



SPACE COWBOYS

The Collaborative Sessions



Session One: The Invisible Men

"Mr. Black," said one of the men sitting at the table. "Have a seat."

Jet Black hesitated, then sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the table. His dark uniform felt suddenly tight and uncomfortable. This was not a place he wanted to be—he'd already spent too much time in white rooms like this, a one-directional mirror along one wall so he could be observed.

"I'll be honest," he said. "I'm used to sitting on the other side, now."

Neither the man with a thinning head of brown hair nor the man balder than he was smiled. "We can see that," said the man with hair, opening a folder in front of him. "In the years since your release, you've climbed through the ranks of the Beaumonde Police Department with remarkable speed." He paused. "It seems you've even turned down a promotion."

"Job would have been all paperwork, if I had," Jet grunted, looking down at the floor. "Takes too much as it is."

The bald man leaned forward. "You've also rabidly pursued corruption within the ranks. In fact, you've beaten out three different IA investigations."

Jet looked up and smiled. "It's nice to do work that matters," he said. "Beaumonde ain't great, but the corruption hasn't set in yet."

"Ah, yes," the man with hair said. "We read your personal files on the ISSP."

Jet's smile vanished. "Those were private."

"Nothing you own is private, Mr. Black," said the man with hair. "Not even your life."

Jet's hands tightened into fists on his lap.

"But we can give it back to you," said the bald man.

Jet stared at him for a moment. "What?"

"We have completed our examination of your ship," said the man with hair. "We believe we can replicate the incident that brought you here. If you are so inclined, we can send you back."

Jet stared at them for a moment. "Send me..." He thought of it a moment-of devastated earth and the ISSP that had long since been crushed by corruption. Of a world broken and battered by the fall of Earth. But his world, nevertheless.

"And, if you'd prefer to stay here," the man with hair continued. "We are willing to return your ship, illegal military hardware included. We have even upgraded it to enable to better travel about our system."

And there was nothing at all doubtful about that thought-regardless of where he was, to have the *Bebop* again, to be able to fly his ship...

"Generous of you," Jet said, keeping his face neutral. "What's the catch?"

"We require your services," the man with hair answered.

"You already have them," Jet said, pulling at the uniform he wore.

The bald man shook his head. "I'm afraid we need your skills in a...different area."

Jet stared between them for a moment, then laughed. "You have a bounty?"

"Yes," the bald man said.

"Then find someone else." Jet leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest.

"You've read the records. You know how bad we were."

"Trained in an environment of bounty hunters with a penchant for getting the job done even at the cost of the bounty," said the man with hair. "No, Mr. Black, given the failures we've had from other sources, I think you are the perfect man for the job. And you will, of course, receive your ship to make this easier."

Jet's breath caught in his throat. To get his ship back, all for the sake of a bounty...? But he knew these people, he'd been held by these people, surely there was a dark side to this, surely there was more to the story...

"I'd need my crew," he said.

"We'll give you what information we have," said the bald man. "But they have not been as...easy to keep track of, as you."

Naturally, they wouldn't.

"Alright," Jet said. "Tell me about the job."

The man with hair reached into the folder, pulled out a picture, and slid it across the table-a picture of a too-pale girl with stringy black hair and gloomy eyes that loomed out of the photo. It was only as he did this that Jet noticed the strangest thing about the man-the startling shade of blue the skin on his hands was. "Her name is River Tam," said the man with hair. "A very dangerous girl working with a group of career criminals aboard aboard the Firefly-class ship *Serenity*."

Session Two: Headlong

Spike woke up as a sudden shake cast him off the couch. He managed to catch himself at the last moment and flipped himself back onto his feet, staggering. He opened his mouth, prepared to yell at whoever was responsible-Ed, he assumed, or maybe Faye.

Ein spun by, barking and whining, and only then did Spike realize that it was the whole ship that was shaking.

"What the hell?" he muttered, scooping Ein up and scrambling for the bridge.

"ED!" Jet roared. "I need to know what this is!"

"Ed can't say!" Ed squeaked. "No data, bad data, dog data, no!"

Spike slid the dog towards her, and Ed squealed happily and grabbed Ein with her feet even as her fingers blurred over her computer.

"What the hell's going on, Jet!" Spike shouted, sliding into the midst of things. Outside of the *Bebop*, the vague golden glow of Hyperspace had been marred by something-streaks of terrible red that made his eyes ache. He lifted a hand to his face, grimacing.

"No idea," Jet said. "Got word from up ahead that there was some trouble with the gate, but..." Jet's hand were flying over the near-at-hand computer as he grappled with the *Bebop's* controls.

"What is this stuff?" Spike asked, gesturing through the viewport.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Faye yelled, nearly falling through the door and desperately pulling her towel up with one hand. "What's going on, Jet?"

"I'm not explaining again!" Jet yelled.

"Uh, Jet," Spike said, staring. "The stuff is...there's more of it."

The others all looked in the same place he was-at the huge clumps of red now breaking off from the sides of the gate and floating freely in their midst.

"That can't be good," Jet said.

The clumps of red thickened steadily, until the golden glow without had vanished and seemed as though the *Bebop* were hurtling through a cloud of crimson.

Like blood, Spike thought, distantly. *Bad omen*.

And all at once the red was gone. They were floating in the dark, stars twinkling in the distance.

"What *was* that?" asked Faye, shaking her head and spilling droplets of water in all directions.

"At least we're not stuck in hyperspace," Jet grunted. "That's weird...I can't get any locational data from anyone." He frowned, typed something in, then frowned again. "Can't make any calls..."

Spike kept looking at the space beyond the *Bebop's* window. Something felt wrong here, something he couldn't quite place, and he frowned at the world outside, tapping his foot. He felt adrift in a strange way, as though he had taken a wrong turn while heading home and ended up in an unfamiliar neighborhood.

Ein barked. "Ein?" Ed said, cocking her head to one side. The dog barked again, and Ed looked at her computer and gasped. "No data, bad data!"

"Ed-" Jet started.

"Not in Sol!" Ed said.

"Not in-" Jet stared out the window, then started typing something into his computer. "That's impossible." But Spike saw it long before Jet drew in a deep breath and said, "The star maps...they don't match."

Of course they didn't match. These were the wrong stars, twisting, swelling, morphing in strange green patterns...

Wait, what?

"Jet," Spike said, tapping the window. Jet looked up, and saw it at the same time-a frightening shape, like two melded skyscrapers floating its way towards them through the dark.

"Call coming, words thrumming, bad things on the air," Ed whispered. She grabbed her computer and scampered away.

Something beeped in Jet's general vicinity. He touched it, and words filled the bridge.

"This is the I.A.V. *Indemnity*," said a harsh voice. "Your ship is not registered and is flying with unlicensed technology. You are to dock with us or you will be destroyed."

"Screw that," hissed Spike and turned to run to the hangar. "Faye, come on, let's-"

"No," Jet said. Spike glanced at him, and he pointed out the window again. Spike followed his gaze and saw that there were already more ships without-a small cloud of ships, each roughly the size of the *Swordfish*. "Fighters," Jet said.

Spike put a hand to his forehead and sighed.

"This is the *Bebop*," Jet said. "We're coming in."

Jet began to maneuver the ship forward. Spike sighed and collapsed backwards into a convenient chair.

Where the hell were they? And whose stars were they seeing?

Session Three: Another One Bites the Dust

"Hey!" someone shouted, right into Spike's ear. Spike lazily opened one eye and stared at the particular loudmouth who'd chosen to intrude on his sleep-a sizable brute, a little pudgy around the middle but with impressively thick arms.

"Hey," Spike said, then closed his eye and tried to go back to sleep.

Rough hands grabbed him and hauled him into the air. Spike sighed and opened both eyes. "I'm not late on my payments," Spike said.

The man, who was dark-skinned and mostly bald, grinned. "I ain't with the hotel."

Ah.

Spike kicked between the man's legs, then jerked his foot back as the man flinched to try and shield his groin. He caught him behind the knee, and the man stumbled. Spike twisted, slipped free of his grasp, and then kept twisting and delivered another kick, right to the back of the man's head. As he fell forward, Spike grabbed the gun tucked under his pillow and pressed it against the back of the man's head.

"Who's your boss?" Spike asked.

"I...I ain't-"

Spike slammed a foot into man's hand, and felt something crunch. The man screamed.

"Wrong answer," Spike said. "Who's your boss?"

"Xiang!" shrieked the enforcer. "Xiang Bei!"

Spike sighed. "Xiang again? How does he still have money for you guys?" He thought for a moment, then frowned. "Wait...how *does* he have money for you guys?" He pressed the gun deeper into the man's skull.

"Y-you didn't get everything," the man whimpered. "He's still got shipments coming in from Santo!"

Spike sighed. "Of course he does. When's the next shipment?"

"Tonight! It's tonight!"

"Where?"

"A ship two hours outside of town!"

"Mmm. And he's not stupid enough to send just you, is he?"

"He..." The man trailed off, sobbing a little. "He put a bounty on you, and I thought-"

Spike laughed. "A bounty, huh? I can understand that." He spun the gun around and cracked it into the back of the man's head. "Still, can't have you letting people know you saw me." He grabbed his holster from beneath the bed and slung it over one shoulder

before walking to the closet. He pulled out his suitcase, flipped it open, and gave a quick once-over to its contents-the shotgun, grenades, ammo, and coins within, then nodded and slammed it shut again, throwing it over one shoulder and sprinting out the door.

The ship carrying Xiang's goods-a blocky brown thing with no life to it-sparked and stuttered its way through the night sky and landed in a spray of dust and wind. Spike kept his goggles on them, counted them as they came out-six crewmen, four of whom were armed and two of who were moving the cargo. Xiang Bei had also brought six enforcers, each well-armed and guarding his shuttle.

A shuttle which soon disgorged the man himself-an exceedingly tall fellow whose limbs looked vaguely spider-like.

My lucky night, Spike thought.

He approached quietly-he had a little time, the smugglers were haggling for more money than Xiang seemed willing to give. Made sense, Spike thought with a smile-he'd put one hell of a dent in Xiang's operations. By the time he was close enough to be spotted, he'd already thrown a grenade into the air-towards the shuttle, of course.

The explosion threw back several of Xiang's men, though it seemed to kill only one. But that was alright-the blast would disorient them, and it certainly drew the attention of the men guarding Xiang's goods. The light of their cargo hold was enough for Spike to take out the four with guns.

Shots tore through the air, kicked up dust around him. Spike whirled and fired until he'd emptied his clip, taking down three of Xiang's enforcers, but two were still standing, still firing. A bullet bit into his arm, and Spike yelled in pain and rolled to one side, expelling his current clip and slamming the one from his pocket into place. Four more shots.

The last of Xiang's enforcers dropped to the ground. Spike glanced at the wound in his left arm and grimaced, but did not allow his right arm-the one with the gun-to waver.

"Spike-" started Xiang.

Spike pulled the trigger. Xiang Bei dropped to the ground. Spike whirled around and kept his gun on the two men who'd begun to move for their fallen comrades' guns.

"These all of them?" Spike said, jerking his head towards the raggedly-dressed people in chains-the twenty slaves Xiang Bei had intended to sell from his auction house here on Lilac. One of the smugglers nodded. "Alright," Spike said. "Remove the chains and get them onto his shuttle." The smugglers hesitated and exchanged glances, and without a word Spike shot one of them in the leg. As he screamed, Spike pointed his gun at the unwounded Smuggler. "Get them onto his shuttle," Spike repeated.

The unwounded man obeyed at once. Spike knelt beside Xiang Bei's body, removed the sack of hard coin he had brought with him to make the purchase, and stood back up. As the last of the slaves made their way into the shuttle, Spike grabbed the smuggler and threw him away from the shuttle. "Get out of here," Spike said.

The smuggler scrambled for his ship. Spike kept his gun on him as he grabbed his partner, hauled him to his feet, and helped him limp into the cargo hold. As soon as the cargo bay doors began to close, Spike turned and threw himself aboard the shuttle, tossing the sack of coin to the slaves in the back.

"That's supposed to be what you're worth," he called. "I'd say you've earned it."

Then the shuttle was soaring.

It was nearly dawn when he landed the now-empty shuttle and stumbled back into his hotel room, the wound on his left arm freshly patched. It still twinged a little, but it was mostly healed—one of the benefits to living in this shitty system.

He glanced down at his bed to discover a note written with terrible penmanship—an apology from the enforcer he'd defeated earlier. *Least there's one happy ending*, Spike thought, and only then glanced at Jet Black, who was dressed in a nice white suit and sitting in a chair in the corner with his chin in his hand.

"You found me," Spike said.

"Wasn't easy," Jet replied. "You went missing right after we separated."

"Been busy," Spike said.

"Yeah, I noticed that," Jet said. "Your transport got boarded by slavers, right?"

Spike said nothing, but grabbed the bottle from the dresser and took a swig. He closed his eyes and relished the feel of liquid fire scorching down his throat.

"Three slaving rings destroyed, Spike?" Jet asked, when the silence had begun to stretch.

"Four," Spike answered. "Just finished the last one."

"What happened to you, Spike?" Jet asked.

Spike shrugged. "Nothing, really. But everyone else..."

They were both silent this time. Jet cleared his throat. "I've tried to keep them off your trail."

"Them?"

"The police. They've been interested. Some of your slaver buddies had friends in high places. I got some of them, but..."

"Should have let them come after me," Spike said. "Could've used the challenge."

The silence started to stretch again. Spike took another pull from the bottle.

"I got here on the *Bebop*," Jet said.

Spike whirled to face Jet. "What?"

"They gave her back to me. Along with the Swordfish and the Red Tail. And a couple upgrades."

Spike thought about that for a moment-about having access to the Swordfish again. The ships here could travel farther, faster, than anything back where they'd come from, but nothing he'd seen could outmaneuver his Swordfish. To have her back again...

"That's not all," Jet said. "They think they can get us back home."

Julia.

Her image swam before him with such force that he dropped the bottle. Instead of bending to clean it up he put a hand to his eyes and tried not to think of running his hand through that hair.

I couldn't find her, anyway.

But the possibility was there. The chance. To go back to Sol would mean...

Julia.

"Why are they helping us?" Spike said.

"Because," Jet said. "They need a couple of Cowboys."

Spike stared down at the whiskey soaking into the carpet and then glanced over to the bed-to the note left behind the enforcer he'd beaten up.

A bounty, huh.

He could still do a lot of good here. Could take out a couple more of these damn rings. Xiang Bei had to have associates, he could...he could...

He could regain the possibility that he'd find Julia one day.

"Alright," Spike said. "What's the job?"

Session Four: Play the Game

"Wash has a job?" Janyne repeated.

"Is it really so hard to believe?" Wash asked.

"Yes," Simon said.

"Kinda," Kaylee agreed.

Wash scoffed and leaned back into his chair, folding his arms across his chest. Zoe put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. The crew were gathered in *Serenity's* dining room, save for Book and Inara, who were taking care of River.

"Now, now, credit where credit is due," Mal said. "It's a good gig. Just listen to the man." Damn lucrative, too. Hmm, lucrative. That's a funny word.

"I have contacts!" Wash insisted. "All sorts of...people. On the underbelly of...things."

"What underbelly, dear?" Zoe asked.

Tears swelled in Wash's eyes. "Marriage!" Wash exclaimed. "You're supposed to-!"

"Wash, we don't have all day, " Mal said.

Wash grimaced. "Contacts!" he repeated.

"Those are kind of outdated," Simon said. "Eye surgery's pretty easy, I could take care of that for you."

"Simon?" Kaylee asked.

Simon shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "Got distracted."

"A little focus!" Mal said, raising his voice. "Wash, get on with it."

Wash nodded. "Alright. I have a friend-we served together when we learning to fly. He made some way better career decisions-

"Don't think we need the commentary," Mal said.

"-and got involved in piloting luxury liners around. You guys know the Soryev Gambling Company?"

"Gambling?" Jayne repeated, perking up.

"Way out of your price range," Inara said, sweeping into the kitchen and digging around for food. Mal glanced back at her, got a fleeting impression of swirling skirts and flowing fabric, then swallowed against the dryness in his throat and looked at Wash.

"How's she doing?" Simon asked.

"Very well, Simon," Inara replied. "Book's teaching her the finer points of cards."

Simon stared at her for a moment. "River went on a gambling streak when she was eight," he said. "Took my dad for two hundred credits and got grounded by my mom when she found out."

Inara laughed. "That's probably why he's getting cleaned out."

"Can we please cut the chitchat!" Mal exclaimed.

"Soryev runs a series of luxury casino ships that tour exotic locations," Zoe said to Jayne.

"Thus putting them in a fine position to take the hard-stolen cash of rich Alliance folk," Mal said.

"And this month is the grand opening of their newest ship, the *Geppetto*," Wash said. "It's the first of its kind-save for pilots and security, it has absolutely no staff. Every system is automated."

"What's the fun in that?" Jayne asked.

"Well, wouldn't want to have the cream of society mingling with the less fortunate," Mal said.

"The tech running the place is all top-of-the line," Wash said. "It can't be hacked, and the vaults which keep the money can only be opened by licensed Soryev personnel or by the use of chips to retrieve your winnings from otherwise-unbreakable machines."

"Doesn't sound like much of a job," Jayne said.

"Oh, but it is!" Wash said. "Because those chips will release the money-in Alliance notes, if requested-to anyone who happens to put chips into the automated banking machines."

There was a moment of silence from around the table.

"Anyone?" Kaylee repeated.

"Anyone," Wash said.

"And for a thirty percent fee," Mal finished. "The higher-ups in Soryev will happily look the other way while we help ourselves, long as we ain't too greedy."

"What's too greedy?" Zoe asked.

"More than 1.5 million," Mal said.

The silence that hung over the table was much more powerful this time around.

"1.5 million?" Kaylee squeaked.

"No ruttin' way," Jayne said.

"Well, minus the 30%," Mal said.

"Honey, you did good," Zoe said.

"Always do," Wash replied.

"We get in," Mal said. "Take as many of the chips as we can, and get out before security gets to us. Have to sit on the money for a bit afterwards-don't want anyone getting too suspicious-but..."

1.5 million. Could do a lot with that kind of money. Could overhaul the ship and float on comfortably for some time. Take the strain off.

"Why don't we play our way through?" Simon asked.

