people like Simon and River have to be hunted down, when they never did anything?"

"Seems like it does."

"Well, that's wrong!"

Kit didn't say anything.

"You know it is," she continued. "That's why you're here, isn't it? That's why you're doing this. Because you know what they're doing is wrong."

Kit still didn't say anything.

"You know, they grind people up. People like Simon and River, and people like you. That's what they do. They grind people up."

"I know," said Kit.

Serenity: Dining room

The others had left to go about their business, except for Simon, who sat with her, but was lost in his own thoughts. She stared at the tabletop and waited for what had to be coming. It took several minutes.

"Couldn't you have said something to stop them?"

She'd been expecting the question in some form, but the way it came out was, well, it added levels of complexity that she knew her brother couldn't have considered. Stopped them? Who was them? What sort of "stopped" did he mean? Was he asking if they were programmed with safewords? Was he asking if they could be held motionless by her voice?

It took her some time to sort through the possible meanings to come up with the highest probability interpretation. And once she had, it only raised more questions: what was he actually afraid of? And, if he thought their intended activity was such a bad idea, why had he agreed to it?

Going past all of that, she pulled another meaning out: he trusted her, and wanted to be reassured that everything was going to be all right. He was frightened.

Well, but there were so many things to be frightened of.

There were men coming to get her, and they would be here very soon, and they were terrifying. And there were so many ways things could go wrong between what Mal wanted to do and what the agent wanted to do. And there were always the fluke occurrences that, in a plan as intricate as theirs, could so easily, at so many points, make it all go bad. There were missed shots and jammed weapons. There were sudden gusts of wind while the shuttle was up. The chance Serenity would be found too soon. And so much more.

By the time she could give her brother all the probabilities for all the mishaps, whatever was going to happen would have happened a long time before, at least for the most useful definition of "long time" in this context.

But he was her brother, and he was frightened, and he needed reassurance, and she didn't want to lie to him. So, she determined which high probability event had the greatest chance of making what he feared come true, and she considered it carefully, and was pleased to be able to give her brother the answer he wanted.

"Don't worry," she said. "Wash and the Alliance agent talked Kaylee out of crashing Serenity into the house."

It was strange, judging from the look on his face, how little that appeared to reassure him.

CHAPTER 15

MY OWN KIND OF PRESENT

13:07

He ran through the preliminary checklist a second time before he started warming up the shuttle. He thought about running through it a third, but there was an old saying to the effect that you shouldn't start getting paranoid when time was running out.

Actually, there wasn't any such saying, but there should be. Wash decided that if he lived through this, he'd have to come up with one. Meanwhile, he started the warmup process, again checking each step carefully.

It wasn't like this would be the trickiest flying he'd ever done. Quite. No reason to be nervous.

He felt an obscure disappointment when the warmup sequence was completed, because now he had nothing to do except wait until it was time to move.

Oh, right: one thing that was always necessary when you were unlucky enough to be going into mortal danger, but lucky enough to have advance warning.

He got back from the toilet and sat down again. This pilot's chair was fine, but it didn't feel the same as his. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Now, what? Was he really out of ways to kill time?

No, he could look over the plans again, and re-check the route, especially the final approach. He'd only been over it four times so far, and only once cross-checking it with the weather report.

He checked the time, and found that it was less than five minutes until launch. His palms were suddenly moist, and his mouth dry. That was all right, though; he'd be fine when it was time to launch.

13:15

The pilot was already in place, but no one else was, so he could choose his seat.

"Welcome aboard, welcome aboard," said the one called Wash, turning in his chair. "Passengers are advised to strap down for their own safety, and, as always, we remind you that Washburn Passenger Service is not responsible for lost luggage,

air-sickness, or suddenly exploding into fiery ruin."

The first mate was in next; she kissed the pilot, squeezed his shoulder, and sat down next to him. The captain and the mercenary came in last; the captain took a position near the door.

"Is it time?" he asked.

"About a minute," said the pilot. "And, not to be painfully obvious, but you should all make sure you're strapped in good." Then he stabbed a button. "Kaylee, open us up."

"Copy," came her voice.

A moment later, the pilot spoke again. "Kaylee?"

"Still here."

"Open us up, Kaylee."

"But . . . oh. That was the other one. There you go."

"Thank you, Kaylee."

"Good luck, all of you."

"Disengaging in three . . . two . . . one . . . free."

There was a mild jolt, a drop, and Kit was shoved back into his chair.

Okay, Kit, my boy. You're in it now.

There was a faint whirring sound as the wings deployed, and they settled into the flight. He wiped his hands on his pants. The flight was scheduled to last just over twenty-six minutes. And end very abruptly.

He put his hand on the buckle that would release his restraints.

I'll bet I'd have made a really good school teacher.

13:16

Serenity gave a little sigh and expressed a desire to list to starboard when the shuttle separated, but her gyros whirled, and she settled in. Kaylee sat in the pilot's chair and watched the clock, as well as the screen that Wash had set up. It was seventeen minutes after thirteen hundred.

The screen was clear.

She tried to relax. It wasn't easy up here on the bridge, in this chair, but she tried.

It was still seventeen minutes after.

The screen was still clear.

She noticed that her eyes hurt, and realized that it was because she hadn't been letting herself blink. She blinked several times, rapidly, then, in sudden panic, looked at the screen. It was still clear.

And it was still seventeen minutes after.

A long, long time later it was eighteen minutes after.

And the screen was still clear.

She heard herself make a little mewing sound.

And the screen was still clear.

And then the screen wasn't clear any more.

She heard a sound, midway between a sigh and a squeek, and realized it came from her.

Her hand was shaking as she reached for the green switch marked with the bright orange tape.

The "click" as she flipped it seemed very loud.

