

MY OWN KIND OF FREEDOM

A FIREFLY NOVEL

**BY
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My Own Kind of Freedom
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**TO CALIANN
FOR MANY REASONS**

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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 Microsoft Word and Adobe Acrobat. The book was converted to PalmDoc format for PalmOS readers using the Lokiware Palm Doc Converter. 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 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 overcrowded 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 suozai*."

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-affects 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."

Serenity: Common room

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.

Serenity: Bridge

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 gorillas, 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 gorrarn 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 Shepard, 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 a 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?"