They glanced towards him. He was looking toward Kaylee. "If we could rig one of the tables, we could take most of the money without having to deal with security," Simon said. "You're pretty good with machines, I figure-"

"With machines, Simon," Kaylee said. "Hardware. I can't just slide under a table and go to work. I think they might notice."

"And software-wise it can't be done," Wash said. "The security systems on the all the tables are really good."

Simon looked a little downtrodden. Mal cleared his throat. "Not a bad thought, doctor," he added. "But it'd take too much time to implement. Best we get in, pay off who we need to, and get out."

Inara left the kitchen. Mal breathed a little easier.

Session Five: Killer Queen

"Blackjack," said the table, as it played out the three of clubs that brought her total to 21. "Player 3 wins again."

"Holy hell!" exclaimed the heavysset blonde man sitting on her right. "You cheatin', miss?"

Faye Valentine giggled and winked. "What can I say?" she said. "Lady Luck's in love with me tonight."

"Lady Luck, run amok, make machines pay!" Ed squealed into her ear. Faye giggled again and adjusted her earring, trying to minimize the ringing she got in her ear every time Ed spoke.

It had taken a lot of time and effort to get here: win the tickets in a private game, get the shuttle to take her here, and get this ridiculous white dress. She looked damn good, of course, but it was too big, and made her feel confined in its intricate folds. Still, she fit in with the ritzy crowd in the *Geppetto* tonight, crowded around the automated tables that spat out chips and cards and kept the dice dancing and the roulettes spinning.

She was currently sitting on 500,000 credits worth of chips. Not a bad haul, and she suspected she could make still more before she turned in for the evening.

"You might want to get out, though," she said, smirking at the blonde man. "Luck doesn't seem to be on your side tonight."

The man scoffed and whirled back to the table. "Can't say I blame Luck for straying," he said. "But she'll come back my way."

Faye leaned forward and put her cheek in her hand. "Let's see about that."

A gunshot rang out, and a ripple of screams surged slowly out from the source. She whirled about as a second gunshot went off, imposing a silence on the panicked wealthy.

"Bullet, bullet, where are you?" Ed sang.

"Pipe down, Ed," Faye hissed, ripping open her purse and hastily pulling together the different pieces.

"Now, now," someone said, in a pleasant, folksy voice. "Ain't no reason to be panicking. This is a gambling ship, after all. Just consider this a bad hand."

They began to move through the audience—two in heavy brown coats, and one especially muscular specimen in a very tight t-shirt. He had a brutish face, carried a heavy rifle, and stopped and stared at her as soon as he caught sight of her.

Oh hell.

She turned back to the table, hastily dropping the pieces together under the chair as something jabbed at her back. "Your chips," growled the brute. "All of'em."

Easy. Won't take much longer.

She turned back to him and smiled, popping her chest out a little to show out the magnificent window of cleavage this dress left her. "Surely we can work something out?" she asked.

He looked her up and down, leering at her. "Well..."

Now.

One kick and one punch later, and he'd dropped his rifle and fallen to the ground, clutching at his groin. She turned around, slammed the last piece into place, and whirled back to face him, reassembled submachine gun in hand. "Okay," she said. "Let's work this out."

She opened fire. The brutish man flung himself behind the nearby table so the bullets bit into the metal floor where he'd been kneeling. The panicked rich folk around her screamed anew and took off running.

Something clicked behind her. "Easy," said the same casual voice as before. "Don't need any fuss."

"Too bad," she said, twisting and kicking out towards the voice. The man in the brown coat stumbled backwards, then threw himself to one side as she opened fire again.

"Captain!" shouted a stronger female voice. Faye whirled again, still firing, but the woman in question—dark skin and deadly eyes—zigzagged forwards, and pumped two quick shots from the shotgun she held in her hands. Faye threw herself to one side, still firing.

Click click click.

Shit!

She grabbed a chair and hurled it forwards; it smashed into the woman's chest and sent her stumbling backwards. Faye closed in and knocked the shotgun from her hand, but the hard-eyed woman seemed unfazed; she twisted and slammed an elbow home into Faye's stomach. The air rushed out of Faye in an explosion of pain, and she stumbled backwards.

Shit shit shit!

As she fell away from the hard-eyed woman, her hand closed along the long metal barrel of the shotgun the woman had just held. With a gasp she thrust herself up and slammed the stock of it into the side of the woman's head, knocking her to one side. Using her momentum, she swung back around. The man with the long brown coat—the woman had referred to him as Captain—was back on his feet, gun pulling level with her. She

knocked it from his hand, then slammed the stock of the gun into his chest and, for good measure, whirled and smashed it into the brutish one she'd first taken down, knocking him back to the ground as he started to rise. She stepped forward, flipped the shotgun around in her hand, and jammed the barrel into the downed man's chest.

"Don't move!" she called. "Or he's dead."

"Don't move!" the brutish man cried.

She glanced over her shoulder. The deadly-eyed woman had drawn a handgun from somewhere on her person, and her Captain had grabbed his own gun again at some point; both were now pointed at her.

"Ah, Jane," the Captain said, putting a hand to his heart. "We'll mourn your passing."

"You fought well, soldier," the woman agreed. "Rest easy."

Oh hell.

"Oh, come off it Mal!" the brutish man (Jane, apparently? Interesting name for a man who looked like that) scoffed, but then both of them cocked their guns and he began to squirm beneath her gun. "No ruttin' way you can do this to me, I-"

"Stop!" someone shouted. Faye looked away from their little standoff, as did the other two. The doors all around the floor of the casino were choked with people fleeing, but now, heading against this current, were men in dark suits, guns in hand. They were stymied in their efforts to get through, but they'd be here soon.

"Damn it!" the Captain said. "Miss-"

Faye found herself caught off-guard by his eyes—gentle but insistent, not pleading so much as asking for her understanding. Well, what the hell, right? Camaraderie among thieves, or something. More than enough to go around.

She lifted the shotgun away from Jayne's chest and tossed it underhand to the woman—Mal?—who caught it deftly. "Good luck," she said.

"Not so far," he mumbled, and then set off, the deadly-eyed woman in tow.

The man rose to his feet, nursing his bruises, and mumbled, "You'll pay."

"Jane's kind of a girly name," she said, smirking.

He grimaced and went running after the other two. Faye returned to her table, pulled a cigarette from her purse, and took a seat as she lit it. No more winnings tonight, but five hundred thousand credits would keep her afloat for awhile, she could sit back, figure out her plan...

"Boys finally get here?" she called, as one of the nearly-identical men with neat hair and dark suits began to fan out around her. "I'm afraid I already took care of things for you. There a reward?"

"For hacking our machines and stealing?" one of the men asked.

Faye smiled. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "Won these from a friend in a card game, just a streak of—"

"You've got quite a record, Faye Valentine," the same man said.

Hmm. She'd used a fake name when getting onto the ship.

She sighed. "Do I have time to finish my cigarette?"

The man exchanged glances with those surrounding her, then shrugged. She took a long drag, so deep it burned half of what was left to ash, and then glanced up at the ceiling—particularly at the chandeliers all around, which illuminated everything in a soft golden glow. "Well," she said. "Guess that's lights out."

"Lights out, night now!" Ed sang, and in an instant everything went dark. She kicked herself away from the table, rolled to her feet, struck at the weakness in the circle around her—just a single man, looking away from her. He stumbled, fell, and she sprang over his body and raced for the exit.

She slammed her stomach into a table she couldn't see in the dark, then immediately tripped over a chair she couldn't see. This turned out to be for the best; gunshots rang out as she fell, along with a stream of yells, curses, and screams.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE" the same man who she'd talked to shouted. "WE'LL JUST HURT OURSELVES!"

"Ed," she whispered, inching along the round and wincing at her aches and pains. "How long 'til they get lights back?"

"Their computer persons are no match for Ed person!" Ed said. She dimly heard Ein bark in the background, and Ed added, "And Ein, too!"

"Ein's a dog, not a person," Faye mumbled, crawling towards the exit.

"Ein is dog person!"

The lights began to flicker to life above her. Faye froze. "Ed," she whispered.

"Hehe," Ed said, a little sheepishly. "They're doing goooooood."

Faye gritted her teeth and prepared a choice insult, and then the lights flickered again and she decided there wasn't time. She scrambled for the exit as the lights flickered fully to life. "THERE SHE IS!"

She burst through the door as gunshots broke out behind her, her skin crawling as the wind from a passing bullet whistled over her neck. "Ed!" she cried. "Lock this place down!" The door behind her slammed shut, and a thick metal shutter dropped into place.

Good. That would buy her some time. But this was their ship, and soon enough they'd get through that door. And even if she made it to her shuttle, it wouldn't get her very far. Security was bound to have shuttles of their own.

She hissed through her teeth as she sprinted down one of the long halls. She needed a way out, needed...

A ship. Perhaps like the one that she assumed that handsome captain commanded.

"Ed," she said. "Patch me through to their ship."

"Ship slip zip?" Ed asked.

Faye hissed through her teeth. "The ship that just came in, Ed. The one that robbed the place."

"Patching, hatching, birdies go fly!" There was a moment of silence, and then Ed added, "You're in!"

"Hello?" Faye shouted. There was a slightly longer moment of silence, as Faye's pulse began to race. Then a chipper male voice said, "How have you taken over my speaker system?"

Faye ignored the question. "Is this the ship that...that Jane guy was on?"

"Jane?" repeated the voice in her ear. "Yeah, I guess. Could you just talk through our comm?"

"No!" Ed squawked. "Loud sound, big sound!"

"Who the hell is that?" the voice on the other line asked.

"I met your crew inside," Faye said. "I need a ride out of here."

"Oh, hell!" came the voice of the captain. "Wash, shut her out now. We're leaving."

"Oh no you're not!" Faye yelled. "Ed!"

"Computer go bye!" Ed yelled

There was a tense silence. "Wash," the voice of the captain said. "How come we got no lights?"

"Got no controls, either," Wash replied. "Ship's systems been cut."

"You're kidding me."

"Boys," Faye cut in. "Clock's ticking for all of us."

"Hell," spat the captain. "Fine. You got a shuttle?"

"I do."

"We'll find a way for you to dock with us. Would you please-"

"Certainly. Ed?"

"Computer say hi!" Ed shouted.

"And remember," Faye said. "If your ship's not waiting for me-"

"Yeah, yeah." Faye smiled and sprinted on. Getting back to her shuttle would be a piece of cake. And from there...

Hadn't made her fortune, but she had a bit of money, and no debt. And now she even had a ride out of here.

"Lady luck's in love with me tonight," she hummed.

Session 6: Breakthrough

Though Spike wasn't going to say it out loud, it was damn nice to be back on the *Bebop*. He didn't know what the Alliance had done to the ship while they'd held it, but they'd left no trace of their work—the living room, the gravity wheel, the bridge, they were each as he remembered them, down to the half-completed game of Go between him and Jet saved to the computer's memory. It was not the only game of Go saved to the computer—there was one between Jet and Faye, one between Faye and Ed, and one, oddly enough, between Jet and Ein.

He had brought this one up when Jet walked onto the bridge, studying a screen in his hand. He glanced up at Spike, then narrowed his eyes. "Spike," he said. "What are you doing?"

Spike scratched his chin. "Are you...are you losing this game?"

Jet sighed and grabbed Spike by the back of his jacket, hauling him away from the game. "Take that as a yes," Spike mumbled.

"Shut up," Jet said. "Blue Sun's forwarded us some intel." He moved to the computer near the front and depressed a couple keys: a screen burst into existence—a camera view of a casino floor crowded with gaudily-dressed patrons huddled around tables, and not a single worker in sight. "This is the *Geppetto*," Jet said. "An automated casino cruise."

Suddenly gunshots went off, and three shapes moved with guns through the crowd, collecting chips. "Who are they?" Spike asked.

Jet shrugged. "Crew of the *Serenity*," he said. He tapped their faces and drew up three close-up pictures. "These two used to fight against the Alliance."

"Browncoats?" Spike said, studying them—Malcolm Reynolds and Zoe Aleyne Washburne. "Met a few while I was tracking slavers. They're not bad people—a couple of them helped me out."

"Nightmare to prosecute," Jet grunted. "They'll threaten to shoot you over a parking ticket."

"I can respect that," Spike said.

"They reminded me of you," Jet agreed.

"And that one?" Spike asked, jerking his head to the third picture—the brutish Jayne Cobb.

"Career criminal," Jet said. "Murder, robbery, arson...he's run the gamut."

"So we've got a bead on the *Serenity*," Spike said. "Should make this easier."

"It gets better," Jet said. The image started playing again, and suddenly the brutish Jayne was fighting a woman in an overly large dress. Spike's eyes narrowed.

"You're kidding me," Spike said.

"Nope."

"She was on the ship?"

"Gets better," Jet repeated. He watched (with a slight grin) as the guards tried to apprehend Faye, and then the lights went out.

"Looks like Ed's with her," Spike said.

Jet sighed. "That worries me. Faye's a bad influence."

"And we're not?" Spike asked.

"It's a matter of degree."

The image changed—an exterior camera showing a svelte shuttle gliding towards a Firefly-class ship off the *Geppetto's* bow

"Let me guess," Spike grunted.

Jet nodded. "She's on the *Serenity*."

"Small universe." Spike fished a cigarette from his pocket and put into his mouth, then began to dig around for a lighter. A flame appeared near his head; Spike spared a glance at Jet, holding the lighter out for him, then lit up and took a deep drag, relishing the curl of hot smoke down his throat and into his lungs.

"Too bad for her," he said, after a moment.

Jet chuckled. "Somehow I knew you wouldn't be bothered."

Spike took another drag. "Not by her," he agreed.

Jet arched an eyebrow. "By what?"

"Jet," Spike said. "What the hell are we doing?"

"Bounty hunting," Jet replied. "Like we used to."

"No," Spike said. He looked up at the sky. "Where we come from...the police have no teeth. You know that better than anyone."

Jet grimaced. "Yeah."

"But here..." He shook his head. "I've seen what the Alliance can do, Jet. They're not like the ISSP. They're not even like Red Dragon. They're organized, they're adaptable, and they're idealistic." He took a third drag. "What the hell are they doing asking us to do their job for them?"

Jet pursed his lips and folded his arms in front of his chest. "Could be a case of an ant and a lion," Jet said.

"So you hire an ant to chase an ant?" Spike asked.

Jet shook his head. "More than that. Core economy's been on a major upswing—trade's up, cash is flowing. But there have been cuts across the board—our budget got slashed by 30%."

"They give a reason?" Spike asked.

Jet shook his head again. "None. But I heard rumors—supplies, scientists, resources, all going to something. Some kinda project."

Spike grimaced. "Huh." He thought for a moment—about the two of them, and about budget cuts, and about the mysterious project that was tying up so much of the Alliance's resources. "And what about them?" he said. "Where do they fit into all this?"

"Who knows?" Jet said. "But we've got the *Bebop*. And they say they can send us home."

Home. To wretched Sol, but to the chance of Julia. He didn't know if they could really send them back into the past, but then, he hadn't believed they could hop so far through space and time in the first place. Why not?

No need to worry about the other things. There was only one chance of finding Julia. That was all that mattered.

"Okay," Spike said. "We got a rough destination?"

"We do."

"Let's get moving." Spike took one final drag of his cigarette, ground it out underfoot, and then sank down at the go table. "And let's finish that game," Spike said. "If Ein was beating you..."

Session 7: Heaven For Everyone

The woman's ruttin' shuttle was nearly done docking with their ruttin' ship, and Jayne had more than a few words to exchange with that ruttin' bitch.

"She can't stay on this ship, Mal!" Jayne growled, shouldering Vera as he stalked towards the emergency shuttle port at the top of the ship, near one of the doors that led out to the exterior for emergency deep-space repairs (the same door that psycho Jubal Early had used not so many months ago).

"I don't see as how we've got much choice, Jayne," Mal grouched. "She shut us down. I reckon she could do it again."

"I'd have to agree, sir," Zoe said.

"And I think you two have gone soft," Jayne hissed.

Mal exchanged an amused glance with Zoe. "Us, Jayne?" he asked. "As I recall, neither of us got beat up by a woman half our size. Ain't that right, Zoe?"

"As far as I can recall, sir."

Jayne felt embarrassment burning its way up his throat. "Oh, come off it," he yelled. "You both fought her!"

"Yes, yes we did," Zoe agreed. "But neither of us got taken hostage."

"Yes, I think we acquitted ourselves quite well!" Mal said cheerfully. "All things considered. Though I must admit I did not expect a girl in a dress like that to pack such a punch."

"I don't think any of us did, sir," Zoe agreed. "Least of all Jayne."

"Which is funny, given his name."

"Gorram it, Mal!" Jayne hissed, slamming his fist into a wall. "This is not a joke!"

"Well, I don't much like having her aboard," Mal admitted. "But that don't mean it ain't funny."

"What's this I hear about Jayne getting beat up by a girl?" Wash asked, clambering up the ladder from his and Zoe's room.

Jayne scowled and stomped off towards the emergency shuttle port. That little bitch had caught him by surprise, lulled him in like one of those wailing women in old stories, just so she could drown him. He was having none of it.

He reached the slightly larger door set away from the quarters of the other crewmates and slammed a fist into it. "Open up!" he barked.

There was a moment's silence and then a chipper voice said through the intercom, "And if I'm not done docking? How long do you think you can survive in space?"

"You're done docking!" he shouted, but suddenly doubts caught ahold of his stomach in a cold grip and he turned back to Wash. "Ain't she?"

"Well, theoretically," Wash said. "But then, she did a number on our computers. Could be they're lying to me."

"Well, that's a comforting thought," Mal mumbled.

There was a giggle from the door intercom. "Oh, relax," she said. "It's finished."

The door slid open. Jayne scrambled and lifted Vera up, ready to explain to this woman just what her position was. He was caught off-guard by the thin, raggedly-clad bundle of limbs that sprang from the shuttle's interior and onto his head, knocking him back on his ass and sending Vera clattering from his hands.

"New ship, Firefly, time to fly!" shouted the pink-haired child, and launched herself off of Jayne's shoulders and into the pipes on the ceiling, swinging from light fixtures and whatever else she could wrap her fingers around. A second later, a small dog with its belly low to the ground came trotting out. It gave Jayne a bizarrely sympathetic look and then scurried after the kid.