So was the next click as she started the timer for the jamming signal Wash had set up; a counter appeared in the upper right corner of the front screen. It started at nineteen minutes and began counting down.

Two lights far to the right turned green. In a moment, they were joined by a third one, flashing. Information began to fill the upper-most monitor, and then the blip on the screen she'd been watching moved across the top, stopped, and began to approach the center. Slowly, but still much too fast.

She remained in the pilot's chair, shaking and waiting and trying to watch three screens at once, because a new blip was going to appear on one of them, and then she'd have to move quickly.

13:24

Miss Wuhan's voice came over the intercom. "Filo."

He tore himself away from the projections he was trying to run. The worst thing that backstabbing fed had done, he'd been thinking, was deprive him of someone who knew how to do those. He'd have to hire someone soon; and this time do a *thorough* background check on the gorram bastard.

"What is it?"

"Serenity has been found, landed, about twenty miles out of town."

"Get me security."

"They're waiting, Filo. I'll switch you over now."

"Security here. This is —"

"You have a lock on Serenity?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good work. Send a Catfish. No messing around. Leave a crater there."

"Yes, sir. We're on it."

He started to switch off, but suddenly, for no reason he was conscious of, he said, "Wait. How'd the break happen?"

"Sir?"

"How did you find her?"

"She started transmitting an ident beacon."

He looked out at his duck pond. An ident beacon? Suddenly started transmitting an ident beacon? Why in the gorram hell would they do *that*? "Hold a moment," he said.

"Yes, sir."

His mind worked quickly. "Okay, dispatch the Catfish, but scan them first. If there is no one aboard, then hold off on attacking and get hold of me. Repeat your orders."

The other did so, without flaw.

"Okay, move," said Sakarya.

He didn't know what was happening, but he was pretty sure that whatever it was would happen soon.

He glanced at the clock: it was 13:28.

13:28

She felt the shuttle level out, and from what she could tell, they were about eighty or ninety meters off the deck. She wasn't worried about it; if something was going to go wrong (and something was almost sure to go wrong) it wouldn't be with the flying. She had seen the route they planned to take, curving around a twisting terrain to stay off radar, and she never for a moment doubted that, just about ten minutes from now, they'd arrive amid crashing and splintering of wood, and they'd arrive intact.

It was the part after that she worried about, and she worried about it on several levels. The Captain had something in mind. The fed had something in mind. And she had the uncomfortable feeling that her husband had something in mind, or, at least, that there was something he knew that he wasn't talking about.

Yes, she was worried. But she was also very much aware that, at this moment, there was nothing she could do about that worry; nothing at all until the next stage of the operation began.

And when that happened, in addition to everything else, she intended to keep a close eye on that fed.

The shuttle made a soft, gentle turn and a smooth rise.

No, she didn't know what was going on with her man, but he could certainly fly. Yes, indeed, he could fly.

She leaned over a little so she could read the clock around his left arm. It was 13:32.

13:32

He sat with his sister in the dining room, trying to be patient. It became harder after she suddenly said, "They're here."

"Who?" he asked, not entirely sure he wanted an answer. Instead of answer, however, River stood up.

"Let's go," she said.

"Where?"

Kaylee's voice came over the intercom. "Simon! River! Into shuttle one, now!"

Simon stared at his sister for just a moment. She smiled back and led the way toward the shuttle.

Kaylee was already there. He said, "What are we —"

Kaylee started to answer, but River said, "Not now, Simon. There isn't any time."

"All right," said Simon, wishing he had at least some vague idea of what was happening.

River at once sat down in the pilot's seat. "Strap yourselves in," she said, as she went through the warm up sequence. "We're off in five."

"Is that five minutes, or five seconds?" asked Simon.

"Boob," said River, and Simon felt like he'd been kicked as the shuttle leaped from its berth.

It was 13:36.

13:36

Analee patched security through without announcing it. "Sir, this is Unit One, and we're at the site. Scan complete, no sign of life. Both shuttles have been launched."

"Hold your fire and check the area. Any sign of either shuttle?"

"Vapor signs consistent with short-range shuttles."

"Can you fix direction?"

"That's affirmative, sir. Opposite directions, one directly toward town, the other directly away."

"Follow the one heading toward town. Overtake and destroy it."

"Yes – there's a problem, sir."

Something inside him twisted and sank; he'd had that feeling before, and the memory came back strong. "There's a problem," he'd been told, followed by word that the artillery support wasn't coming through. "What is the problem, Unit One?"

"We're being ordered to ground and be boarded."

Old habits came back, and he heard himself sounding completely calm as he said, "Ordered by whom?"

"They identify themselves as Special Deputies of the Anglo Sino Alliance, sir. We've been given one minute to comply."

"What is the situation?"

"They're in some sort of short-range vehicle."

"Do you see any armament?"

"No, sir. Nothing visible."

"Anything else in the vicinity?"

There was a brief pause, then, "No, sir. Clear sky, no sign of anything on the ground."

"Unit One, attack. Blow them out of the sky."

"Yes, sir. Engaging."

He counted to ten, then said, "Report." A moment later, he said, "Unit One?"

He muttered a curse and said, "Security, are you still there? What are you picking up?"

Nothing.

"Security, report on the status of unit one."

After five seconds he let out a slow breath. "Okay," he said aloud. "This can't be good."

The clock on his desk said 13:41.

13:39

River set the shuttle down, gently as a feather. As far as Simon could guess, they were a mile or two from Serenity.

"What's happening?" he said.

River said, "They blew up the security ship that was sent to bomb us."

"They . . ." He looked at Kaylee, and discovered that he was holding her hand. He wasn't sure when or how that had happened, but her hand felt cool and good in his. She was looking at him.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm scared."