"Sorry about them," the woman said. Jayne staggered to his feet and found that the woman was still wearing the shredded remains of her dress, but now had a very old-looking handgun in her hand. Although it wasn't pointed at anyone, Jayne remembered the hail of gunfire she'd unleashed upon them, and had no doubt that if he went for his gun she'd be able to shoot him down long before he reached it.

"Now, hold on," Mal said. "I don't recall saying you could bring your kid or your dog."

"They sort of come with the shuttle," the woman said. "Besides, she's not my kid and that's not my dog."

"That was a girl?" Wash said, craning his head to follow the clanging, barking sounds down the corridor. "I thought it was, like, a scarecrow with ADD."

"If it needs food, I don't care what it is," Mal said. "We can't afford to take on more crew. Especially with the losses you gave to us."

"The losses I gave to you!" the woman said indignantly. "What about the ones you gave to me?"

"What losses would those be?" Zoe asked.

"It took weeks to earn my way onto that ship," the woman said. "I was cheating my way through the system. If it hadn't been for you, they never would have caught me."

"And if it hadn't been for you, we'd have walked off that boat with millions of credits lining our pockets," Mal said.

"We didn't have to fight," she said. "Could have left each other alone."

"You looked as rich as anyone else," Mal said.

"Richer, with that pile of chips in front of you!" Jayne yelled, rising to his feet but not quite daring to reach for Vera.

"Well, seems like we both got dealt a bad hand," she said. "Misread each other, made calls too big to keep."

"Oh, poker metaphors," Wash said. "Because we lost our shot at millions of credits when you interfered with us taking a gambling ship. That's funny."

"Like hell it is!" Jayne yelled.

"Sad as this is, I have to agree with Jayne," Mal said. "We were counting on that credit haul."

"So was I," the woman said. "We'll just have to make it up to each other."

"How would you do that?" Jayne asked, but his eyes flickered down to the spectacular window of cleavage the dress offered. The woman lifted her gun.

"Not like that," she said.

"Then how do you plan on helping out?" Zoe asked, her voice flat and deadly.

"Well, I'll lend a hand with your jobs," the woman said. "And all I ask is food to eat and a place to sleep. Seems more than fair to me."

"Except for the minor fact that you ruined our last job?" Mal said.

The woman smirked and lowered her gun. "No one's hurt and we got away clean," she said. "Could have been a much worse hand. I'm Faye Valentine."

"Malcolm Reynolds," Mal said. "Captain. We're not done here, ma'am."

"Oh, I'm sure we're not," she agreed, not even looking at Jayne. "But I'm sure we're both tired and in need of a shower and a change of clothes. We can talk more when dinner's ready." She took a single step backwards, and the door slid shut.

"Where the hell do you think you're going!" Jayne yelled, slamming his fist into the door so that its dim impacts reverberated down the ship. "We're not done talking"

"I hate to say it, but I think we are," Mal grunted. "Leastaways, 'til dinner." Jayne turned his head and saw Mal walking down the hall. "Three new gorram mouths to feed..."

"I have to admit, the prospect of a shower does sound nice," Zoe said.

"Especially with company?" Wash said softly.

"Oh, I could think of worse things..."

The two of them sauntered off down the corridor. Jayne gritted his teeth and slammed another fist into the door. "You come out here!" he said. "You come out and...and...!"

But Jayne could not think of what he could force this woman to do, and after five minutes of cursing at the door had to admit that she probably wasn't coming.

Session 8: Going Slightly Mad

Joy. Then fear. Now something else.

She didn't care.

Huddled behind the crates they'd picked up for transport to an Outer Rim world, River Tam let her mind drift through the ship, bounce off the thoughts of the crew—off the low, cheerful lust radiating from Zoe and Wash, circling the enraged frustration of Jayne Cobb, lightly dancing over the worries of the Captain. There were new thoughts—a cheerful someone, light-hearted, free.

Drifting through space. Drifting free from her body. And then...

Another of those beats, those pulses, those sledgehammers with teeth driving into her brain and washing away everything but the pain. She twitched, whimpered, tightened her arms around her knees and tried to go blank, as blank as the crates around her, as blank as a meaningless object, floating through space without will. It was easier without will. She could pretend those savage fingers were not digging claws into her brain, a psychic rack trying to drag her back.

And then it was gone, and she was left cowering, tears on her cheeks, whispered sobs shaking her. She didn't know how much more she could take. She wasn't sure how she'd lasted this long.

And then a wet tongue rolled across her face. She blinked, momentarily back among the cows. But that was months ago, wasn't it? Or had these months of pain and confusion been a dream?

But no. Here it was in front of her. A small, anxious-looking dog. A Welsh Corgi. Pretty rare these days—only the rich had them, and only on Core Worlds.

Are you alright?

River blinked.

"I'm dreaming," River said.

You are? You look awake.

No, dogs didn't talk, and dogs definitely didn't think. Well, they did think—little trickling thoughts, flashes of image and confusion, startlingly loud and simple. Barking thoughts. They didn't think like this.

"This can't be real," she said.

Why not?

"Dogs can't speak."

The little dog barked.

"Was that a joke?" she asked.

Yes. Did you like it?

River put a hand to her head. "More damaged than I realized," she said. "Will have to critically reevaluate all my perceptions. Maybe I was never in the Academy. Maybe there isn't a *Serenity*. Maybe I'm in a psych ward."

This seems real to me.

"A talking dog does not make for sufficient empirical evidence."

But I'm not a talking dog.

"A thinking dog."

Yes.

"Is that supposed to be more acceptable to me?"

Why not? You can hear my thoughts. Is that so much weirder than me having them?

River frowned. "Discomforting."

Why?

"That makes sense."

I know.

River put hands to her temples, and the dog sidled up to her. The warm bulk of him was strangely comforting, and almost without thinking she put a hand on his side.

"I'm River," she said.

Hello, Rivergirl. I'm Ein.

"Where did we find you?"

Faye-lady brought us.

"Us?"

"Ein!" shouted a high, bright voice. "Where are you!"

Here! Ein called, and at the same time barked twice. *Here, Edlove!*

River looked up, still frowning. Someone was here? But she hadn't felt anyone...

A bundle of thin limbs and wild pink hair scuttled around the corner, crabwalking with astonishing speed. She came to a stop and grinned at River.

"Ein!" she said. "You made a new friend!"

Ein barked again and hopped into River's lap. *Edlove this is Rivergirl!*

"River?" Ed said, cocking her head to one side. "River, shiver, liver, quiver?"

This was bizarre. Unusual. Unprecedented. Thinking dogs and girls with thoughts that weren't quiet but were outside of what she could quite read. Like background noise, shuttles roaring through the atmosphere, wind in the trees, invisible trace of something bigger, harder to understand.

"Ed?" River asked, and then on a whim, "Said, bed, dead?"

Ed's eyes went wide. "Dead!" she squealed, scuttling back. "Ein!"

Ein have a little shake. *Not dead, Edlove. Never dead.*

Ed stopped in midmotion, here eyes narrowing. "Mean joke," she said.

"Oh," River said, a little confused. "Sorry."

Ed nodded enthusiastically, then her face split into a wicked grin. "Want Ed to be dead?" Ed asked. "Then catch me!"

Ed went scuttling away. Ein hopped off River's lap and looked into her face. *You're it*, he informed her somberly, and went chasing after Ed, barking all the while.

It? Was he calling her an object? A weapon, a tool, like the Alliance had wanted her to be? Or...or was it like a game?

She looked down at her thin body. Bruised arms from where she clung to herself too tightly. Too thin because sometimes when she was eating she tasted death. Didn't want to throw up. Terrible it. Atrocious choice. An inefficiently-designed predator.

"No," she said, and sat back down.

But only so she could switch to a crabwalk and go scuttling after Ed and Ein.

Session 9: One Vision

After a day as long as this one, nothing felt better than a long shower. Fortunately for her temporary traveling companions, she kept a large supply of water stored in her shuttle for just such occasions, and had a very efficient recycling system built into her bathroom to clean and retain 90% of the water she used

So, she could afford to luxuriate a little. And after the hard fighting she'd been through—with some of her new companions, no less—she needed it. Hot water coursed over her soaped-up body, and she relished it.

Right up until the moment she heard the buzzing of her shuttle door.

Faye sighed, flicked off the water, and grabbed at a nearby towel, tucking it around herself in two deft moves. She swept towards her door and slid it open. Mal was standing on the other side, a hand looped through his belt. When he saw her, his eyes darted down for just a fraction of a second, then returned to his face.

Well. She minded a little less than when Jayne had done it.

"Miss Valentine," he said, inclining his head.

"Mr. Reynolds," she responded. "Do you make a habit of bothering your female passengers while they're half-clothed?"

"Oh I do like to make a nuisance of myself to our shuttle passengers," Mal admitted. "But given how many of them spend time unclothed I try not to bother them during business hours."

Faye frowned. "What?"

"Oh, we've a Companion renting one of our other shuttles."

Faye's eyebrows arched. "A Companion?" she repeated. Prestigious, that. Too prestigious for a Firefly-class transport crewed by robbers. Then again, who was she to judge?

"I understand your skepticism," Mal said. "But we've got more than few characters in this crew."

"Now you've got a few more," Faye said, smiling.

"See, that's the thing," Mal said, taking a single sidling step toward her—so that his foot was in the doorway of her shuttle, she noticed. "My crew has made my life plenty interesting enough, and I've no need to make it more so. We've got enough food to afford one big meal, but after that I suggest you take your girl and your dog and you get off my ship."

"You suggest?" Faye said, smirking but suddenly conscious of the fact that her nearest weapon was at least ten feet away. "Mr. Reynolds, I'm not sure I'm inclined to follow your...suggestion."

"I would make it an order, but I don't want you shutting down my ship again," Mal said.

"And what's to stop me from taking off and leaving you to float on in the dark?" Faye asked.

"The same thing that stopped you from shooting us when security came in," Mal said.

"See, you didn't have to do that, and of all the scammers and schemers I've met, they wouldn't have. So why did you?"

"Only way I was going to keep my credits," Faye said, but the back of her neck was prickling in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature of the ship.

"Maybe, maybe not," Mal said. "But the point, Miss Valentine, is that if you go I think I can trust you not to screw us over too badly."

Faye hesitated for a moment. "I'm not near a safe port," she said.

"Had my pilot plot us a long course through the dark," Mal said. "Take us in a direction they wouldn't expect. We'll arrive at Persephone in two days time. Girl like you should be able to charter a ship out without too much trouble."

Faye pursed her lips. It was true, she'd more or less achieved her goal—she'd gotten away from the *Geppetto* and any pursuit the Soryev Gambling Company might send her way. She hadn't made the killing she'd been hoping for, but she could figure something else out some other day. Persephone wasn't the most hospitable place, but she thought she had the funds and the skills to get herself out and on to something better.

"And you?" she asked. "Is Persephone a safe harbor for you?"

Mal laughed. "Not really. Pissed off a few of the wrong people, and the Soryev Company's got some ties there. We'll do a quick flyby and then head somewhere else."

Faye smiled. "Is that so?" she asked.

"It's so."

"You really are a gentleman, Mr. Reynolds," Faye said.

Mal blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me."

"I've been called many things in my life, Miss. Gentleman is not among them."

"Better get used to it," she said. "After all, you are trying to save my life."

Mal stared at her. "Scuse me?"

"Don't play dumb," she said, leaning on the nearby wall. The way she leaned made the towel a little looser around her torso. Mal's eyes flickered down and then back up again. Faye's smile widened.

"Who's playing?" he asked.

"You're taking me to Persephone just to get me off the ship?" Faye asked. "That doesn't sound likely. Maybe you're trying to avoid trouble from me and maybe you aren't, but it seems to me more like you're trying to keep *your* trouble from bothering *me*."

Mal flushed. "I-I don't know what you're sayin'."

"I'm saying that you've shifted your whole ship to get me out of here quicker," Faye said. "I don't know if it's to protect me or to protect your crew, but it's not about you." She smiled. "Very gallant, Mr. Reynolds."

Mal shook his head. "Just better to get you off my ship," he mumbled. "You're trouble enough as it is."

Faye laughed. "Good thing we're not playing poker, Mr. Reynolds," she said. "I don't think you could bluff to save your skin." She took a step back towards him, so they were almost touching. "I do appreciate your concern, though."

Mal grimaced and took a step backwards. "Ain't you I'm concerned about."

"And again, Mr. Reynolds," she replied, still smiling. "You're a terrible bluffer." Now that Mal's foot was out of the doorway, she was able to press the button to her right side. With a rattling hiss, her shuttle door slid closed.

"Wait just a-" Mal started, but then the door was shut. She smiled and sauntered back to her shower.

But she'd only been in there two minutes when the buzzer sounded again. There was still soap in her hair, so Faye decided to keep him waiting several seconds while she rinsed it out. Then she threw the still-damp towel around her and walked back to the door.

"Listen, Mr. Reynolds-" she started, as the door slid open, but then stopped. The woman on the other side of the door was wearing a gown of loose red fabric that didn't cling anywhere yet somehow suggested the contours of a lithe, elegant form. Without meaning to, Faye searched every inch of the woman, from her wavy dark hair down her simple dress of fine fabric to her slippered feet. Her eyes looked familiar, though Faye couldn't be sure where she'd seen them before.

"Were you waiting on Mal?" the woman asked.

"He bothered me earlier," Faye said, leaning to one side.

The woman laughed. "Yes, he does that. I'm Inara."

"Faye." The woman's eyes were too familiar—they made her feel uncomfortable. Piercing was the wrong word for such eyes. Those eyes were comprehensive. They

wrapped around you, found the cracks in your defenses. But those eyes did not exploit: they caressed, like a mother's fingers on a child. Your cracks weren't weaknesses to be exploited, but fascinating traits to be examined. You were a work of art to be marveled at, and understood.

"What did he want?" Inara asked, as Faye's mind whirled.

"What's it matter to you?" Faye asked, defensive before the honesty of this woman's gaze.

Inara shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't," she agreed. "I never know what he wants on my shuttle, either."

Soft, kindly, neither probing too hard nor acting disinterested, but it just made Faye more uncomfortable. She got the sense that she could never bluff this woman, that she would know immediately if she was being lied to or if Faye was hiding something. What was more, she got the sense that this woman might not care even if she did know. Worse, she might understand.

How infuriating.

"To warn me off," Faye said bluntly. "He tried to get me out of here."

Faye was about to ask the other woman to leave her alone, but then those eyes left her as Inara sank against the opposite wall and sighed.

"Yes, he does that too," she said.

"Does he?" Faye asked, her discomfort warring with her interest.

Inara nodded. "Didn't want me to take the shuttle in the first place. He's had me clear out of here more times than I can count. And tried to send me off for good, more than once."

"Why don't you go?" Faye asked.

Inara hesitated, then lifted those eyes back up to Faye and gave a beatific smile. Faye had never been attracted to a woman before, and she wasn't now. But she could suddenly understand how Companions could be so influential and command so much respect. That smile was both give and take. It instantly made you feel like you were a part of something special, something both timeless and fragile. It made you want to talk. It made you want the parts of yourself you didn't share with anyone.

"This is home," Inara said simply. "Or as close to home as I've ever found."

And then Faye knew where she'd seen those eyes before, why they were so familiar. Normally, Spike Spiegel's eyes were bored, or weary, or mocking, or bright. But sometimes, when he was really serious and really focused on you, he looked just like that. Eyes that encased you in the awareness of the person they belonged to, so that you felt naked and totally understood and a little ashamed and a little proud but never judged.

"Are you alright?" Inara asked, still watching her with that all-encompassing gaze.

"You're...you're very pale. Did I say something wrong?"

"N-no," Faye managed. "N-no, I...I think I'm just light-headed from the shower." She gave a weak smile. "You're joining us for dinner?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"I'll see you then. Have to get ready."

She slid the door closed before Inara could say anything else, then sunk quietly to the floor and wrapped her arms around her legs. Those eyes would have been haunting enough on their own, reminding her of the universe she'd left behind. But why had that damn woman had to say those words. Home? She knew the exact feeling Inara described, the feeling of belonging that was a little sad and a little happy but more than either of those things essentially comfortable, because they were people and they couldn't always trust each other and it wasn't always right but they could rest and relax among each other, could be *themselves* in a strange universe...

Faye closed her eyes. The *Bebop* was long gone, locked away in some Alliance storehouse. She'd heard Jet was making waves as part of the Alliance law enforcement, and had heard nothing of Spike in years. Even if she'd wanted to return to the *Bebop*—which she didn't, she absolutely *didn't*—it wasn't there to be found.

And besides, this universe was better, wasn't it? No debt she could never hope to repay. No ghosts. Here, there was no way to get her hopes dashed pursuing a past she could never reclaim. This was a new universe of new opportunities and she was happy here.

Except there was still that nagging doubt trailing its fingers over the back of her mind, reminding her that she might never reclaim her past in the old Sol, but there had still been that chance. Though she might not know the future she had left, there was always the chance she might reclaim her past. Here, there was only the future. Here, there was only the relentless present, lingering on from one day to the next.

But then, she hadn't belonged to the last time and place, either. This was just another strange voyage into a strange time, and this one seemed a little better than the last.

So she got to her feet, let the towel drop to the ground, and went sauntering back into her room, looking for the yellow outfit she favored. Hummed softly to herself, and tried not to think of slightly mismatched eyes gazing at her with the same total comprehension of the Companion Inara.

Session 10: A Kind of Magic

A bad time to be picking up stragglers. A very bad time.

Book's weathered face was curved into a severe frown as he stalked through *Serenity's* corridors. The Doctor needed to see River, to understand the strange attacks she'd been suffering from over the past few months. They were at odds with the general improvement in her mental well-being. By and large, River was a happier creature than she'd been when Book had first met her, largely cogent even if she was rarely coherent. These hammering migraines were always horrible reminders of how much remained to be understood, and Simon was desperate to find out what was causing them.

In conjunction with the rumors he'd been picking up over the past few months, these attacks made Book very nervous.

Until joining the crew of the *Serenity*, Shepherd Book had kept only minimal contact with his friends in the Alliance, content to grab a drink on the rare occasion he crossed paths with an old friend. Whenever he reached out to the world he'd left behind, it had only been to make sure there was nothing to worrying in the works. That was how he'd missed the rumors of the Academy: he had been asking after weapons, not experiments.

But after running into River and discovering what some elements of the Alliance were up to, he'd been making full use of his contacts. Quietly, so as not to alarm the Captain or alert Book's old friends to his new line of work. But Book was becoming worried anyways. There were dark things at work in the Verse, and now that Book was back in the world he couldn't allow himself to stay away from them.

Book hadn't heard much, for all his searching. But what little he'd heard worried him immensely. Some big project that was going to change everything in the 'Verse. Something tied up with the Academy and the full resources of the Blue Sun Corporation. And a redoubled effort to track down River Tam.

But why? What was the connection?

Blue Sun. Corporation. Alliance slush-fund. A place for retired bigwigs to pursue the private agendas that would have gotten them crucified by the public. And that level of influence made it a difficult place to glean any information on.

And now there were strangers on board. Strangers who had compromised one of the less wicked jobs this crew had undertaken. Strangers at a time when River Tam and the crew were more in danger than they'd ever been before.

By God, Book was tired. Tired of all the sin these people never wanted to stop doing, tired of all the harm that came down upon them whenever they brought themselves to do good work, tired of this life. He wanted to retreat to a monastery again, recover, find his mind. Maybe it was time to get out of the world.

Book suppressed a sigh and came to a stop. He closed his eyes. *Lord, help my eyes to find the truth that needs revealing and my hands to do the work that needs doing. I trust you to guide my feet on the righteous path. Amen.*

When he opened his eyes, he found a small, cheerful face right up against his.

"What the-!" Book barked, stumbling backwards. The girl—and it was a girl, small and thin as a twig, hanging upside down from one of the pipes on the ceiling—grinned at him.

"Big hear, bug bear, scared by me!" she sang, and flipped effortlessly from the ceiling onto her feet.

Then River swung down right next to him, also smiling, also upside down. "Old Book, scared look, what do you see!" With equal ease, she twisted and flipped onto her feet on the ground beside the pink-haired girl.

And then Kaylee swung down, immediately lost her grip on the ceiling fixtures, and collapsed onto the ground, curling into a fetal position as she laughed. A little dog jumped over her fallen form, barking uproariously.

"S-sorry!" Kaylee said, but then broke off in a howl of laughter. "J-just...y-your face...!" And then she trailed off again, burying her face in the floor and laughing as the little dog continued to circle her, jumping back and forth over her legs.

Book ran a hand over his face. "Big hair," he repeated, staring at the little girl.

"Big big big!" she agreed, holding her hands as far apart as they would go.

Book frowned, reached back and touched it. It was still tied back into its ponytail. "No it's not," he said.

"Hidden things are always there!" the girl sang, hopping from one foot to the other.

"Who are you?" Book asked.

"Ed is Ed!" she said.

"Ed is Ed!" River agreed, smiling. The little dog barked as though in agreement.

Book had seen her laugh before, but he had never seen her look quite so cheerful. Laughs and smiles were fleeting things on River's face, only briefly dispelling the haggard pain she'd worn even as she'd recovered. But not now. Now there was no trace of her usual despair.

"I...see." Book said slowly. "Well, it's...it's nice to meet you, Ed." He extended a hand to her. Ed leaned forward, sniffed it, and then nuzzled it for a moment. Book was caught so off-guard that he didn't pull his hand away.

"Book smell, good smell!" she said warmly.

Book blinked. "Th-thank you," he managed, and Kaylee laughed again from the floor.

But strange as Ed was, it was stranger still to see River looking so happy. So at peace. And for a moment Book considered wishing them all well and then continuing on his way. The Doctor would find her eventually. She should have as much fun as she could.

Except it wasn't just about River. It was about the Academy, and this secret Alliance project, and the renewed efforts to find her. Because figuring out these strange attacks River was suffering from was important to everyone. Because even if it meant taking away this happy moment from her, he had to do it. He had to do the hard thing for the larger good. To take away this moment of happiness, so she might have more in the future. So they might *all* have more in the future.

So he hardened his heart and said, "River, your brother wants to see you."

"Simon?" she said, cocking her head.

Book nodded, and waited for the inevitable down-turning of her features.

"Brother, brother, where is he?" asked Ed.

"Med-bay, med-bay, there is he!" River answered, in the same loose singsong voice.

"Race!" Ed shouted.

"Race!" River agreed, and then all at once the two girls had flung themselves backwards and were scuttling down the hall in a crab walk, the little dog running between them and barking all the while.

"No fair!" Kaylee gasped, struggling to her feet and taking several stumbling crab-walking steps after them.

Book watched them go, blinking.

Session 11: Under Pressure

Simon had never liked being crowded. It had been the worst part of working in a hospital—the constant hustle and bustle that would engulf him even in the middle of a delicate operation. His distaste for crowds had only swelled upon rescuing his sister—every large group of people seemed to pose a quiet danger to him, strange faces masks for killing intent that could undo all his hard work saving her.

He hated being crowded even aboard *Serenity*. Now, with strangers aboard, he hated it still more. But he was able to control himself, if only because he hadn't seen River look so happy in a long long time.

"What's this what's this!" asked the hyperactive girl who appeared to be suffering from mild malnutrition.

"It's a neural imager," Simon said, then immediately realized the girl couldn't possibly follow what he was saying. "It's—"

"Machine machine with no soul, show me what's going on inside my skull!" the girl sang. River, laid out on the seat in front of him, giggled.

"Er, yes," Simon affirmed. "That's...more or less what it does."

"I thought these were rare?" Kaylee asked, leaning against a nearby counter. Simon glanced at her, realized he was gawking at the way her overalls were pulled tight against her breasts, and quickly jerked his head up to her grinning face. "Whole reason we had to break into that hospital, right?" she added, with a little eyebrow wag to indicate his indiscretion had not gone unnoticed.

Flushing, Simon nodded. "Y-yes," he said. "But the technology's...changed. Apparently they've found a way to develop much more detailed images of the brain for much cheaper, and this tech's been dropped. They were going to junk it, but an old friend of mine...well, he got it to me."

"You're in contact with old friends?" Book asked, standing by the door with his arms folded in front of him. "I don't think the Captain would approve."

"No, I don't think I would, either," Mal said, strolling into the room.

Simon tensed. "Mal—" he started.

"We take a big risk carrying you on this ship," Mal said. "I don't want you risking us all by talking to people who know you're wanted."

"This wasn't one of my old medical buddies, Mal!" Simon retorted. "This was a member of the underground group that helped me get River out! They hate the Alliance every bit as much as you do."

"No one hates the Alliance as much as me," Mal said. "Cept for Zoe, maybe. And may I remind you that these dear friends of yours were more than content to let you and your sister wander off all by your lonesome into the cargo hold of some infamous neer-dowells?"

That wasn't entirely their fault—the underground had operated far more openly than they were used to to help him save River, and had been using Simon's funds to bankroll the operation. When his accounts froze, their ability to help him was severely limited. "That didn't end too poorly for me, Captain," Mal said.

"I'm sorry, are we forgetting about the Fed who tailed you to us?" Mal asked.

Simon sighed again. "No."

"No," Mal said. "Try to keep your contact with these people to a minimum, hm?"

"Come on, Captain," Kaylee said. "Neural imager's bound to help him figure out what's bothering River. Plus if I could get a look at it, I might be able to design something like that. Not as sophisticated, mind, but we could maybe make a profit selling'em in the Rim."

Simon smiled gratefully at her as Mal said, "I'll think about it."

"We can figure that out later," Simon said, returning his gaze to the hovering projection of River's brain. It looked much healthier than the first time he'd laid eyes on it nine months ago. Cleaner, somehow. Activity was about twice as high all across, but then, that might just be normal for River.

And then all at once it went berserk.

River screamed, shaking on the table. Everyone rushed forward all at once, and the dog (until this moment sitting quietly in the corner, looking somberly at the proceedings) began to bark wildly, hopping around Simon's legs. The skeletal pink-haired girl reached River first, and placed placed her forehead against River's. The Shepherd was yelling something and trying to pull the other girl off but both River and the girl started smacking at him and he jerked backwards.

And Simon wanted to comfort her but his eyes were transfixed by the way her brain was reacting, in waves and surges of pain and frenzied activity and it looked familiar but...

Suddenly there was a black spot on one section of the brain, and Simon briefly thought that it was some tumor developing all at once, consuming his poor sister from the inside out, undoing everything he'd tried to do and all his work and sacrifice would be for nothing and all his training, too, because if his sister died what was the point?

But no. The dog had scampered over, and put its nose up against the projection. Against a section of the brain that...

That had to do with communication.

I've seen this before.

It stopped. River was panting, whimpering a little with every breath. The dog was giving him a peculiarly knowing look.

"River," he said, running a hand through her hair. "Are you...is it better now?"

River's eyes were squeezed tight. "Peer pressure," she moaned, and the words sent a chill up his spine. "Make you stand naked in the light. Put the most tender parts of you on display, and then dig their fingers into them. Make it stop."

"I will," he said soothingly. "I will."

"River River flowing by!" the pink-haired girl sang softly.

"I'll do my best not to cry," River answered, opening her eyes a little. She lifted them to Simon. "I think I need a short recess."

"That's okay, mei-mei," he said. "I'll...I'll look at the data."

"And make insightful hypotheses," she said. She sat up slowly, removing the little metal circlet that allowed him such detailed insight into her brain. "If you need me to doublecheck your work, let me know."

"You'll do it anyways," he said, smiling so he wouldn't cry.

"Otherwise your tendency towards inexcusable inaccuracies would go uncorrected." He stumbled out of the room, with the pink-haired girl scampering along behind her on all fours. The dog barked, leapt from the table, and trotted along at River's feet.

"Book, could you-" Simon started.

"I'll make sure she's okay," Book said, and followed them out.

"I did not think it was possible for this ship to get any stranger," Mal mused, staring after them.

"Simon, what's wrong with her?" Kaylee asked.

"Something new," Simon said. "This isn't the result of her surgery—at least, not directly. But the thing is, I've seen symptoms like this before."

"Really?" Kaylee said.

"Yes," Simon replied. "There was an attack during the Unification War—Independents used an experimental chemical weapon they'd developed on some elite Alliance sol-"

He broke off when he saw the look of mingled anger, exasperation, and amusement on Mal's face. "Fraid that story ain't exactly true, Doctor," Mal said. "It was the Alliance that developed the weapon. When we got wind of it, a squad of choice soldiers—myself included—was dispatched to prevent it from ever getting used. Since they only had the one batch and it was in their special forces compound..."

Simon nodded. He had never thought to question the official account of events, but the Independents hadn't been much for technological innovation and he'd seen what the Alliance was willing to do for the sake of progress—both during the war and after.

"Do you know what the compound did?" Simon asked.

"Only knew it was supposed to be nonlethal," Mal said. "Doesn't make much sense to me, but..."

"It's a devastating weapon, captain," Simon informed him, thinking back to the patient he'd treated. "It somehow targets the section of your brain that processes auditory and visual signals and disconnects it from the section that handles communication. In other words, your brain no longer sees or hears words as a method of communication. It's not impossible to talk to them—it just takes a great deal of effort."

"And what good are soldiers if they can't understand orders?" Mal mused. "That's a helluva twisted thing."

"Well, Alliance didn't want to waste their highly trained special forces," Simon said. "So they developed a computer interface for these soldiers that got around the damage. Full testing didn't begin until after the war, but preliminary results showed the soldiers were even more effective—their intel was constantly updated, and they could respond on a moment's notice."

"How'd you learn about all this, Simon?" Kaylee asked.

"Because when I was interning, I had to deal with them," Simon said. "See, the interface allowed the soldiers to link directly to each other—share thoughts as communication. But as the program developed, it began to allow more and more of these details to bleed over. It was no longer just words meant to be shared—secret thoughts, secret feelings, memories, pain, all of these started to be shared over the network too, and the Alliance couldn't shut it down because that would kill them. A hundred of those soldiers ended up at my old hospital. Took us months to figure out an effective treatment. We eventually had to put them into comas so that their thoughts would stop bleeding over. Then we had to work on removing the devices that made it all possible..."

"This is a fascinating anecdote, Doctor," Mal said. "And I'm always delighted to hear about Alliance incompetence, but was there a point to this story?"

"The point, Captain, is that when all those thoughts and memories started bleeding over, their brains looked very similar to what River's just looked like."

The Captain stared at him, then swore under his breath. "Are you telling me she's got a device in her skull reporting back to the Alliance?"

Simon shook his head and said, "No. No, we'd be able to see that, especially with the imager. What I'm saying is, it seems like she's being...attacked, somehow."

Mal's eyes narrowed. "She's a reader, Doctor," he said. "Can tell what people are thinking. Can feel trouble coming."

"According to you," Simon said, trying to ignore the nagging fear and doubt that always surfaced at the back of his mind when this subject came up.

"According to everyone!" Mal barked. "And she didn't used to do that, right?"

"Right..."

"We still don't know what they did to your sister, do we?" Mal asked. "But we do know they were doing it to other people."

Simon felt his jaw drop a little. "Captain, surely you're not suggesting-"

"I'm suggesting that we have to find a way to treat this," Mal said. "I don't want them finding us."

"I think I can safely say I don't either," Simon said, his eyes narrowing a little.

"Then we'd best fix this *fast*," Mal said. "You know how to get ahold of any of those underground folk on Persephone?"

Growing exasperation mixed with growing fear in Simon's stomach. "You just told me you didn't want me talking to those people!"

"That was then. This is now. I want you to find out what you can from them soon as we drop into orbit around Persephone. See if you can find out why this is happening and how we can stop it."

Simon hesitated, then nodded. "At the very least, I could start her on a drug regimen similar to the one we gave the soldiers."

"Good," Mal said. "I don't want any other readers getting a bead on us. Last thing I want is the Alliance breathing down my neck." He left the med bay, grumbling, "Leastaways anymore than they already do."

Simon sighed and put a hand to his head.

"You okay?" Kaylee asked, sidling up behind him and roping arms around his stomach.

"I'm fine," Simon said. "But she's not. And...and he's right, Kaylee, she does know things, and if there are others like her..."

"It's okay," Kaylee said. "You'll figure it out."

"I haven't yet," he said bleakly. "All my training and...Kaylee, this is so beyond me. This is so beyond anyone. The things they did to her..."

"She's feeling okay," Kaylee said. "Ed and Ein...they're keeping her company."

"A dog and a starvation victim," Simon snorted, and was about to say more before he felt warm lips pressed against the back of his neck.

"They're keeping her mind off her troubles," Kaylee said. "Now, how's about I do the same for you?"

Simon hesitated. There were a million things he needed to do—contact the underground on Persephone, figure out where to get the drugs he'd need to quiet River's mind like they'd done for the soldiers, but...

But the truth was he couldn't do any of that. Not now. Not until they were closer to Persephone. And besides, there was too much electricity in those lips upon his skin.

"Yes," Simon said, turning to look down into her big, bright eyes, almost energetic, almost so much more alive than they had any right to be. "I think I could handle that."

He closed his lips on hers, and let his mind melt into her warm, soft embrace.

Session 12: Body Language

Sex was shiny, no two ways about it. And it left her feeling shiny for hours after the fact, glowing a little. Sometimes she thought she was gleaming audibly, twinkling like stars whenever people looked at her.

Well, there were worse ways to be feeling.

She was still humming to herself as she took a seat at the large table near the kitchen. Simon, Inara, and Book were preparing dinner tonight, but Simon kept sneaking her glances and then looking away when she caught his eye. Inara kept glancing their way too, and smirking. Kaylee grinned back.

Well, someone had to be in a good mood, way this table was looking.

Mal and Jayne both looked like they'd swallowed something that was trying to fight its way out of their throats. Mal kept looking every which way but where the scantily-clad gorgeous woman sitting at the table's far end. Jayne kept alternating between glaring at the woman and glaring at her tits. Hard to blame him, though. They were right there.

The only positive part of all this was River, Ed, and Ein, skittering around and under the table and surfacing only briefly all across the room. But based on the way Zoe's eyes kept darting after them, Kaylee suspected she might be the only one who thought it was that funny. Except for Wash, who kept giggling whenever River or Ed's head slowly emerged from between someone's legs or at the side of the table.

"So," Faye mused, eating cheerfully from the bowl of gruel in front of her.

"Persephone."

"Yeah, why exactly are we headed back there?" Wash asked. "I have these dim memories of us getting shot at. Anyone else remember that?"

"In all fairness, honey, that's a long list of planets," Zoe said.

"Seems to be a theme on the ships I ride on," Faye said.

"Feel free to get off anytime," Mal said.

"Was that an offer?" Faye asked. Back by the bar, Inara blanched, and Kaylee couldn't help but grin wider.

"Come again?" Mal said, blinking.

"Seriously, Mr. Reynolds," Faye said. "Control yourself."

Kaylee giggled. Faye's eyes flickered her way, and her smirk widened a bit.

"Lotta places we could drop you between here and Persephone," Jayne growled. "Lotta space out there."

"You're welcome to try, Jayne," she said, smirking. "It went so well for you last time." Jayne grimaced, and Faye's smirk widened still further. "But I was thinking of something else, actually. I assume you had help from some Soryev officials in robbing from the *Geppetto*?"

The room went silent, and even Kaylee's inner shine dulled a little. All eyes were fixed on Faye.

"That's quite an assumption to make," Mal said.

"It's correct," Faye said. "I've played too many casinos in my day. I know how the game works. You give the house their cut, one way or another."

"What's your point?" Zoe asked.

"My point is that they can't be happy, either," Faye said. "No one made any money off that deal. Not them, not you, not me. I think we can fix that."

A ripple stirred through the room. Even Jayne's glare softened, as he lifted his eyes back to Faye's face.

"How do you figure that?" Mal asked.

"Peresphone's got more than a couple Soryev casinos," Faye said. "Even if you're not welcome there, they don't know much about me. Let Ed and me get in, make you some money. The Soryev officials can catch us, crack down on us, confiscate some of our wealth...and then you guys show up, guns blazing, and whisk us away. Everyone gets their money."

Zoe's eyes were fixed on Faye as she said, "Could that work, sir?"

Mal rubbed his chin. "Normally I'd say no," he said. "But we've seen what Ed can do."

"Take a chance, computers dance!" Ed squeaked from the kitchen, startling a yell out of Simon. Kaylee giggled in spite of herself.