She needn't have told him that last; he could see it. He tried to think of something

to say to reassure her, but couldn't think of anything that didn't just sound stupid. He squeezed her hand.

"River," said Simon. "Who blew up what security ship?"

"Two by two, hands of blue."

"River —"

"But they aren't coming for us. They're flying away. We can go back to the ship now."

"Are you sure?"

River sent him a withering glance over her shoulder.

"I wish," said Simon, "that I had some idea —"

"It was his idea," said Kaylee, as she unstrapped herself, released his hand, and stood up. "The Alliance agent. And Wash's. They worked it out together."

"Worked *what* out?"

Kaylee leaned over River and pressed a button on the console.

"What was that?" Simon heard an edge of panic in his voice.

"The recall," said Kaylee. "Now we can return to the ship."

"But —"

"Strap in," said River.

It was 13:42.

13:42

It was easier than it ought to have been.

The wind was pretty mild, and, as he began the final approach, almost directly in his teeth; and no one was shooting at him; and all the landmarks were clear and easy to follow. It was an awfully straightforward piece of flying for how scary it was.

He swung the shuttle around, nice and easy, holding at about three hundred feet, and got a visual on the house.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he said to no one in particular.

"What surprises me is that it was your idea," said Mal.

"Rub it in," muttered Wash.

The house, and then the spot on the wall; in his mind, he superimposed a big X on it, and aimed right for that spot. It was coming up on them fast.

"What's that indicator mean?" said Mal suddenly.

"What indic —"

"The one's that flashing."

"Oh, that?" said Wash. "Nothing. The recall. It means that Kaylee, River, and Simon are returning to Serenity."

"Returning?" said Mal. "I don't — what the gorram hell is going on?"

"I'll explain later," said Wash. The house rushed up at him. "You know, this is mind-numbingly stupid," he remarked.

He killed the thrust, hit the airbreaks, and gave her a bit of the retros, then a lot more just as they hit the wall.

13:43

He had maybe two seconds of warning that something was going to happen, and none whatsoever of what it was.

Old, old reflexes were still operating, however, and he was out of his chair and rolling on the ground almost before the sound reached him, and well before he had time to figure out just what had happened.

A few splinters cut him here and there, but he didn't notice.

When the noise stopped, he raised his head, and his first thought was that someone had fired a missile at him, and it hadn't exploded. By the time he realized what it actually was, the door of the vessel was opening. He had, by this time, slipped so far into his old battle reflexes that he found his hand was reaching for a sidearm he hadn't carried in seven years.

13:44

With some detached part of his mind, he realized that what he was experiencing was a lot like trying to stay on a badly spooked horse. With another small part, he put aside whatever it was that Wash had cooked up without telling him; there was just no time to worry about it now.

With the more important and less conscious part of his mind, he unsnapped his restraints and hit the button to open the door, and as the door swung open he saw that the fed was already past him and was out the door.

Guy moves fast.

He drew his weapon and followed the fed out into the shambles that had been—he hoped—Sakarya's office, feeling Zoë and Jayne behind him. "Jayne," he said, "cover the door."

One thing he hadn't anticipated was that it would be hard to see; but there was dust—sawdust, most likely—everywhere. It stung his eyes and nose. *Goggles, dammit; I should have brought goggles.*

After what seemed like a horribly long time, he focused on the tall man, just coming to his feet against the wall to his left. The man said, "Good afternoon, Sergeant Reynolds. You make quite an entry."

Mal swung his pistol to cover him. "Good afternoon, Colonel Bursa. You're about to make quite an exit."

"Could be," said the ex-colonel, "but I'm not sure your team is in complete agreement about that."

Mal took a quick glance around the room. Jayne had his pistol pointing at the door. Zoë had her carbine pointing at the fed. The fed had his pistol pointing at Mal.

Oops, he thought.

CHAPTER 16

MY OWN KIND OF HEALTH

Sakarya's office

Her reactions had been automatic. She saw a pistol leveled at the Captain, and she'd been prepared to cut down the fed; she stopped only when she realized that he wasn't shooting.

She kept the weapon pointing at the fed and waited for the little twitch around his eyes that indicated he was about to pull the trigger, or for an order from the Captain; but as she did, it occurred to her with something of a shock that she very, very badly wanted to turn her carbine and put two rounds into Bursa's chest. The desire came on so strong that, for a moment, her hands almost trembled.

But she didn't do it, of course. She held her position and waited for orders, because that's what she did.

Sakarya's office

With the corner of his eye, he saw Wash leave the ship, look around, and then head for the door of the office. Before he got there it swung open and two men dressed in green coveralls and holding rifles came through. Mal kept his attention and his weapon on Bursa while Jayne fired twice. When the bodies hit the floor, Wash continued, stepping around them.

"Where are you going?" said Jayne.

"Out for a stroll," said Wash. "I won't be a minute."

Then Jayne said, "Hey!" and swung his rifle to cover the fed.

"Stay on the door, Jayne," said Mal.

"We should probably talk," said Kit.

"Okay. But we're all holding guns here, and someone's arm is going to get tired soon, and we all know what that means."

"I'll talk fast. I can't let you kill this man."

"You know who he is?"

"I knew before you did."

"You know who he was?"

"Your old commanding officer when you fought for the Independents."

"He was more than that to me."

"I figured. He was your hero, wasn't he?"

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"No, you wouldn't. But it was true. He mentored you, taught you about command, showed you —"

"Shut up."

"And look at him now. He threw away his name, his rank, and his scruples. That must be *feichang bu yukuai* for you. It must feel like a betrayal of everything —"

"I said shut up."

"All right. But you don't get to commit murder."

Bursa/Sakarya stood there, hands clear of his body but not raised, and gave no indication that the conversation had anything to do with him, or even that he was listening to it.