"You don't seem the type to go helping others," Zoe said, fixing her cold glare on Faye, but her voice wasn't quite so icy.

"I'm not," Faye agreed, shrugging. "But there's literally no way of me doing this without you. Besides, you did me the favor of giving me a ride. I don't like being in debt."

Zoe studied Faye a moment longer, then turned her eyes back to the Captain. "What do you think, sir?"

Mal rubbed at his chin. "I think we've pushed our luck plenty these past few days," he grunted. "And I think it's a dumb animal that goes back to the same watering hole it's nearly been shot at."

No one said anything for a moment. Faye's glittering eyes were fixed on the Captain.

"Then again," Mal said. "We ain't animals, and this ain't the same watering hole." A smile twitched across his face, and there was a collective rattle of anticipation across the dining room. "We won't be able to talk our friends at Soryev for at least a day or two, so no telling if this is a good plan or not," he mused. "But it's an idea."

He nodded gratefully at Faye, whose smile widened in turn.

"Glad we got that settled," Jayne muttered. "Can we get to the gorram food?"

"Not if you're going to ask like that," Inara huffed, sweeping into the room with a bowl stuffed with creamy white that wafted deliciously beneath Kaylee's nose. She almost didn't see the sidelong glances Inara shot at Mal and Faye, or how quickly she returned to the kitchen. Almost

Idiots, both of them. Wasting time on games. She'd never seen either of'em look at anyone the way they looked at each other, but somehow they kept not getting it. Kept not quite saying what they should.

Well, she'd tried her best. Tried to tell Inara. If she didn't want to take the hint, so be it. Kaylee had her own business to worry about. And plenty of fruit to reap from taking her own advice, and just saying what was on her mind.

She flashed a smile at Simon, who caught her eye and gave a tenuous grin. Yeah. Probably time for a few more distractions as the night wore on.

Session Thirteen: Keep Yourself Alive

Wash's little chair wasn't really built for two, but Zoe's calloused, warm body curled so perfectly into the crook of his arm that he never really minded, and her gentle breath against his neck made him forget how uncomfortable it was to squeeze them both in here.

"Where'd that come from?" he asked, as he stroked her arm and stared out into the star-spangled black.

Zoe chuckled, tickling his neck. "I guess it's just watching those two. Kaylee and Simon. Gets me to thinking about the old days, y'know? Sneaking around while the captain wasn't looking."

Yeah. In the engine room, and the dining room, and the kitchen, and the cargo hold, and even in Mal's bed. Heh.

"Why?" Zoe asked, sitting up and staring at him. "You complaining?"

"Oh no," Wash said, grinning. "No, no, keep it coming."

"I'll do the same to you," she said, fingers trailing gently down his chest.

"You're insatiable."

"Well, can't give Kaylee and Simon anytime to catch up. We've got a reputation to maintain."

A low beep rang out from the broad console in front of Wash. He grimaced at it, trying to stay focused on Zoe's fingers.

"Is that the cortex?" Zoe asked.

"Don't worry about it," Wash said. "Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Honey, are we being called?"

"No!" Wash scoffed. "No."

"Hon."

"Okay, yes."

Zoe shook her head and pulled away from him. "Sorry, dear."

Wash grumbled and reached over, flicking a switch.

"-and we need immediate help!" roared a deep voice. "I repeat, our ship has taken damage, and we need immediate help!"

"That sounds...not good," grunted Wash, lifting a mouthpiece off his console. "We read you! What's your situation?"

"This is Fad of the *Black Dog*," said the voice. "Merchant ship operating out of Persephone. Raiders followed us off the moon. We got away, but we took serious damage. I'm not sure how long the ship can hold together."

Well, that didn't make sense. Wash frowned at the speaker and glanced towards Zoe, who was hastily pulling her top back on.

"Keep him talking," she said.

"And say what?" he whispered.

"He can't hear us, dear," Zoe said. "You don't need to whisper."

"I know," Wash said defensively, though the truth was he'd completely forgotten. "It just feels more appropriate."

Zoe rolled her eyes and then leaned over the console. "Captain," she called.

"What'sat," groaned Mal's groggy voice through a different speaker.

"Bit of a situation up here, sir. Think we need your input."

"Think you need to let me get some gorram sleep," Mal grunted.

"Sir..."

"I hear ya, I hear ya."

"Are you still there?" Fad bellowed from the other end.

"Uh, yes!" Wash said, snapping up his mouthpiece as he pulled his pants back on. "Yes, still here. A merchant ship, huh?"

"Yeah. We're affiliated with-"

"Sure," Wash said. "Y'know, it's funny, I've flown on a couple ships out of Persephone. Never had to deal with raiders."

There was a brief silence from the other end. "It's a new problem," Fad said.

"Yeah?" Wash asked. "Doesn't seem like it."

"No," Mal agreed, stepping onto the bridge and sliding his suspenders into place. "No, it surely doesn't." He took the mouthpiece out of Wash's hands. "Son, Persephone's a hard place to raid. Either you're the unluckiest sonofabitch I've ever talked to or you're lying, and either way I'm not much inclined to head your way. Wanna change your story?"

Another silence from Fad's end. Wash felt tension mounting like a wave in his stomach.

"That depends," Fad said. "Are you Alliance?"

"If your situation's as bad as you say it is, I'm not sure that matters," Wash said.

"Side from which," Mal said. "You aren't broadcasting on regular channels. Make a'that what you will."

A brief hesitation. "Alright," Fad said. "We're smugglers. We try to keep it low-key, but we heard about this prize, and...well..."

"Prize, huh?" Mal said, glancing at Zoe. "What are we talking about?"

"Don't know," Fad grunted. "It's sealed up tighter than anything I've ever seen. And right after we snatched it, Alliance came down on us hard. We barely made it out of there."

Mal released his hold on the mouthpiece and glanced at Zoe again. "Alliance goods," he said.

"Could be worth something, sir," she said. "Could also be a trap."

"Yeah..." Wash agreed, but the idea of that lucrative haul was enticing. "But if their situation is as bad as they say it is, we'll be able to tell. And if it ain't, we can hightail it out of there."

Mal thought for a moment, then pressed the button on the side of the mouthpiece again. "You sure you got nothing to add that'd make it worth our while to head your way?"

"Can't tell what's in there," Fad said. "All we know is the info we got from the guy who pointed us to it. Says it's got something to do with those two resistance kids who up and vanished a year ago."

Mal frowned. "Resistance kids?"

"Yeah. The brother and the sister. One was a doctor."

Wash felt his heart jump a little. The crate had something to do with River and Simon?

"Doesn't sound familiar to me," Mal said. "But hell, it might be worth a look. We got your coordinates from the wave. Be there quick as we can."

"Thank you," Fad said. "I'll try to keep this piece of shit together 'til you get here."

Fad's wave broke off.

"You sure about this, Captain?" Zoe asked.

"No," Mal grunted. "But if Simon's right about his sister, we might not have a lot of time left. Anything that might put us another step ahead of the Alliance is worth looking at."

"Could still be a trap, sir," Zoe said.

"Could," Wash agreed, but the idea of learning a little more about the strange psychic girl they had aboard made his heart skip a beat, reminding him of all those sci-fi books he'd read as a kid. "But if it is, we can get out if it."

"How do you figure?" Mal asked.

"Like I said" Wash said. "It's an easy story to check. Not like they can sneak up on us."

Mal pursed his lips a moment, then nodded. "Alright," he said. "But let's not take any risks. I want Kaylee up and running the engines for us. We stay quiet."

It wasn't far to the *Black Dog*—a long stretch of empty space, just a few thousand kilometers or so away. An hour's uneasy, silent running took them there, and it didn't take much to see that Fad's story checked out. Hunks of debris were floating off the ramshackle ship.

"Is that you?" Fad called.

"Sure is," Wash replied into the mouthpiece, then disabled it so Fad couldn't hear their conversation.

"The hell is that ship?" Mal said, leaning in to study the rough diagram Wash had lifted from preliminary scans.

"Beats me," Wash said. "Looks like it was converted from something else. It's more beat-up than ours!"

"Hey!" Kaylee called out from the radio. "*Serenity* ain't beat up! She's got character!"

"Then Jayne's got more character than all of us," Mal said.

"With the exception of you, sir," Zoe said.

"I take offense at that," Mal said.

"Hope you don't take it as bad as you take a hit, sir."

"Are you still there?" Fad yelled.

"Don't know what you're yelling about, Fad," Wash said. "Far as I can tell, your ship ain't in danger of a hull breach."

"That's because I'm pumping out interference!" Fad yelled. "Whatever's in this crate keeps trying to put out a signal. Had to pay a lot to get something that could hide it. Your scans can't tell you anything!"

"Signal suppression," Mal said, rubbing his chin. "Take that off his hand with the crate...yeah, I'd say this is worth the risk." He pressed a button on Wash's broad console. "Fad, this is Malcolm Reynolds, Captain. If you're telling the truth, we should get you out of their first and go in later. Got a shuttle?"

"Yeah," Fad said. "Got it prepped already. One sec."

"Where are we planning on docking him, exactly?" Wash asked, keeping one eye on the screen to make sure Fad made it out okay.

"Right in the cargo bay, I reckon," Mal said. "May take a bit more finagling than usual, but I think we can swing something. Kaylee?"

"Shouldn't be a problem, Captain," Kaylee called up.

"He's away," Wash said, frowning at the design of the shuttle. Something about it didn't look quite right to him. Wings were too large, for one thing. Body too angular. Shuttles

were emergency escapes and quarters and cargo hauling. This thing didn't look like any kind of shuttle Wash had ever seen. "Fad, what kind of shuttle are you in?"

There was no response from Fad, and that set Wash's teeth on edge. Signal jammer could be blocking this thing, sure, but he didn't like it. It looked too much like...like...

Like a fighter.

"Shit!" Wash yelled, and twisted the controls around. No sooner did he do so then alarms sounded from the bank of controls on his right.

"What the hell just happened!" Mal roared, latching onto a handhold as the ship shook around them.

"It's a fighter!" Wash yelled, twisting around to one side and sending the ship into a low spin.

"So get us out of here!" Mal shouted, as the ship shook around them.

"Can't really do that, sir!" Wash said. "By the time we got the main engine up to full..."

"He'd have a clear shot at us," Zoe said, staring at the console.

"Ah, hell!" Mal yelled, grabbing for the mouthpiece. "Kaylee, we need everything you got!"

"Captain, what's happening!" Kaylee yelled.

"We're under attack, that's what!" Mal shouted.

Wash gritted his teeth, ignored them, and kept flying. In theory, *Serenity* was far faster than the fighter behind them, but that was only long term, with a real good burn of the engines. And that kind of burn took time—time the enemy fighter wasn't giving them.

The fighter chasing them was good—maybe better than anyone Wash had ever flown against. He was using his fighter's superior maneuverability to hem them in. Every time Wash tried to build up their main engine for an escape, the fighter would come swooping in from one flank or another, and Wash would have to use his thrusters to keep them spinning, dodging the streams of bullets

So they whirled and danced through space, the cockpit shaking around them as the fighter pinned them in. They couldn't bring the engine to full burn while they were spinning with the thrusters, and their hunter knew it. Truth was, he'd get them. Couldn't be avoided.

"Where the hell are the inertial dampeners!" Mal barked.

"They needed to be replaced two months ago!" Kaylee squeaked over the radio. "They can't take this much movin'!"

"Won't have to!" Wash shouted, keeping *Serenity* spinning at his fingertips. He was calculating in his head. "Kaylee, bring us up for a full burn."

"Wash, that'll blow the engines!"

"Trust me, it won't," Wash said. "Just let it ride when I tell you to."

That fighter was keeping too close, and *Serenity* didn't have any weapons. Eventually Wash would slip up and their enemy would be able to sink a few shots into the ship. Had to deal with him before that happened.

"Ready!" Kaylee shouted.

"Okay," Wash whispered. He cut the thrusters all at once, gritting his teeth in a grimace. For half a second, the fighter thought it was a feint, and swung far out, then it spun back around...

Too close to escape.

"Now!" Wash shouted, and jerked the thrusters up and around. At the same time, Kaylee let the engines hit full-burn for just a few seconds. They'd never escape like this—the fighter would have had a clear shot at him. But the plan wasn't to get away, not this time.

When full-burn hit, it just let the *Serenity* spin faster. And when Wash let the thrusters go, the fighter was just a few thousand feet in front of them, easily visible through the viewport.

It was a beat-up, angular, red craft with huge wings and needle nose. Wash had never seen the like, but he didn't need to know the ship to know how to beat it. He twisted the thrusters down as the ship opened fire, waited until the ship started to burn past them, then twisted again and slammed the side of the *Serenity* into the flaring engine on the fighter's rear. From the diagram on his right, he saw its engines go dark.

"Gotcha!" Wash shouted, as the fighter was launched spiraling off into the dark.

"Yeah you did," Zoe whispered, putting a strong hand on his shoulder.

Then there was a loud, hull-echoing *ping*!

No one said anything for a moment. Wash blinked, studying the diagrams. The fighter was still spinning uncontrollably, hurtling away from their ship. It wasn't possible. It wasn't.

But according to the *Serenity* diagnostic, it was.

"He hit us," Wash said incredulously.

"He what?" Mal demanded.

"He hit us with something," Wash said. "I..."

But then his screens started to flicker. Wash's throat went very dry as he grabbed for his controls and tried to turn the *Serenity*. But the ship wasn't responding.

"No way," he whispered. "Kaylee! Kaylee are you seeing this?"

But there was no response from Kaylee, either.

"Oh, hell!" Wash said. "He locked us down!"

"And again I say, what?" Mal said.

"Locked us down!" Wash repeated. "Hit near enough to one of the diagnostic sensors that he messed with all the ship systems. We still got life support, but can't communicate, we can't fly, we can't see what's coming!"

"You sent him flying!" Mal said.

Yeah. Yeah, Wash had. Wash had sent the bastard spinning without engines, and somehow he'd still managed to get a clean shot at the ship. While spinning? Man, this guy was good.

"Only one reason to do that," Mal said grimly. "They want us alive."

"They know about Simon and River, sir," Zoe said.

"Seems likely," Mal said. "Baited us. Baited us good." He grimaced. "They'll be boarding soon."

"They'll come in through the cargo hold," Zoe said. "Only place a ship that big could force an entrance."

"Yeah," Mal said. "Alright, grab Jayne and-"

"Already here," Jayne grunted, stomping onto the bridge with Faye close behind. Jayne still looked tired, but Faye looked fresh, somehow. She was still wearing the outfit that made Wash feel as though he had to look anywhere else but her. "The hell's goin' on up here? Some of us were tryin' to get some ruttin' sleep."

"We got attacked, and we got shutdown," Mal said.

"I'll get Ed on it," Faye said.

"Won't do ya any good," Wash said. "This is hardware, not software. Can she hack into something she can't access?"

Faye shook her head. "Well, you need a hand?" she asked. "I offer very affordable rates."

"We can talk about that later," Mal said.

"I'll just take that as a verbal contract," she said.

"Will one of you get Kaylee up here?" Wash called. "I'll do what I can from here, but I'm gonna need her help if I'm gonna get anything done." Wash grimaced at his controls.

"Not like we're flyin', anyways."

Mal nodded, and swept out of the room, followed shortly by Faye and Jayne. Zoe stuck around for a moment, and Wash moved his hand back and placed it over hers.

"You be careful out there, okay?" he said.

"When am I not?" she asked.

Wash turned narrowed eyes back to her. "I've seen you naked, y'know," he said. "I actually know exactly how many scars you've got."

"Doesn't mean I'm not careful," she said. "Just means I got shot." But she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I'll be safe."

She squeezed his shoulder, then slipped her hand out from under his and went off down the hall. Wash stared after her for the half-second he could spare.

Sooner I get this thing in order, sooner we can get out of here, safer she'll be.

No time to worry right now. Not when there was something he could be doing to keep her safe.

Session Fourteen: Hammer to Fall

On a ship with strangers she'd recently been fighting, helping them to protect themselves for an undiscussed fee. Faye was having a peculiar sense of déjà vu.

She had her favored MP5K in hand already—she'd been on enough shake-ups aboard the *Bebop*, she knew better than to go unarmed—and was following after Mal, with Zoe and Jayne nearby.

"Looks like they're after the Tams," grunted Mal.

"And I bet we're gonna go sticking our necks out for'em again," Jayne growled.

"What's so important about the Tams?" Faye asked.

Mal looked momentarily stricken, but Zoe popped in, "Got a few outstanding warrants for'em. Bit more serious than the rest of us. You'd be surprised what kind of trouble that brings."

A lie, but a smooth one. Faye had to admire that.

"Captain!" shouted the Shepherd, running up the stairs. "Looks like they're force-docking with the cargo bay."

Mal grimaced. "They want to take us alive, I guess," he said. "Zoe, Jayne, get us some cover."

"On it, Captain," Zoe said, sweeping down the hall.

"I'll get Simon and River ready," the Shepherd said, running back down the stairs.

"Hang on," Jayne said. "I ain't willing to die for them. We could talk this out, Mal. Maybe get ourselves a deal."

"Jayne," Mal said, with a note of bitter warning.

"Ain't our responsibility to—"

Mal's eyes flashed dangerously, and Jayne went silent at once. "Go get us some cover," Mal repeated, with ice in his voice.

Jayne grimaced, but he didn't protest any further, instead stomping off the way Zoe had gone. "Guess he does respect you," Faye mused, as they set off towards the med bay.

"You're surprised?" Mal asked.

"That someone could respect you?" Faye said. "Why, yes. Yes I am."

Mal rolled his eyes. "Glad we took you on board."

"You should be."

They reached the med bay soon enough. Simon was busy laying out supplies with Book and Inara, while River, Ein, and Ed huddled conspiratorially in one corner. Faye spared them a concerned glance before Simon turned to the Captain.

"Got all the supplies we need," Simon said. "If anyone gets injured in the fight-"

"About that, Doctor," Mal said. "Looks like these folks may be after you and your sister."

Simon, Inara, and Book all flinched, as Simon's eyes flickered towards her. "Captain," he said carefully. "Does...does she know..."

"About your outstanding warrants?" Mal said airily. "Oh yes, Doctor. We haven't given her the specifics, but I think she can imagine-"

"Oh, I can imagine more than you'd believe, Captain," Faye said warmly. "Why, with such a fine story, how could I help but imagine all sorts of details?"

Mal gave her a smile that was almost a grimace. "So glad we understand each other." He looked back at Simon and River. "Best if you hide, yeah?"

Simon swallowed, visibly afraid. "I..." he started. "Where?"

"Could use my shuttle," Inara suggested.

"Bad idea," Mal said. "They've got one fighter that we know of, and most of our hardware's shot thanks to the lockdown. Could be we won't even be able to let you go."

"Do you have a better plan?" Inara snapped.

Touchy, touchy! Faye'd been picking upon that since she first met Inara, but it had been aggressively apparent during dinner. How was she supposed to resist tweaking such an easy target? It was like cheating at games with Jet.

"C'mon, you guys are smugglers!" Faye said. "If they get through us, they'll find'em anyway. Only goal's to make sure they can't get'em before we stop'em, right?"

Mal exchanged glances with the Shepherd. "What do you think, just stuff'em in the crawlspace?" Mal said.

"I think that could work," the Shepherd answered.

"Then let's get'em stowed. Doctor."

Simon ran a hand through his hair. "Captain, I'm not sure I...what if you or the others get hurt?"

"Then we hide out, finish the fight, and get you out to patch us up," the Captain said.

"You've seen us fight before. You got any doubts?"

"I'd have fewer if I'd seen you *win* before," Simon said.

"And what am I doing during all this?" Inara demanded.

"You're staying in your damn shuttle and keeping out of the way," Mal said, whirling to glare at her. "Don't want no Companion's guild bringing trouble down on my head. Last thing I need's more high-class whores complaining on this ship."

Inara glared at him in turn, grabbed some of the medical supplies, and swept away to our shuttle. Mal watched her go.

There were a million things Faye could have said about this interaction, but she was only half-paying attention. Her main focus was on Ed, Ein, and River, huddled together in one corner and whispering. Faye hesitated, then approached them.

"Ed," she said. "You need to find someplace safe."

"Safe?" Ed repeated, blinking up at her with her huge

River giggled. "Turn the lock and listen close. Hide away your secrets and make sure they can't hear."

Faye gave a slightly worried glance to the stringy-haired ghost-like girl, then glanced back at Ed. "Just need to keep out of the way, okay?" she said. "Looks like we've got trouble."

"It's always trouble with you, Faye Valentine," River said.

Faye turned surprised eyes towards River, and found herself pinned in place by a gaze as fierce and remote as a hunting falcon's. "Isn't that why you're always running?" River asked. "Always trouble nipping at your heels? Got to get away, before it finds you." She seemed struck by a sudden thought, her face softening as her eyes turned away. "No, that's not right. You're not running away. You're running home. You've been running home since before you woke up. Since school let out and you sprinted up that hill."

Faye gaped at her. How? How could she possibly know any of that?

"River, slither, quiver in fear!" Ed sang quietly. "Don't make Faye-Faye shed a tear."

River looked suddenly abashed. "Sorry."

Ein nuzzled against River's shin. Faye kept staring at the thin, broken-looking girl, her words filling her head and crawling like ants across her skin.

"Hey!" Mal said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You gonna come help, or what?"

Faye grimaced, tried to shake the cobwebs of River's words out of her mind. "Coming, coming," she said, glancing at Ed and giving up with a helpless shrug. If the girl had managed to survive roaming free across bombarded Earth, she'd be fine now.

But as Faye followed Mal down to the cargo hold, River's words slithered back into her mind. Home? Running home? That wasn't right. She hadn't been trying get home while she'd been here. She'd been free.

Except...except she hadn't been able to stop gambling, had she? She'd made so much money, and still she wanted more. Always chasing the next big prize. Why? Because she

wanted wealth and luxury? Or because no matter how well she was doing, she felt that itch, that nagging sensation that no matter what she did here she'd never figure out who she was? Never know what she'd been, before the accident?

Ugh, enough of this deep-thinking. People were trying to break in, and she had her MP5K in hand. That was enough for her.

When she reached the metal overhang overlooking the cargo bay—as Simon shepherded River into a crawlspace concealed behind a false wall—Jayne was hopping out of the mule, which was itself acting as the final part of their makeshift barricade of crates and junk, forming an arc around the cargo bay. She and Mal lingered on the overhang for a time, as Faye checked her clips.

"That's an old model," Zoe said, nodding up towards Faye's MP5K.

Faye arched an eyebrow. "So's yours."

Zoe shrugged. Faye examined another of her clips. It turned out her MP5K could accept the more modern clips with their different chemical propellants with just a little bit of modification, which she'd been free to do as soon as she and Spike had slipped their Alliance watchdogs. She had plenty to spare—she knew better than to travel without her weapon. That was true regardless of where you were—in this universe, or in the broken Sol System she'd left behind. The world was dangerous, no two ways about it.

"Plan, sir?" Zoe called up to them, as everyone finished checking their weapons. She, Jayne, and the Shepherd were all waiting down below.

Mal considered for a moment.

"Shepherd, I want you in the medbay," he said. "Til the Doctor can come out, you've got to keep us healthy. Think you can handle that?"

"I have some experience as a field medic," the Shepherd said. "I think I can patch you up 'til the Doctor's free to help."

Mal nodded. "Zoe, you and me on the ground," he said. "Deal with anyone who tries to bust our barricade. Jayne, grab a low-powered rifle and get up here, take out anyone you have to. Faye, if you don't mind spraying down anything from here..."

She smiled. "Not a problem."

"Good," he said, his eyes flickering to the groaning cargo bay doors. "Then let's do this."

Mal swept down to the next level, he and Zoe taking opposition positions amidst their barricade. Jayne, eyeing Faye suspiciously, went back to his room and returned with a rifle in hand. He kept a respectful distance from her, which made her smile.

Not so long ago, these people had been her adversaries. Now, they were allies. That was becoming a habit with her.

The cargo bay doors kept groaning. Jayne laid out on his belly, aiming through his rifle scope at the doors. Faye, climbed up the stairs a little, aiming her MP5K and watching. Finally, with on loud, protesting groan, the doors creaked open, revealing nothing but darkness beyond. No one fired. Nothing happened.

Then something colossal and metal blasted out of the darkness, trailing a gleaming cord in its wake. It smashed into their barricade and swept, tearing a breach straight it.. From down below, she heard Mal and Zoe shout in alarm: Jayne started cursing wildly, firing several sniping potshots.

Faye felt a strange, cold clarity. That metal object, attached by its gleaming cord, looked awfully familiar. Even more so when it vanished back into the darkness as though it were a hook being reeled by some gargantuan fisherman.

Two figures, obscured by the dust and chaos of that opening attack, rushed through the darkness of the cargo bay doors. One, slender and fast and deadly, leapt into the shattered barricades, kicking the shotgun out of Zoe's hands. When Mal lifted his gun, this darting figure swept low and snapped another kick upwards, catching him in the face. Mal collapsed to the ground.

The larger figure, carrying a large rectangular box on his shoulder, aimed up at Jayne. With a concussive *whoosh*, a mesh net flew up at him, tangling around his gun so it slipped off the overhang and hit the ground with a clattering *clang*.

Familiar. Too familiar.

The absolute stasis of her dissonant clarity was broken when a bundle of ragged limbs and a barking dog rushed down the stairs and started spinning around the thinner figure, barely visible through the chaos. He gave a familiar shout of consternation, staggering away from them.

"Damn it, Ed, get offa me!"

Faye leaned over the edge of the railing. Her heart felt strange—heavy but serene, as though she were plunging down through cool, perfect water.

"Spike?" she called.

Everything seemed to freeze. The chaos and light seemed to settle, and Spike looked up at her eye with those distant, dreaming, perpetual eyes.

"Hey, Faye," he said weakly.

Session Fifteen: Friends Will Be Friends

After all that preparation—after finding the likeliest route and broadcasting their location, layering space around them with debris and using one of Ed's old programs to block their ship from conventional scans—it was only luck their plan had worked. Spike managed to lock them down with the harpoon attached to the Swordfish's underside, but it had been a tricky shot—hell, only the pilot's overconfidence had left him open to it. Not that Spike could blame him: if he'd pulled a maneuver like that one, he would probably have rested on his laurels a moment, too.

Still, it did throw their timing off. It took Spike a lot of maneuvering with thrusters and air brakes alone just to flip his battered Swordfish into their hangar, only a few kilometers out from the *Serenity*.

As soon as he'd screeched his way back in, the doors closed behind him, and Jet rushed out. "What the hell, Spike!" he roared, climbing onto the Hammerhead as Spike made his battered way out of the Swordfish. "They'll have time to get ready now!"

"You could have taken'em on by yourself, old man," Spike said.

"Yeah, me alone against a whole ship," Jet said, rolling his eyes. "Not everyone's as crazy as you."

"That's why we're using the Hammerhead, right?"

"Right," Jet said. "Except I hadn't finished adjusting her! Last thing we need's to make a hull breach and have our bounty get sucked out into space!"

"It *would* be just like old times," Spike said with a grin.

Jet eyed him for a moment. "Why are you in such a good mood?"

Spike stretched, easing out the kinks in his muscles and neck, rolling his head around to shake off the lingering pressure behind the eyes, that faint after-flight hangover that always hung around after he'd gone through too many g's of force. "Good fight," he said.

"They've got a helluva pilot."

"He was piloting a Firefly," Jet grunted. "You should have been able to handle it."

"What can I say?" Spike said. "He's good."

But that wasn't all, was it? As Spike started examining his weapons (ultimately settling on only a single handgun—anything bigger and he'd almost certainly kill someone, and they needed to take the crew alive), he was also thinking about this feeling. The feeling he'd had since he'd gotten back aboard the *Bebop*.

That feeling like, just maybe, he was on a path to see Julia again.

He didn't look for her. That wasn't how the universe worked, not really. Spend your life chasing a thing, and you'd find only disappointment. Best to drift free upon the breeze, and hope you found your way back again.

But that wasn't an option anymore. Because drifting free here would only take him farther away. Two dreamers could meet again, if they were sharing a dream. But dreaming worlds apart, they'd never find each other.

Spike was content to dream, but not if there was no hope of her. Not if he was dreaming all alone.

"We're set," Jet called, as the groaning from their hangar doors swelled to a crescendo, forcing a connection between *Serenity's* cargo bay and their hangar.

"It'll fire when I give the word?" Spike asked.

"Yeah," Jet grunted. "I don't know why *you* get to give the word. It's my ship."

"You can't bluff to save your life, Jet," Spike said. "I've seen you try."

"I can bluff just fine," Jet said.

"See how terrible that was?"

Jet grimaced, grabbed some of his weapons, and took shelter behind the Hammerhead. Spike followed his lead, and with one final, creaking, groan, the doors opened, spilling out into the bright interior of the Firefly's cargo bay. Hunkered down behind the Hammerhead, Jet clutched a little screen, showing a camera's viewpoint from the tip of the Hammerhead's harpoon gun, sweeping the room. The gleam of a rifle, on the overhang. And a wide arc of cargo, to act as a barricade. Jet pressed something else, and switched them to a thermal view, so they could just make out two bodies behind the barricade and two on the overhang.

"What are you thinking?" Spike whispered.

"Blow a hole in their defenses," Jet said. "You get in there and hit whoever's behind it. I'll worry about the sniper."

"Works for me."

Jet pressed something on his screen. With a colossal *thumph*, the harpoon gun fired, and tore a breach into their junk wall. As it started to retract, Spike and Jet were already moving.

Spike heard Jet's net fire, and hear the *clang* of the rifle tumbling down from on high. He was already over the broken wall at this point, glancing towards a terrifying woman hefting her shotgun—Zoe, the devilish browncoat with so many kills on her record. He spun on his heel and kicked the gun from her hands, as another man in a long brown coat—Malcolm Reynolds, defiant hero of the Independents and legendary avenger of

Shadow—darted from cover with his gun in hand. Spike lunged low, then snapped a kick up to the man's face, sending him tumbling backwards.

So far so good. Now-

A rattling of limbs on a metal staircase, and Spike reached for the gun beneath his jacket. Too late, he saw them running towards them—a familiar, stick-thin figure, launching herself through the air with a dog at her side.

"Spikey Spike!" Ed shouted, wrapping herself around him as Ein ran around his feet, barking.

"Damn it, Ed!" he swore instinctively. "Gett offa me!"

"Spike?" called that familiar brash voice, mellowed with unfamiliar sweetness.

Spike shot a sheepish glance over Ed's mane of pink hair and up to the overhang and saw Faye staring at him with disbelief. Hell, it was good to see her in person. Hadn't seen her since they'd escaped from the Alliance's prying eyes together, parting ways on stolen shuttles when they hadn't been able to agree where they would go.

"Hey, Faye," he managed.

Ed and Ein exchanged glances (or so it seemed to Spike's distracted gaze), and then Ed released him and scampered off towards the *Bebop*, Ein right on her heels and barking all the while.

"Hold on," Reynolds said, rising to his feet and running a probing hand along his jaw where Spike had kicked him. "You know these guys?"

"Yeah," she called back. "We, uh...we used to work together. A long time ago."

"These guys are thieves?" Zoe called. Spike noticed that she'd reclaimed her shotgun. Great.

"They weren't when I knew'em," Faye said. "Back then, we were bounty hunters."

Reynolds and Zoe exchanged alarmed glances. Spike glanced back at Jet in turn as he kept swiveling their net cannon from one target to another. These people had the Tams, no doubt about that now; that was clear from the alarm in their faces. Jet nodded, and raised his voice in a bellow. "We're here for the Tams! You hand'em over, we'll leave peacefully."

"What are you offering?" the man on the overhang called. Spike couldn't see him from here.

"Jane!" Reynolds shouted. Spike was baffled. Jane? The man's name was Jane? Was he a transvestite sniper? Well, he wouldn't be the first Spike had met, or...

Oh, wait. Jayne Cobb. Right.

"Offering?" Jet shouted back. "I'm offering not to kill ya."

"You think you can take me, old man!" Jayne shouted, rising to his feet.

"Seems like!" Jet shouted back. "You don't have a gun."

Jayne scowled at him, then glanced towards the SMG in Faye's hands. Faye's eyes narrowed. "Don't even think about it," she said.

"Focus, people!" Reynolds shouted, then let his eyes flicker between Jet and Spike. He took a step back, and Zoe followed his lead. Shit, Spike didn't like the look of that—the one on the overhand was just a thug, but these two were military, browncoats used to asymmetrical warfare and fighting against superior odds. They had the background and the training. They could be a problem. "What are we dealing with?"

"Dunno," Faye admitted. "Spike? What are we dealing with?"

Spike studied her for a moment and weighed his odds. "Alliance hired us," he said. From the corner of his eyes, he saw rage and fear cross Zoe and Reynolds' face. Couldn't worry about that now: if they moved, he'd see it coming. "Want us to take in the Tams."

"Yeah, I figured that much out," Faye said, rolling her eyes. "These guys can't keep a secret to save their lives."

"Hey now," Reynolds called. "I'm a consummate liar."

"What are you talkin' to 'em for?" Jayne demanded. "Shoot 'em!"

"I'm thinking about it," she said.

Jayne's eyes narrowed. "You thinking about turning on us?"

"He's one to talk," Reynolds muttered.

"What are they offering!" Faye shouted.

"A way home," Spike said, watching her.

He saw her eyes flash wide. Her mouth hung slightly open: she looked too flabbergasted to speak. "I..." she started. "I...I don't..."

"Home, Faye," he said.

She closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. "Home," she repeated. "I..."

She hefted her gun, and aimed it at. Her eyes flashed open. "There's nothing for me there, Spike," she said. "And these are good people. Leave 'em alone."

Spike sighed. "I can't do that, Faye."

"Yeah?" she said. "What's waiting for you back there?"

"Maybe nothing," Spike admitted, but Julia's face was in his head. "Maybe everything."

"Well, ain't that sweet," Reynolds said. "But I ain't planning to lay down so you and yours can get what you want."

"All we want," Jet said. "Is the Tams."

Reynolds frowned. "What, those kids that pissed off the Alliance?" he said. "I wouldn't exactly call the Alliance if I found'em, but we don't have'em."

"You're a bad liar, Sergeant Reynolds," Spike said, grinning at him.

Reynolds grimaced, then snapped his gun towards Spike in one swift motion. "Maybe," he admitted. "But I think we've got this one sewn up."

Reynolds on one side, Zoe on the other, guns trained on him. And up above, Faye, pointing that gun at him. Would she shoot? Didn't matter: she'd keep him pinned down while the other two dealt with him.

"What do you think, Jet?" he called.

Jet sighed. "Looks like we don't have a shot."

Spike grinned a little. "Yeah," he admitted. "Looks that way."

"You're giving up that easy?" Faye asked, sounding a little amused and a little worried.

Spike glanced up at Faye, and shrugged. "Can't win'em all," he said, and pointed his finger like a gun at the overhang beneath her. "So this one ends with a whimper instead of a *bang*."

Behind him, the Hammerhead's harpoon gun snapped up, following the line of his finger. Then it fired, right at the overhang. With a terrific scream of metal, the thing split in two, sending Faye and Jet tumbling to earth and raining metal down all around them, so Zoe and Reynolds were forced to duck and cover.

But that was all the time Spike needed.

He snapped towards Reynolds first, sidestepped the man's reflexive gunshot and then casually grabbed him by the collar and threw him to one side, into Zoe. Both were sent careening to the ground. From the corner of his eye he saw Jayne rushing towards him, and then with a concussive *thumph* a net hurtled out and wrapped around the brutish man, bringing him to the ground. Another net fired, tangled Zoe and Reynolds together so that they couldn't get free.

Faye was already on her feet, casting her head from side to side as she searched for her gun. Spike charged her, and when she threw a predictable punch, he caught her by the wrist and flipped her onto her back.

"Sorry, Faye," he said. "I need to know where they are."

"Mei-mei, no!"

Spike glanced up as panel on the wall slid away, and River Tam strolled out as casually as though she were walking into a store. Behind her, Simon Tam lay dazed against a wall, half-concealed in shadows.

Smuggling ship. Of course there were secret panels

"Got her," Jet said, wheeling around and aiming his gun. He fired, but somehow River slid around the net, spun as effortlessly as a top as she whirled towards Jet, and before Jet could fire again she was upon him, striking at his ribs, knees, throat. He collapsed to the ground, gasping.