"I'm not convinced you can stop me," said Mal.

Sakarya's office

A somewhat elderly woman sat behind a desk, speaking into a microphone with a sense of urgency.

"Hi there," said Wash. "I need to borrow your processor for a moment. I promise I won't hurt it."

"Who —?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I'm in kind of a hurry. And you're not going to be able to reach your security people anyway. So, if you'll just let me . . . ugh. Which one of these . . . ? Okay, that's the direct link to the Cortex, so one of these must be, ah, I see. I don't know if I have the right connection here. Okay, this ought to — there. Yes. A guy named Mister Universe showed me how to do this. Weird name, huh? Not half as weird as the guy is. We met in flight school. Worst pilot you ever . . . okay, that should do it. Just give me half a second to make sure the cross-load worked. Yep. Okay. You can have your desk again. Thanks."

Sakarya's office

Kit really hoped the captain couldn't tell how scared he was, or how bad he was at this whole pointing guns business. It's funny, when they had tried to kill him in the canteen he hadn't been scared at all; maybe he'd been too busy trying to work out what had happened. But now, when he had the gun, it was much worse.

Of course, that sawed-off carbine pointing straight at his chest might be part of the reason.

He said, "I don't need to state the obvious, do I?"

The captain said, "You mean, the part about I shoot him, you shoot me, Zoë shoots you, and Jayne flies off into the sunset?"

"Something like that."

"Works for me," said the mercenary without turning his head.

"No, you don't need to point that out."

"So, tell me this: what do you think will do more good? Killing this guy, or making an example of him to everyone else on the border worlds who wants to try the same thing?"

"Couldn't say," said the captain. "I don't conjure with more good and less good, just with what's in front of me."

"The Independents lost the war, Captain Reynolds."

"Yeah, I read that somewhere."

"Let suppose the cause was right. Then what?"

"You don't believe that."

"No, I don't. But suppose I'm wrong. Then what?"

"Then it's a damn shame we lost."

"Just what I was thinking. Means some bad happened."

"I don't think you're making your point real well, Agent Merlyn."

"So, how about, if some bad happened, you let us do what good we can do, to sort of make up for some of it."

Wash came through the door.

"Wash!" said Jayne. "I almost put one through your gorram head!"

Wash ignored him, and spoke to Kit. "I got it," he said.

"Verify it."

"How?"

The captain said, "Wash —"

"One second, Mal."

Kit said, "Slide the little brown button on the back the other way, then hit start."

Wash said, "Two green lights."

Okay, here we go. It happens or it doesn't.

Kit rotated his whole body until, weapon and all, he was facing Sakarya. He said, "Filo Bursa, alias Filo Sakarya, you are bound by law for violations of Alliance Labor Code section nineteen part three, forced indenture, and section seventeen part five, child labor, and additional charges to be determined by a duly authorized court."

Then he waited.

Sakarya's office

He so badly wanted to pull the trigger; to watch Bursa fall to the ground twitching. To shoot him in the chest, so he'd just have enough to time to know he was dying.

But it wasn't that gorram simple.

He'd never felt this way in a firefight.

Even as a young recruit, when he didn't know how to handle himself, he'd done as well as could be expected: keeping his head down and shooting in the general direction of the enemy. But this was different. It wasn't clear. It wasn't obvious. There were too many answers, and all of them had some right and some wrong.

When the fed pointed his gun at Bursa, Zoë had immediately turned hers toward the door; now he heard the report of her carbine at the same time as Jayne's pistol, and two more of Bursa's security force fell in the doorway, next to their companions, one of whom was moaning and writhing, while the other wasn't moving at all.

"Sir," said Zoë, without turning her head, "whatever you're going to do, I'd

suggest doing it soon."

"Real soon," said Wash, from directly behind him. "Someone's gotten past the jamming."

Song yiqie dao ta ma de diyu.

In a firefight, he either knew the right thing to do, or he knew something to do that, at least, wasn't *wrong*. The only thing worse than having to make this sort of decision was having to make this sort of decision in a hurry.

He looked over at the fed. "I don't owe you a gorram thing," he said.

"I know."

"And I owe your Alliance even less."

"I know."

Mal lowered his pistol and heard himself saying, "Take him, then. He's yours."

Sakarya's office

A tension she didn't know she was feeling drained out of her when the Captain spoke. She held her position and kept her focus on the door while she heard a clanking sound that had to be cuffs going around Colonel Bursa's wrists. She held her position, waiting for the order to embark.

"Wash, how's the shuttle?"

"It's going to be fun getting it turned around in here, but everything works."

"You can fly us out?"

"Yes."

"With six of us aboard?"

She heard the hesitation, then, "I don't —"

"Five," said the fed. "Take the prisoner. I'm staying here. I'll come to collect him later."

"You know they'll kill you," he heard the Captain saying.

"Oddly enough, they won't. But I'd hurry if I were you. There are two Special Deputies on the way, and you'd much rather face down Sakarya's security force than these two. Trust me on that."

"All of you, move," said the Captain. "Buttoned up and flying in thirty seconds."

She took a position next to Bursa, grabbed his arm, jabbed her sawed-off into his back, and guided him toward the shuttle. He seemed reluctant to move. She dropped the barrel of the weapon, prodded him again, and said, "Colonel, if you even hesitate," she said, "I'll blow your balls off and we'll drag you in. And you can't know how much I want to blow your balls off."

They moved toward the shuttle.

Sakarya's office

Rearguard again.

As he backed toward the shuttle, keeping his eye on the door, he saw the fed leaving, and felt a sudden temptation to put a round into him, just because he could. Then the fed was coming back through the door, faster than he'd left. After about five steps he stopped, turned, fired twice, then backed up and off to the side.

Crap.

Jayne moved forward and dropped to his belly, holding the Marauder with both hands.

"Jayne!" called Mal. "What are you doing?"

Now there was a good question. He'd just been thinking about plugging the gorram fed, just for fun, and now he was —

A whole bushelfull of them came through the door, several of them getting in each other's way, a couple of them tripping. *Not the best trained troops I've ever seen*, he thought. Meanwhile, the little counter in the back of his head recorded that after firing six times, he had fourteen rounds left in the magazine. The captain was firing from behind him, and the agent from off to his right somewhere, though he wasn't consciously aware of how he knew. Another voice joined the chorus; it had to be Zoë. He hoped that ruttin' bastard in the shuttle was well secured, but it wasn't his job to worry about that. He also made a mental note: *I should really suggest to the Captain that we pick up some grenades.*

He fired six more times, very fast, then the doorway was clear. Were they hanging back, waiting, or had they run? Only one way to find out. He stood up, then discovered he was on his stomach again.

What the--?

He tried to stand again, and failed.

Then hands grabbed him by the arms; Mal's and Zoë's, and dragged him toward the shuttle. The fed was looking at him, holding a smoking pistol, and then he was inside, and was being strapped into a chair.

"You can really get us out of here?" said Mal, which seemed very odd, because Jayne had never claimed to be a pilot, and he wasn't even in the pilot's chair.

"Watch me," said Wash. "How is Jayne?"

"One in the shoulder that went straight down, one in the left calf. I'm not sure how bad. Zoë took a scratch in the hand. That's all. Now get us out of here."

"I'm on it."

There was a shiver as the shuttle started up.

How is Jayne? One in the shoulder? Hey, that's my name. Was there another Jayne he didn't know about? Be damned funny if one of those bastards he'd shot had the same name as him.

The shuttle rose about a foot off the floor and did a neat one hundred eighty degree turn in place. Jayne wanted to ask Wash not to do that, because the motion made him queasy; but it seemed like a lot of effort to talk.

Wash guided the shuttle neatly through the hole it had made coming in with a force that pushed Jayne into his chair. As the ship slowed for a turn, he felt himself moving forward. He reached out to hold the seat in front of him. For just a second, he felt a horrible pain in his back, then he didn't.

Sakarya's office

The Captain said, "Wash, what just happened?"

He turned his head just enough for them to hear him over the whine of the engine and the whirl of the wings deploying. "I don't know, exactly, except that I plugged a thing into a thing and pushed a button."

"You made an arrangement with the fed."

"Yeah, Mal. An arrangement to get us out of that place alive. It worked, too. Sorry if it hurt your feelings."

"You knew what was going to happen."

Wash made a minor course adjustment and gained a lot of altitude. "Can't say as I did, actually. But I had a pretty good idea that if you went in and killed that guy, all sorts of things were going to happen, including the bunch of us probably getting shot."

"How? How did that —?"

"Mal, the fed was not going to let you shoot his prisoner."

"Your wife was going to shoot the fed if he'd tried."

"Yeah, Mal. And I wasn't really happy with that idea. And you weren't either."

"So you took it on yourself —"

"Yes, I did."

"Who else?"

"No one else."

"The fed has to have been part of it."

"Well, yeah, the fed. Mal, if you're going to shoot me for it, would you please wait until I'm done flying this thing?"

Zoë felt the Captain's eyes on her from the seat to her right, but she kept her own eyes staring straight ahead. "Zoë," he said. "I need to know where you stand. I can't have —"

"Sir."

A pause. "Yes?"

"I wasn't part of it. And I wouldn't have gone for it. But while you're thinking this over, there's one thing for you to consider."

"And that is?"

"They're right."

"They're right to just decide —"

"That every once in a while you have to be saved from yourself? Yes, sir."

"And those Special Deputies he was talking about? Are they going to just fly away? You know they're after the doctor and his sister, and you know they won't stop until they find her."

"Yeah," said Wash as he leveled out the shuttle. "Well, I guess I should explain that part of it."

"I guess you should," said the Captain.

Zoë closed her eyes for a moment. It was starting to look like there was a horrid, ugly choice she wasn't going to have to make. This time.

Serenity: Bridge

Wash's voice came over the comm. "Kaylee, you there?"

"I'm here, Wash. How . . . how are you?"

"Mal is looking for someone to kill, and Jayne took a bad one, but everything is fine other than that. Have the doctor standing by. We're coming in. Locking in three . . . two . . . one. . . locked."

She wanted to know if the Captain knew about her involvement, but she couldn't think of any way to ask the question. She thought about getting up and going to meet

them as they left the shuttle; she thought about going back to the engine room and waiting there. In the end, she just notified Simon that he had a patient, then sat in Wash's chair and waited.

Sakarya's office

The security forces had vanished, no doubt down the stairs. He felt rather like patting himself on the back; four of them had held off more than thirty, and even made them run. But in all conscience he couldn't, because he knew they had the superior position, and he knew just who joined those security forces and what sort of training they had never received, and because now he had to deal with Miss Wuhan.

Miss Wuhan was staring at him. "You!" she finally managed. "He trusted you, and you betrayed —"

"Miss Wuhan, you have three choices. You can be bound by law, you can force me to shoot you, or you can walk out of here right now. I'd prefer you didn't take the second option; I don't much care about the other two."

"You're a federal agent."

"That's right."

"What you did was illegal."

"In fact it wasn't. I got the evidence to convict, and I can show probable cause. Of course, if I'd failed to get the evidence, you might say I'd have been breathing metaphorical vacuum. But I got it, so all is well and happy. Now, do you want to go down with him, or go down for good, or go away?"

"The security forces will be back soon. They'll kill you before you can —"

"Not before I shoot you if you're still here when they arrive. I'm not big on shooting little old ladies, but I will. Trust me."