Then in one ballet leap she had closed the gap between herself and Spike. Spike kicked at her, and she slipped aside, so Spike twisted and kept kicking, six times in different spots, and every time she managed to dance away just before the blow landed.

And Spike couldn't help but smile as she descended upon him in a flurry of lashing blows.

She was weaker than he was, no doubt about that, but she might have been faster, and she was certainly more intuitive. Every time he tried to grapple her she slipped away before dealing quick strikes to his ribs and limbs. Not much power in those strikes, but there was precision to spare, quiet aches getting more intense all the time. Only reason she hadn't crippled him yet was because he knew how to twist away from the worst strikes.

When it came to speed and technique, Spike Spiegel almost always had the upper hand. But this slip of a girl was keeping ahead of, dancing with him effortlessly, and this was starting to hurt.

Spike had spent along time training to remove most of his obvious tells, but for some reason she could still read his attacks, dodging and blocking before he'd quite begun to move. He had to be giving something away, and eventually her little blows would add up, so he simply focused on her torso and let go. The years he'd spent fighting had given him instincts that were nearly subconscious, reflexive as the kick of the leg beneath a doctor's mallet.

Then he was no longer fighting. He was dancing, too, and there was an ecstatic joy in that dance. He briefly recognized the fleeting surprise that crossed her face, and then an answering smile unfolded on her lips. Then there were back to punching, kicking, grappling, striking, dancing, whirling over debris that skittered at their feet, stumbling and striking and flowing like a river of blows together.

They danced, and hurt, and fought, and it was magnificent.

They parted in an unspoken reprieve, stared at each other, smiling still.

"You're a killer to the core, Spike Spiegel," she said.

"And you're not, River Tam?" he replied, bouncing from foot to foot. "You're enjoying this as much as I am."

She nodded. "We're weapons," she said. "Tools. Why not enjoy what we're made for?"

Spike's eyes narrowed. "I'm no one's tool," he said.

"Maybe not," she admitted. "Maybe I'm not either. But we were tools, once. Blue Sun. Red Dragon." An icicle speared its way into Spike's heart. "What's the difference, really?"

Spike's smile hadn't quite faded, but it was flickering. "And how do you know about Red Dragon, River Tam?"

She shrugged. "That's the kind of tool I am, Spike Spiegel. But at least I'm on the right side."

"Oh yeah?" Spike asked. "Whose? Theirs?" He jerked his head to one side, where Zoe and Reynolds were just starting to untangle themselves from the nets.

"No," River said. "Ed's."

"ATTENTION THUGALUGS!" came Ed's roar over the intercom sequence, making Spike wince. "Edward Wong Hau Pepelu Tivrusky IV demands your attention!"

Spike's head jerked up, searching for the source of her voice. "Ed, what the hell!" he hollered.

"Friends should not be fighting!" she sang over the intercom. "Friends should be talking! Friends should be playing!"

"We're not friends, Ed!"

"Spikey Spikey, angry face!" Ed sang. "Tell me, can you breathe in space?"

Spike's eyes flashed wide. "What?"

"Tick-tock tick-tock Ed's finger's on the airlock," Ed kept singing.

Spike glanced over at Jet, still nursing his throat. "She wouldn't. Would she?"

Jet grimaced. "Does anyone know what's going on in her head?"

"No," River said, smiling.

Spike glanced around him. Faye, Reynolds, Zoe, and Jayne had all retaken their feet, and were looking about as confused as he felt. "She shut down our whole ship before," Reynolds grunted. "She could do it again."

Faye sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "Oy, Ed!" she shouted. "What do you want!"

"Friends should be talking!" Ed said.

Spike sighed, then glanced sideways towards Reynolds and Zoe. All the fighters looked dazed and confused. Well," Reynolds grunted, shrugging. "Don't really want to push her."

Spike nodded reluctantly. "Where do you want us?" he shouted up at the ceiling.

Session Sixteen: The World We Created

The ruttin' living room on this ruttin' ship was too gorram small. Couches and chairs were all crammed full of people, perching on the stairs and leaning on walls and railings and sitting against the couches and cross-legged on the gorram floor. *Serenity* might not be the biggest ship in the gorram galaxy, but at least there was a bit of space. Why the hell were they on this ruttin' ship? And what kinda name was *Bebop* anyways?

Jayne, leaning against a wall, scowled at anyone who met his eyes. Not many did; they were all staring at each other, glaring or glancing, searching and studying.

"So," Mal said, coughing. "Here we sit."

"Yep," the big man with the prosthetic arm—Jet or something else that was equally gorram stupid—replied. His arms were folded in front of him, his eyes closed.

A long silence followed.

"Which one of you was flying that fighter?" Wash asked, standing near the doorway with Zoe.

The man with the stupid Jew-fro—Spike (who came up with these ruttin' names?)—flashed a quick grin towards Wash. "That was me."

Spike. Jayne didn't like this man, not one bit. He understood the Captain, when push came to shove—a man like a tree, had some give to him but push too hard and you'd see exactly just how tough he was to shake. He was a stable man when it came down to it, not too different from Jet.

But Spike? Jayne had known guys like Spike before. Guys who seemed calm and laid-back, 'til suddenly they weren't. Not just killers, but madmen. You didn't know which way they were gonna go at any moment. Jayne was glad he hadn't been on the ground to face him—no tellin' what a mad dog like that would do, pushed hard enough.

"You messed with my ship," Kaylee said, glaring at him. Simon put a protective arm around her, and Jayne felt the familiar but still confusing mix of gooey nostalgia and disgust. He still wasn't a fan of the Doc, but they were adorable together, though he'd never say so aloud.

"It'll be fine," Spike said, waving a hand.

"You messed. With my. Ship."

Spike rolled his eyes. "It'll be fine," he repeated.

"You were good," Wash said.

"Hon, not now," Zoe said.

"No, really!" Wash exclaimed. "You were just...wow. The way you flew? How did you even make that shot?"

Spike smiled. "Hey, I just got lucky," he said. "You took you a fighter with no weapons. I didn't know a Firefly could move like that."

"She could move like that," Kaylee said, glaring. "Because she's *my* ship."

"Hang on a sec," Mal said. "She's *my* ship."

"Not now, Cap'n," Kaylee said, barely glancing at Mal.

"No, now," Mal insisted. "It's *my* ship."

"How the hell did you people evade the Alliance this long?" Jet asked, his eyes still closed as he massaged the bridge of his nose with a prosthetic arm.

"The Alliance is a joke," Mal and Spike said together, and then flashed suspicious glares at each other.

"Then why're you workin' for'em?" Mal asked.

"I told you why," Spike said.

"Yeah, about that," Wash said. "I'm having a hard time believing your stories. You're time travelers from the past? That, uh...that doesn't strike you as bit crazy?"

"I'm from farther back than that," Faye said, waving from her own position leaning against the stairway railing.

"Are you?" Jet asked, his eyes closed.

"Yeah?" Spike said. "We traveled to the future."

"Figures you wouldn't look at a history textbook," Jet said.

"What do you mean?" Spike asked.

"Don't make no gorram sense," Jayne grumbled, trying to shut out all the clamor around him.

"Gotta side with Jayne on this one," Wash said.

Jet sighed and nodded in turn, though he kept his eyes closed. "I can't really argue," he said. "We don't get it either. One moment we're floating along in Sol, the next your people have us under lock and key."

"Alliance ain't our people," Zoe put in, her eyes flashing.

"Took my ship," Jet grunted. "Let us go when they couldn't get anything else out of us, but they took my ship."

"Oh, come on, Jet," Spike scowled. "They didn't let us go. You had police all around you, not like you could just disappear, but they had eyes on all of us. It's why Faye and me had to bust free."

"So what, Spike?" Jet demanded. "That doesn't change the fact they took our ship. And do you really think you got away?"

Spike frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe they wanted you to get away," Jet said. "To feel safe, so they could really see how you'd behave."

"It makes sense," Inara said. Everyone turned towards her, standing a little apart from everyone (not too far from the Shepherd, though). "It was Companion training procedure, too. With special cases. If you're not sure of a candidate, you give them the freedom to do what they want and see where that leads them. Sometimes it shows you your doubts are misfounded. Sometimes, it shows you things were worse than you thought."

Spike gave her a wolfish grin. "Yeah?" he said. "Which were you?"

Inara's mouth quirked in a smile Jayne had never seen before. From the corner of his eyes, Jayne saw Mal flinch.

Jayne sighed and leaned back against his wall, glaring at everyone. This didn't make any ruttin' sense. These people had attacked them—Faye and Jet and Spike and all of 'em. Why the hell were they sittin' here? For all they knew, this was some kinda trap from that crazy little girl.

"Found it, found it!" Ed squeaked, scampering back into the living room with a bulky brown box in hand. River followed behind her, gaunt and ghost-like, with that dog trotting along at her heels. Jayne's skin crawled at the sight of her—she'd looked every bit as deadly as Spike, and she was all sorts of creepy all by herself.

"Found what?" Faye called. "What were you making us wait for, Ed?"

"I put a flea in a lion's hair!" Ed exclaimed.

Complete silence from the room. Jayne literally felt his thoughts stumble like a man in a creek as they tried to follow that sentence.

"Uh..." Mal managed. "Good job?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Ed?" Jet demanded.

Ed grinned. "A lion came to catch us, and take us all away," she sang. "So I left some fleas behind, and a couple got to stay!"

"Thanks for clarifying," Spike grunted.

"Alliance!" the doctor exclaimed. Jayne glanced over to him, found him staring at the girl with his mouth slightly open. "It's...she's talking about the Alliance. A lion..."

More silence, everyone looking puzzled. Then Jet's eyes flashed wide.

"Hold on," he said, glancing at Ed. "You bugged the Alliance? How?"

Ed shrugged. "Ed was scared when we got here, so Ed started putting fleas in the *Bebop's* hair!" she said. "Many many fleas, so that at least one would get to be in the lion's hair!"

"But they would have noticed any fleas!" Spike said, then grimaced. "Bugs. They would have noticed bugs."

"Uh...not necessarily," Kaylee squeaked. Everyone turned towards her, and she flushed. "Well, it's just...if ya'll are really from a different time but the Alliance was digging around your ship, they wouldn't know what to look for, would they? Your programs would look all sorts of different, so...so it's possible they could grab something and not realize..."

Ed nodded, and offered a bulky brown box to Jet. Jet took it from her, frowning, and flipped it open, revealing a staticky holoscreen. Weird—Jayne had never seen anything like it.

For several silent moments, Jet studied the screen. Gradually, the color drained from his face. Jayne sat up a little straighter. He'd known cops like Jet before, hardasses without much give to 'em, but they sure as shit didn't scare easy.

"Oh," he said. "This is, uh...wow. This is bad."

He got to his feet and handed the computer back to Ed. "We got any bugs on here?" he said.

"Many!" Ed said, nodding.

"Think you can clear'em out for us?" he said.

"Yes yes!"

"Do it," Jet said. "Then load all that data onto the *Bebop's* computer, okay?"

"Okay!" She glanced at River. "Help me help me pick the fleas?"

River nodded. "We'll be just like two monkeys."

Ed giggled and scampered off. River followed, the mutt trotting cheerfully along behind them.

"What's it say?" Faye asked, leaning against the railing in such a way that her tits seemed even bigger. She caught Jayne leering and glared at him, but Jayne shrugged—why wear that gorram outfit if you didn't expect to get looked at?

Jet hesitated, then said, "It's about gates."

"Gates?" Spike said. "What about gates?"

"What are gates?" Zoe asked.

Jet ran a hand through his beard. "It's like this," he said. "Back when we're from, Earth is...Earth is messed up."

"Same here," Mal said.

"Right," Jet agreed. "But I've looked at our histories and I'm not sure they got messed up the same way. See, to me, it looks like you guys kinda used up the environment. You had time to find this system and get the colony ships moving here. We, uh...we were still in Sol for 50 years."

Simon frowned. "That's not the history I remember."

"No," Jet agreed. "Looked like you guys stayed 'til the end, came here because there were way more planets you could terraform. It was a planned exodus. See, we messed up Earth when we started testing a new way to travel across Sol. A series of interlinked gates that bypassed conventional lightspeed problems by connecting us through man-made wormholes in Hyperspace. Best I can figure, your guys engines can take you cross this system in...what, a week?"

"If we push the engines," Kaylee said. "Not a good idea, though."

"Right," Jet said. "But if you had a Gate like ours, you could do it in...three days?" He glanced at Spike."

"Something like that," Spike agreed.

"Can't be," Simon said. "Hyperspace? That's science fiction."

"We live in a spaceship!" Wash exclaimed.

"This sounds familiar," Zoe muttered.

"It's not impossible," Book announced from the corner where he'd been sitting passively. Everyone glanced towards him, and he continued, "But it is very difficult. I hear that the Alliance did some tests early on—during the War, in fact. Trying to find a way to deal with you guerillas."

Mal grinned. "We did tend to give'em the runaround."

"But they lost most of the test probes," Book continued. "And those that came back, well...they weren't exactly intact. Best we can figure, Hyperspace takes us out of the universe proper, puts us side to side with other universes. If you don't do it right, your ship takes a lot of damage along the way."

"Makes sense," Jet agreed. "The best and brightest minds in Sol didn't totally understand hyperspace. Caused a lot of weirdness."

"That makes sense to you?" Wash said.

"Point is," Jet continued. "We understood the mechanics well enough to maintain the Gates. And just in case anything like that ever happened again, most ships were given the basic equations, too. Building a Gate's a major enterprise—only world governments and a couple of the biggest crime syndicates had the resources for it."

"Done done done done done!" Ed called over the speakers.

Jet rose to his feet. "It'll be easier to show you what I'm talking about," he said. He left the room, with the rest of the group striding, trotting, stumbling, or dragging their feet behind him.

"See," Jet explained as they walked. "I was working an Alliance beat on Beaumonde, We'd lowered crime, weeded out some of the corruption, Core Worlds were having this big economic boom, but our budgets kept getting slashed."

"Aw, are the Alliance bigwigs feeling the pressure?" Mal asked, standing just behind Jet and keeping careful distance from Spike. "Poor babies."

"Actually it's a mite strange," Book mused, standing close to the middle of their stupidly-big pack. "Government budgets are getting slashed all across the board—military, local bureaucracies, police. And no one really seems to know where the money's going."

"You ever gonna tell us how you keep so informed, Shepherd?" Mal asked.

"Doubtful," Book said, with a wry smile Jayne could just make out from the back of the group.

They reached the *Bebop's* bridge, and Jayne had to admit, it was impressive. Spacious, with a good window. Better than the *Serenity's*, but kind of a waste, weren't it? If you're not driving a battlecruiser, why do you need a big bridge?

There was also some kinda table right in the center of things, lit by a blue/white light. Ed was perched over the table, happily fiddling with wires tying it to her compute. River was curled up in a corner, her head on her knees and the damn mutt curled up at her side with a doleful look on its face.

"River," Simon said, rushing from the thick of the group towards his crazy sister. "What's wrong?"

"Two by two," she whispered.

"What's wrong with her?" Spike asked.

"Oh, you don't know?" Mal asked. "Alliance did that."

Jayne grimaced, remembering that horrifying glimpse into River's head, the scar tissue all around her brain. "Cut into her," he muttered, barely noticing the people standing around him. "Made her crazy."

Spike's mouth twisted into a scowl. "That's not right."

"No," Mal agreed. "It ain't."

They fanned out around the table (save for River and Simon, who remained in their corner like the freaks they were). Jet and Mal were on opposite sides of Ed.

"Got it loaded?" Jet asked.

"Haiiiii!"

"Then bring it up."

Something flickered into the space above the table. A staticky holographic image, piss-poor quality. Jet sighed and fiddled with something on the side of the table, and all at once it snapped back into focus.

It was some kinda space dock, that much could be seen at a glance. Extremely complicated, too, tethered to a larger floating complex that was all harsh angles. The whole thing was oriented around a gargantuan ring of silver, many parts of which were exposed with their wiry guts exposed to the vacuum.

"Jet," Spike said, staring at the ring. "Is that..."

"Yep," Jet said.

"It can't be," Faye said.

"What are we looking at?" Kaylee asked, studying the complicated projection.

"This is the Blue Sun facility *Clairvoyance*," Jet said.

"Blue Sun?" Simon said, looking away from River and his eyes widened. "That's...that's the group that...the Academy was funded by..."

Jet nodded. "It's got close ties to the Alliance government," he said. "All sorts of retired Alliance bigwigs end up working there, and they work a number of government jobs on black box budgets. See, most Alliance projects are open to Parliament investigations, but military contracts with outside corporations are kind of an exception to that rule. Get a military contractor with non-disclosure agreements workin' with Alliance on classified projects..."

"And you've got a recipe for all sorts of abuse," Book said.

"This facility's been in operation for awhile, according to the stuff Ed got for us," Jet said. "Kind of a fringe science outpost for testing stuff they don't want the general public to know about. But it went into overdrive when they got their hands on the *Bebop*. See, I don't think we're from your past—I think we're from a different universe altogether."

"Jeez," Wash grunted, scratching the back of his head. "That's hard to believe."

"No harder than us jumping forward in time," Jet said. "And it explains a lot. You guys are a lot more advanced than us in some ways, but we're pretty equal in others. Hell, we've even got some stuff you don't. It makes a lot more sense if we come from different places, different technology tracks."

"Could be," Kaylee admitted. "I read somewhere that existence is based on probability. Every time you make a choice, the world changes."

"A fork in the river," River whispered from where she was sitting, and everyone glanced back at her. "Water flowing down until it splits in two. It's the same water, but

it's not on the same course. Can't go back. Can never go back. Rivers only flow one way." She seemed to curl more deeply in on herself.

"Okay..." Mal said slowly.

"I bring this up because...well..." Jet massaged the bridge of his nose again. "I've seen some stuff over the past few years. Like improvements in neural scanners kind of in line with some tech we had back in Sol."

Simon stood up abruptly. "Scanners," he repeated. "That's...a lot of the hospitals were getting them."

Jet nodded. "That's right," he said. "We had devices when we left earth that allowed direct brain interaction with computers. That's tech you guys generally don't have, but it's small potatoes to what you could build. Like that."

He nodded at the projection.

"What the hell is it?" Jayne grunted.