The little old lady hesitated, then without another word headed out the door.

He sat in the chair and waited.

Security forces? She had no idea what the real danger was. To hell with the gorram security forces, there wouldn't be more than thirty of them. But there were two Special Deputies coming; that was the real problem.

He heard a faint scuffling and raised voices coming from some distance away, no doubt down the stairs. He leaned back in the chair, and took a couple of deep breaths. He kept his pistol in his hand, out of sight beneath the desk.

There were two of them, as expected; except for odd, skin-tight blue gloves, they were dressed simply, much like he was; they could have worked in the office with him and would have fit in nicely.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said, before they could speak. "I'm Kit Merlyn, Anglo Sino Alliance Security, Investigations Department, Identification number six three dash four one seven, reporting to Commissioner Gerald White. I'm not expecting you to identify yourselves; I know who you are and why you're here."

He felt himself come under intent scrutiny. The other, shorter one, spoke in a pleasant, almost melodic voice: "Agent Merlyn, why do you have a weapon concealed under that desk?"

He'd been expecting that question. "Because I know how you gentlemen work, and I have no intention of letting you kill me if I can prevent it. I have a man to prosecute, and —"

"You think we'd kill one of our own with no reason?"

"No, you'd need a reason, but I have no idea what you might decide is a reason, so I'm playing it safe."

"Very well," said the thinner one. "Then where are they?"

"Simon and River Tam left the world twenty-four hours ago in a Firefly class transport. They made a rendezvous in close orbit with an as yet unidentified Seagull-class transport, transferred to her, and left the world. The Firefly, Serenity, landed back here. I temporarily commandeered and searched her in order to complete my own mission. I'll be filing a full report —"

"Did you speak with the Tams?"

"I had no contact with them at any time, only with a crew member of Serenity who intended to give them up."

"That would a Mister Jayne Cobb?" said the other.

"That is correct, yes."

"And where is he?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, he is a fugitive somewhere in the world, having escaped the local lockup."

"How did he escape?" said the shorter of the two.

"He had help. I don't know more than that; it doesn't fall within the purview of my investigation."

They looked at each other. "We aren't going to kill you," said the thinner one.

"Then I'll be equally polite," said Kit.

"Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"The Seagull was on a heading for New Hall. They have a day's start, but they aren't fast."

"You could have reported that yesterday."

"Not my job," said Kit.

The thinner one nodded. "When you make your final report, see to it a copy comes to Special Operations. Mark it 'Attention Headwater.'"

"All right."

The two of them nodded and walked out of the room, and Kit started breathing again. However he didn't move for a good five minutes, just in case. But they were well and truly gone, the only thing left would be carnage downstairs. He wished there were a way to walk past it without seeing it. For one thing, he didn't relish deciding if he were obligated to put it in his report.

He used the comm equipment at the desk to arrange for transport.

Serenity: Med bay

"Sit over there," he told Zoë. "I'll get to you in a minute."

"I'm fine," she said, but he barely heard her; he was already concentrating on Jayne, who lay on the table, face down and sleeping; the bleeding had stopped for the moment.

Simon prepared his tools, then made his first examination. Pulse all right, blood pressure good — and there it was: he could see the exit wound in the trapezius. He studied the entry point, looked at the angle, and decided the bullet hadn't done any

bouncing around, which was good.

"I think he'll be fine," he said aloud.

"You going to fix him, doctor?" asked Mal.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Simon might have replied, but he was too busy, and the question was too stupid to deserve an answer anyway.

CHAPTER 17

MY OWN KIND OF TRUTH

Serenity: Med Bay

In a moment of relative lucidity, he realized he'd been shot again. That he was back in Serenity's med bay again. He tried to put together the events of the last few hours, days, but he couldn't make things fit, and it was too much effort to try. Shortly after that, things went fuzzy again.

Some indeterminate time later, he saw the doctor's face peering at him. He tried to ask if he was going to live, but he couldn't make his mouth work right. "You're back on Serenity," said the doctor, as if that had been his question.

"Where else would I be," he tried to say, but it wouldn't come out right. Not that it mattered.

Serenity: Engine Room

Zoë's voice came through the speaker. "Captain wants everyone in the dining room.

Kaylee, leaning against the port battery casing, stared at the box. It was a technology that hadn't changed in hundreds of years: a thin membrane set to vibrating by the motion of electrons through insulated wires. Power requirements: almost nil. Control. It was all about control, about fine tuning, about precision. It was the same sort of precision control, in a different way, that let Wash do what he did. And the Captain do what he did.

Big things, turned into small things, then moved and turned back into big things. She stared at the speaker.

"Kaylee?"

"I'll be there," she said. Her voice sounded odd in her ears.

The speaker went dead. "I have to be there," she told the empty engine room. "It's my job to keep Serenity running."

Serenity: River's Room

Sometimes it seemed it was just a matter of keeping her balance. Too far in one direction and she would see anything; would just sit there for the rest of her life like the cat-tails in a still-life. Too far in another direction, and it would all rush in on her at once so that she would burst and become nother. Too far in another direction, and she would become non-existent. Too far in another direction, and they would find her and take her back. Too far in another direction

The problem was there were too many directions, and you had to stay balanced among all of them. It was like dance; if you could find the balance point, you could do anything.

That was the beauty of flying. She would have to ask Wash he how did it, how he made it like a dance. The way Kaylee made Serenity dance. The way Simon danced with his hands, when he was operating. The way Mal danced between disaster and triumph. The way Zoe danced around between Mal's orders and Mal's wishes. The way Jayne...

Jayne.

Jayne was the only one who didn't dance.

He had no balance. That's why he did all of those things, he couldn't find his balance point.

She got up, then, and walked to the Med Bay. Simon looked up and said, "What is it, River?" but she ignored him. She went over to Jayne, who had was looking upward with fractured shards of consciousness coming and going like his breath; wrung out, shot full of drugs and holes with his life flowing through tubes and his spirit spreading through the ship like the ghost locked up in the hold.

She stared down into Jayne's half-open eyes. "Boxing is just like ballet," she told him, "except there's no music and they hit each other."

Then, satisfied, she turned and went back to her room.

Serenity: Cargo Bay

She walked away from the speaker and took another glance at Sakarya. He was well secured to the stairway with steel cuffs. There was nothing within nine feet of him. He looked back at her; his eyes were dead things.

"Food, water, and toilet break in an hour," she told him. Then she turned back to the speaker, punched a button and said, "Wash, surveillance check."

"We're good," he said. "Dining room?"

"Yes."

"All right, I'll be there as soon as I'm sure nothing is coming to eat us."

She looked at the prisoner again, wondering why she didn't hate him; wondering if there was something that had died, somewhere along the road.

Someone said, "So, did you think it was good operation?" Zoë recognized her own voice, and wished to tell she could take the words back.

"Quite professional," he said. "Do you actually care what I think?"

"Evidently."

He nodded a little. "Why?"

"I don't know."

"No, I mean, why was it important to ruin me?"

"We were much too late for that, Colonel."

"Glad to have given you the opening for the line, but you know it doesn't answer the question."

"Yes it does," she said, and turned and headed up the stairway, hearing her boots clank loudly in the wide, empty space of the hold.

Serenity: River's Room

"River," he told his sister patiently, "we need to get to the dining room." He wanted to ask her what she had meant when she spoke to Jayne, but he was afraid she might tell him.

"It's not that far," she said reassuringly, but made no move to get up from her bed.

"Mal is expecting us to be there."

She gave him a look he couldn't interpret. "Yes. He's going to ask questions, and he'll want answers, only the answers he wants won't be there."

After some hesitation, he asked it. "Where will they be?"

"In the cargo hold," she said, as if it should have been obvious. "Where the ghost is."

Simon made a few connections in his head, put a few things together, and nodded slowly. "You see, River, we can't always tell when you're speaking in metaphors, and when you're being literal. That makes it hard--"

"What makes you think I can tell?" She sounded genuinely curious.

"To use a metaphor, or a simile, requires activating a part of the brain that . . ." he trailed off. "It isn't that you can't tell the difference between reality and fantasy, it's that you can't express the difference. The language centers . . . I might have something."

"But what about seeing the future?"

He frowned. "You see the future?"

"I see *my* future. I see more tests." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"What else can I do?"

"You want me to remember."

He nodded.

"I don't want to remember."

"I know. But . . ." he looked for the words. "I think you're in a state of lucid dreaming, while you're awake."

She was quiet for what seemed like a long time, then she turned her deep eyes on him and said, "But how can you do anything about it?"

"I'm a trauma specialist," he said. "Come on, let's go to the dining room."

Serenity: Bridge

He felt a hand on his shoulder and knew it without turning around; had known when he heard the footsteps.

"Everything is all right?" he asked, and felt her hesitation.

"Did you hear from the feds?"

"Agent Merlyne said he'd be showing up sometime in the next hour."

"Good."

She stood there behind him, just touching him.

"Sweetiekins, what's wrong?"

"I don't know how this is going to come out."

"You mean, Mal?"

"What we did--"

"What I did, you mean."

"The Captain won't like it."

"Then we'll have to stage a mutiny."

"Wash, that's not funny. That's almost what we did."

He stared out at the light blue cloudless sky of Hera.

"Did you see another choice?"

"That's not the point."

"Why not? It's what you've been doing for the last six years. And Mal too. When you don't have any choice, you do what you have to."

Her hand still rested on his shoulder.

"Then what?" she said softly. "What happens after that, Wash?"

He locked on the autopilot and stood up. "Maybe I can find a job performing with finger-puppets."

She wrapped her arms around him. "And what would I do?"

"Cook my dinner and rub my tired fingers. Ouch."

She shook her head, smiling. "Some things, you and I just ain't cut out for."

"It'll be fine."

"The Captain--"

"This is our home. He knows that. And it's his home because we're here, and he knows that too."

"If he gets pushed too far--"

"You know, for someone who's known Mal longer than any of the rest of us, you don't have a lot of faith in him. Come on, let's not keep them waiting."

Serenity: Dining room

They were sitting around the table. On his left was Kaylee, looking at the table on front of her; then Simon, looking at Kaylee; then River, looking at nothing; then Wash and Zoë, who were involved in some sort of whispered conversation.

"All right," he said, looking at each of them one at a time. "I got a bit of mad I ain't used up yet, so now's the time. Wash, maybe you can start by telling me how it happened that you concocted a plan with the fed behind my back. I'd expect that from Jayne, not from you."

Wash looked down at the table.

"Not good enough, Wash. I need an answer."

Still nothing.

He felt the knot of anger in his belly; he noticed his right hand, sitting on the table, was starting to shake. It didn't make sense. It wasn't like Wash to do something like that; not, at any rate, unless it involved protecting Zoë, or —

"Kaylee," he stated.

She looked up. "Yes, Cap'n?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"You got something to add to this?"

Her mouth opened and closed, and she glanced at Wash, as if for support. She got it, too. "Mal," said Wash. "She was going to crash Serenity into the house."

He looked at Wash, who was now staring back, and then at Kaylee, who had returned to studying the table-top. "Huh? Why?"

"Because," said Wash, "she thought we were all going to die."

"We weren't going to die."

"Yes you were," said River. "You were going to kill the ghost, and then the wizard was going to kill you, and then Zoë was going to kill the agent, and then the security forces —"

"You weren't even there!" said Mal.

He suddenly felt everyone looking at him.

"Which," he continued less forcefully, "doesn't mean you're wrong."

"Sir," said Zoë, "you've been off your game. We've been covering for you. Sorry, but that's how it is."

"How long as this been going on?"

No one spoke for what seemed a long time, then Kaylee said, "Since Inara left, and it was his turn to have nothing to say."

She wasn't even there, and she was still complicating things. His anger flared, and he badly wanted to find something to throw or someone to hit.

"You can't blame her."

An acidic response came to his lips, then he realized that no one had said anything; the voice had been in his head. *Great. Now I'm hearing voices.*

He said, "This can't work if my crew feels they can just concoct their own plan whenever they conjure I'm not working right. Noble thought, maybe, but it can't work that way."

Zoë said, "Then what do you want us to do, sir? If Wash hadn't acted, we'd all be dead now."

"With all respect to little miss Delphi here, you can't know that."

This time, the silence was eloquent, and lasted longer, until Zoë said, "Sir, what do you want us to do?"

"Times like this," said Mal, "I always ask myself, 'what would Jayne do?'" He looked around. "Not, you understand, that I'd do it; I just ask myself."

He didn't even get a courtesy laugh.

"All right, all of you seem to think I'm in a twist over Inara, but —"

"I don't," said River.

Now all eyes were on her.

"All right," said Mal. "And what does the Oracle think?"

"You just needed to lay a ghost to rest."

"Ghost?"

"The ghost you have chained up. Ghosts usually walk around with chains. It's traditional."

"I don't —"

"Now you're done with the ghost, so it's all fine."

"You think so?"

River nodded. "Now you can make yourself miserable over Inara."

"Doctor," said Mal, "is your sister a shrink as well as, uh, whatever else she is?"

"Captain," said the doctor, "I give you my word I have no idea all the things my sister might be."

Whatever Mal might have come up with to say to that was interrupted by the double buzz of the proximity indicator.

"I'll go check on that," said Wash, sounding relieved. He headed up to the bridge.

Everyone except River was now staring at the table top; she was looking right at Mal. After a very long and uncomfortable two minutes, Wash's voice came over the intercom. "Mal, the fed is here and wants to come in."

"Why the hell not?" he said under his breath. Then he stood up, punched the intercom button, and said, "Okay, Wash. Let him in."

They all got up and headed for the cargo bay. Zoë reached the button first, and opened the airlock, let down the ramp. Wash joined them.

Kit came in, holding a pair of large duffel bags. He set them down. "I opened the lockers, gathering evidence. This is your man's stuff. He'll want it back, if he lives."

"He'll live," said Mal.

Kit nodded. "I wouldn't stay here long, if I were you. The Special Deputies are eventually going to figure out you aren't where I said you were, and they'll come back this way first to pick up your trail."

"That going to make it hot for you?" asked Mal.

"Hard to say. I can cover a trail pretty good. I might get away with it. And I completed my assignment; that should count for something. Speaking of, may I have my prisoner?"

"Zoë will fetch him for you."

"Has he said anything?"

"I haven't asked him anything. Didn't trust myself."

Kit nodded. "I should be moving too. I have reports to file, a prosecution to arrange, and maybe even a job to keep, if I'm lucky."

"If you call that a job."

"I do."

"Zoë," said Mal, shrugging. "Go fetch the prisoner. Kaylee and Wash, get the boat warmed up; I want to be off the world in five minutes."

"Cap'n," said Kaylee, "she's still pretty hurt. Guidance is bad, we got a big hole —"

"Can we make it to a repair station?"

There was a pause, then, "I think so."

"Then we move. A repair station, then back to Paquin."

"Paquin, sir?" said Zoë.

"Got some ginseng to return," he said, prodding Jayne's bags with his toe.

"Yes, sir," said Zoë and went off to fetch Bursa-Sakarya. Wash went back to the bridge, Kaylee to the engine room.

The doctor said, "I'll go see to it Jayne is secured," and headed toward the med bay.

"Don't worry," said River. "She'll be back," and turned to follow her brother, leaving Mal alone with the fed.

"Must be hard," said Kit. "He used to be one of the good guys, which makes it much worse. I'm impressed you didn't kill him."

"I'm just proud as a papa of that."

"And," continued the fed, "here I am, and I used to be one of the bad guys."

"Still are, in my book."

"Is that right? Let me ask you something, Captain Reynolds. During the first two years of the war, ninety-five percent of the Alliance forces were volunteers. After that,

they still made up the heart of the army. What do you suppose made them volunteer?"

"Couldn't say."

"You don't think maybe they believed in what they were fighting for?"

"Maybe so. Folk been wrong about things before, believed it was okay to tell other folk how to live. Nothing new there."

"And maybe they thought it would be a good idea to stop the Sakaryas in the 'verse. And maybe they were right."

"You worry about right, Agent Merlyn, and keep fixing the 'verse. I got to fix my boat."

"Good luck with that," he said.

Zoë showed up then, one arm on the shackled prisoner. Mal looked him in the eye. "Got anything to say, Colonel?"

Bursa met his eye. "It's what happens when you lose everything," he said.

"Not always," said Mal. "Sometimes you find a new thing."

The fed took hold of the prisoner, and led him down the ramp. Mal walked over and punched the button; the ramp raised, and the world of Hera vanished from sight. As the airlock closed, Wash's voice came over the speaker: "Strap in, everyone. We're off the ground in two minutes, and we're still in rough shape."

"It could be bumpy," said Zoë.

Mal looked at her. She looked back at him. "Just trying to save you the trouble, sir; you must be tired of saying that."

They walked back toward the heart of Serenity.