"It's a Gate," Jet said. "A Hyperspace Gate."

No one spoke for several several seconds. Mal rubbed his chin. "Like the kind you were talkin' about before? Cross our system in three days?"

"Something like that," Jet said.

"But said these things were networks," Mal said. "That's just the first, yeah? I mean, it ain't exactly good news, but..."

"Normally, you'd be right," Jet said. "But you're leaving something out."

"Oh yeah?" Mal said. "What's that?"

"Two things, really," Jet said. "See, only the best and brightest of our Sol really got Hyperspace physics, and even they didn't understand everything. Hell, an accident with one of the Gates made a kid immortal. Ain't that right Spike?"

"You don't need to remind me," Spike muttered.

"Is that a story you want to share?" Zoe asked.

"Not particularly," Spike said.

"Point is," Jet said, raising his voice. "We never really got a handle on the mechanics. We understood just enough of the practical applications so we could use'em. And we cobbled the Gates together as best we could so we could run throughout Sol. It was the only way we were gonna survive, when we'd barely started terraforming the worlds out there."

He glanced at Kaylee. "Your engines can cross the system in a week," he said. "But that's a harsh estimate, I know. It's more like two, right?"

"Yeah..." Kaylee said cautiously.

"That's more than we could ever have done," Jet said. "You guys are better at traveling already. And you've got a whole group of people designed to learn fast. Not just as killers and telepaths, but as hyperlearners. The perfect soldiers, scientists, and slaves the Alliance needs."

Simon staggered visibly, drawing all eyes on him. "The Academy," he whispered.

"When one lacks sufficient soldiers for a war," River mumbled. "Those soldiers must be made."

"I'm sorry, what's that?" Mal said.

"The Academy," Simon repeated. "It...what was it doing?"

"Take a look yourself," Jet said. He touched something on the side of the table and a series of dossiers popped up near Simon. He glanced at River hesitantly, then stepped away and started studying the files. Ein rested his head on her lap. "All I know is that they're being used so your people can get a better handle on our technology—a better understanding of Hyperspace than we've ever had, based on a study of successful practical application. And say what you will about the Academy, but it looks like it's working. They've got a better handle on hyperspace than we ever did." He grimaced. "Maybe because they're not exactly sane to begin with."

"There's an anthropological term for that," Inara said, looking paler than usual. "When one society develops a weapon and the other civilizations find out about it, they'll be able to develop that technology much more quickly, simply because they know it's possible."

"And when that society has technology of their own, they can develop things even farther," Jet said. "The first civilization that made the sword probably felt pretty great, right up until they fought a civilization that learned to forge a better one. Just like this gate." He glanced around the table and heaved a heavy sigh. "Unlike our gates, which had to be set to be part of a larger network, this thing the Alliance is building...it can create hyperspace corridors to and from itself to anywhere in your system."

No one said anything. Jayne felt his mind stumble, trying to work that out.

"What the hell do you mean?" Mal demanded.

"I mean that once this thing is built," Jet said. "It'll be able to send any Alliance ship anywhere in the system instantly."

"That's not possible," Zoe breathed.

"No, it isn't," Jet agreed. "Not with your technology, or with ours. But put them together..."

"And it can be done," Book said. "Kind of funding the Alliance has been pulling in? Working Hyperspace gates and the kind of power we can supply? They could do it."

"It's worse than that," Simon whispered, studying the dossiers and drawing everyone's attention back to him. "The Academy...it..." He leaned forward, narrowing his eyes in concentration. "It's got a lot of goals," he said. "I'm gonna have to do a lot more reading to figure this out, but...but it's *ambitious*."

"Ambitious how, Doctor?" Mal asked.

"The Academy is a prototype program," Simon said. "It's a way of taking the best and brightest and making them what the Alliance needs. Soldiers deadly enough to face off against the Reavers, telepaths able to find any needed information, actors who can play any role, scholars who can learn about every problem the Alliance has to face. They cut into the brain, rebuild it with machinery and retroviruses under carefully controlled conditions, conditioning their subjects so they can't turn against them. We're talking about a program literally designed to torture people into perfection and service, and...and it's *working*."

"If the sword is ill-forged, it must be forged anew," River mumbled, but there was an awful keening to her voice that drew every eye to her. "Melted down and made into a new blade. What does it matter, as long as you can't hear the sword screaming?"

Ein whined at her, pawing her leg, and River picked up the dog and cradled him close.

"Mei-mei," Simon whispered, falling to her side.

"That's why they want me," River said. "That's why they keep looking for me. Broken minds can make sense of a broken world."

Simon ran a hand through her hair, then looked up at the others. "She's right," he said. "That's what they're using the students for."

"And these signals they've been sending after her?" Mal said.

"River was the best in the program," Simon said. "Every document said so. It...actually, it's what made her easier to rescue. She tended to be the...example they used, to show Alliance brass exactly what they could expect from the program. So when I got in under false credentials..."

"She couldn't possibly be that much help to 'em," Mal said.

"With the way she was learning, she could accelerate their understanding of hyperdimensional physics," Jet said. "Might be able to speed up the program by two or three months. With the kind of money they're spending, that's worth a lot. Especially given what they already spent on her."

"Alliance able to go anywhere, anytime," Zoe whispered. "Bad enough we got their cruisers everywhere we turn. They could send full-strength patrols, whole fleets, all without ever leaving their precious Core exposed. Alliance ships in every sky."

Mal's lip curled. "They can't take the sky from me," he whispered. "It's all we got left."

Jayne kept staring at that projection—that stupidly big gate (nearly ten times the size of the Alliance Cruiser hovering off to one side in the image). But it wasn't the Alliance he was thinking of, exactly. It was his mama, slipping the local guards a few credits to get first access to Damplung drugs for Mattie, Mattie selling local greenleaf on the side since she couldn't work, Jayne running errands for local mobs and playing the occasional footpad and thug so he could bring in extra credits. And yeah, he'd gotten busted by local cops when he'd grown too big for his boots, but he'd deserved it when he did. He'd know the risks. Law wasn't supposed to come down all the time. It couldn't. If it could...

"This ain't right," Jayne whispered, trying to piece together his thoughts. "I...this ain't right."

"You're tellin' us, Jayne?" Mal asked, jerking his head between Zoe and himself.

"You don't get it, Mal," Jayne said, scowling. "You've been fighting the Alliance since you were shittin' your diapers. You just don't like getting told what to do, period."

"Yeah," Mal said, rolling his eyes. "That's all there is to me."

"Look," Jayne grunted. "I ain't gonna pretend I like the Alliance, but I get it, you know? I like my life, but if everyone was like me and there weren't no one to stop us, well...hell, that would be a pretty shitty place to live, see? My mom, my sis...people like them, they'd just get hurt. Way it is...hell, it ain't perfect, but there's a reason for it. People like my mom and them, they need Alliance types lookin' out for him, okay? It's not a bad deal. But..."

God, it was hard to think, and his neck felt hot with everyone's eyes on him, but this was important, there was something he needed to say.

"Seems to me that Alliance is supposed to protect people," he said. "And...and I ain't saying that means every time some local governor hires someone like me to crack some heads that means the whole system's busted. It just means people are people, y'know? Messy and ruttin' crazy. Everyone breaks the rules, cuz...cuz who can follow the rules all the time? Too goddamn many of them even when you're trying. But..."

He grimaced, tried to explain this weird itch in his head, this sense of *wrong* that he so rarely felt. He glanced at Simon, and his crazy-ass sister huddled neck to him. "But look at what they're doin' already," he said. "Hell, if it were torture, I'd get it. We know why people torture. But this ain't torture, this is...breakin' em. This is...this is them hurting people because they're people. Makin' kids that can see into your gorram head and got no choice but to tell ya what they see. Hurtin' people so they'll hurt people for ya. That ain't right. It ain't."

He was hitting his stride now, finding the words he wanted. "And if they can be everywhere," he said. "If they're always lookin' over your shoulder, that's not lookin' out for you. That's bein' worse than me. Least when I want to knock a man down a peg it's a

man in front of me. Anytime a farmer skimps on his sprays or a mom sells some stuff on the side she ain't suppose to sell so she can get her kid the drugs she needs, they'll know. And if they want to, they can come down on her same way they come down on me. Suddenly it ain't bad guys vs. regular folk, it's everyone who's got to be put down, everyone who's got to fall in line. They get to choose how they make the law work. That ain't protectin' people, that's protectin' themselves. That's law for law's sake. And that's...that ain't right."

His brow was furrowed, his lip curled up into a sneer. He wasn't even looking at anyone in the room, just trying to keep the words coming. "I don't like it when the Alliance tries to put a stop to me, but at least that makes sense," he said. "And you know people ain't perfect, so you make the allowances you gotta make, bend the rules you gotta bend. But look at the rules *they're* bending. I betcha ten-to-one River was as much a pansy-ass as the doc here before they got ahold of her."

River mumbled, "Don't insult me." Startled laughs broke out all around the room.

"They're trying to cut people right," Jayne said. "I get the need to hurt a man, or a woman, or anything in between. But that's when you got a reason. Anger, or desperation, or survival, or money, or cheatin', or...hell, there's a lotta reason to hurt people. But doin' it just so's they do whatcha tell'em? So they'll hurt others for ya? So they'll be like her?" He jerked his head at River. "It ain't right."

"And if the Alliance can be everywhere...hell, we all know they ain't gonna loosen up. They're gonna make this world smaller. Gonna be more than one Academy. Gonna be a lot more mess."

He lifted eyes, stared around the room, daring anyone to argue with him. "They want to stop people like me, I get that," he said. "But most of these people don't need the Alliance comin' down on'em for every little thing. If...if this is what they want..." He nodded slowly. "I think we gotta stop'em."

Silence for a moment. "Well, hell," Mal breathed. "And here I thought I'd get the chance to make a big speech."

"We're in, sir?" Zoe said.

"We have to be," Wash said. "Jayne's right, we can't let people like this..."

Wash seemed both lost and determined somehow, like he didn't know where he was going but he was determined to get there all the same.

"No one gets to decide how we live," Inara breathed, staring at River. "We're all free. But we won't be if the kind of power the Alliance can bring to bear..."

"Seen that before," Mal muttered.

"As have we all," the Shepherd said. "Everyone does things you regret in time of war, but the worst horrors are committed in times of peace. Desperation leads to tragedy; security...security can give rise to gentle tyrants who would crush the soul."

Jet's eyes were closed, but he was nodding slowly. "Never thought that was a problem I'd have to deal with," he said. "Back where I'm from, the governments are powerless—it's criminals of all stripes who do the worst deeds. If a government looks like it's getting something done, it's because the criminals are already involved. There's no difference between the two. But this..." He shook his head. "I've seen a handful of nightmares like this back in Sol," he said. "I won't let him break an army of innocents just for their own convenience."

"Let's not be too hasty here!" Faye exclaimed. "I've only been in this place two years and I know just how tough the Alliance is! I doubt we could stop'em even if we wanted to."

"You don't really believe that," Kaylee said.

Faye's eyes shot towards her. "No?"

"No," Kaylee said. "Yeah I know it's...it's okay to run away when you have that choice. Nothin' wrong with runnin' and hidin' when the only thing on the line's your life. But think about what you're saying. The Alliance is tough now. What happens if they build one of those things?"

"Could be good, couldn't it!" Faye exclaimed. "Trade and security! All these Rim worlds that can't get the stuff they need, maybe..."

"Alliance could do that if they wanted right now," Mal said.

"What stops them is the greed of the few and the indifference of the many," Shepherd Book put in. "Just like every one of the great tragedies of history."

"Same as it was back in Sol," Jet agreed.

"I..." Faye started, looking around. "You..." She sighed and shrugged. "Oh, hell, there's no use arguing with fools. You want to start a goddamn revolution? Why not."

"Revolution, revolution!" Ed squealed. Ein barked at her.

Jesus. Had Jayne set this in motion? Wasn't used to that, least not when there was no profit in it.

"That makes me Captain now, right?" Jayne said.

"What, you think you make one good speech and you get to be Captain?" Mal said.

"Man gets one town named after him and all of a sudden he knows how to govern."

"No," Spike said.

Silence in the room, as though shocked by a sudden gunshot. Jayne felt his crawling as Spike's killer eyes stared dreamily at the ceiling. From the corner of his eye, he saw River flinch.

"Scuse me?" Mal said.

Spike didn't look at any of them. "Jet," he said. "That's a Gate, yeah? More powerful than any Gate we ever had back in Sol."

"That's right," Jet said.

"So it stands to reason," Spike said. "That when they said they could send us home, they weren't lying."

"No proof of that, Spike," Jet said. "Nothing in these notes."

"Hyperspace accident brought us here," Spike said. "Shouldn't be too hard to get us back, a Gate like that."

"You're talking about letting these people torture kids, Spike!" Jet exclaimed, hammering his prosthetic arm into the table.

"I'm talking about going home," Spike said.

"What's so great about home?" Faye snapped. Spike's eyes drifted lazily down to her like leaves floating on the breeze, as Fate's brow furrowed into a snarl of rage. "Debts and crime and nothing tying us down. Hell, it's not even home, just a place to be. I like this one better."

"Then you can stay," Spike said. "And I'll go home by myself."

Simon took a step towards him. "They wanted my sister for that."

One quick twist, and there was a gun in Spike's hand, aimed right at Kaylee. A moment's reactive rush towards him, but Spike had already taken a step back, out of anyone's grasp, and everyone stayed frozen where they were but Jayne's heart was pounding. That sonofabitch would not hurt Kaylee.

"I'm going home," Spike said. "Long as I'm here, I've got no reason to live. Yeah, maybe you all could kill me before I killed you, but at least a couple of you would die. Me, I'm willing to take the chance, if it means going home." He smiled a little. "Can any of you the same?"

Psycho killer. Jayne's hands curled into fists as the tension in the room stretched and stretched.

Session Seventeen: The Show Must Go On

Spike stumbled up the stairs to the bridge, swaying from side to side with an unconscious River Tam curled in his arms. He put her gently to the ground, then collapsed into Wash's pilot chair. His face was mottled with bruises, blood trickling from his nose and the corner of his mouth. His suit was torn in several places, crust with his own blood in others.

He pressed a nearby button, entered the number he was trying to hail. For a few minutes, he remained where he was, wheezing and running a hand over his various wounds. Then their faces flickered onto *Serenity's* cortex screen. One bald, one with trim brown hair, both wearing suits. The brown-haired man had his head resting upon his interlaced blue hands.

"Mr. Spiegel," said the brown-haired man. "I must confess, this is a surprise. We knew Mr. Black had found you, but we were under the impression he would be contacting us himself."

"Dead men don't make good contacts," Spike said.

The bald man cocked his head. "He's dead?"

"He had second thoughts about the bounty," Spike said, fishing a cigarette from his rumpled shirt pocket and sliding it into his mouth. "I didn't." He lit the cigarette.

"I see," the brown-haired man said. "And did you find her?"

Spike leaned over, grabbed River Tam by the hair, and pulled her face into the screen. She moaned softly, feeling the pain even through her sedation.

"Excellent," the brown-haired man said.

Spike shoved her unceremoniously to the ground, took another drag from his cigarette.

"What of the others?" the brown-haired man asked.

"They didn't want to give her up," Spike said. He shrugged and took a long drag from his cigarette.

"I see," the bald man said. "Well then, Mr. Spiegel. Well done. We'll arrange a pick-up and-"

"No," Spike said. "You won't."

"I'm sorry?" the brown-haired man said.

"I'm going to head for *Clairvoyance*," Spike said. "You're going to get that Gate you're building ready for a test run, and you're gonna send me home."

Neither of the blue-handed men said anything for a short time. They simply stared through the cortex screen.

"You aren't suppose to know that name, Mr. Spiegel," the bald man said at length.

Spike snorted. "You think I care about your fuckin' plans?" he asked. "Do whatever you want with the Gate. Whatever you want with your system. But you're not getting River Tam until I'm headed home."

"And what makes you think we'll accept those terms?"

Spike drew his handgun from his jacket and aimed it towards River. The men on screen didn't flinch, exactly, but he could see them tense.

"I did this so I could go home," Spike said. "If I don't get what I want, neither do you."

The brown-haired man smiled. "I can respect your position, Mr. Spiegel," he said.

"You've taken the *Serenity*?"

Spike nodded. "They put up a helluva of a fight," he said. "Crippled the *Bebop*."

"When should we expect you?" the bald man said.

"It'll take me awhile to get the *Serenity* running again," Spike said. "Give it ten days."

"We'll be waiting."

The screen winked out. Spike stared at it for a long time, then switched the cortex off entirely, just in case they had a way of looking through. He leaned heavily into the pilot's chair, relishing his cigarette and mentally probing at his various aches.

"You know," Wash said from the stairwell. "You're *really* not supposed to smoke up here."

"What's so important about it?" Inara asked.

Her voice wafted through the tension, reached Spike's ears in spite of himself. He didn't look at her, and she said again, "What's so important about going back there?"

"The only thing worth living for," he answered.

"Spike..." Jet said.

"Julia again, huh?" Faye breathed, and Spike could hear the rage in her voice. "It's always Julia."

"Some of us have places we can return to, Faye," Spike said.

"And you think that gives you the right to take this poor girl hostage?"

Right? No, it didn't give him the right. But it gave him the necessity, didn't it? He couldn't stand to live in a universe without Julia. He simply couldn't.

"Come on, Spike," Jet said. "You spent all that time hunting those slavers? For what? So you could let even bigger monsters do whatever they wanted?"

Yeah. Worse than the slavers he'd spent the past two years hunting, no doubt about that. But Jet didn't get it; hunting those slavers had done some good, sure, but it had mostly been his way of distracting himself from this universe where he felt suddenly meaningless. What was the point of an endless dream like this?

And suddenly Mal was in front of Spike, hands still in the air, eyes calm even with a gun aimed at his chest.

"Mal!" Inara gasped.

"I don't care why you're doing this," Mal said. "Don't know what you're after, and don't much care. But you do not get to aim a gun at my crew."

"And you're not gonna stand in my way," Spike said.

"Sure looks like I am," Mal said. "But as far as I can see, ain't no reason for you to be doing this."

"You can't see very far," Spike said.

"It really means that much to you?"

From the corner of his eye, Spike could still make out the grand circle of that silver Gate. A path. A way back to her. To Julia.

"Give me an alternative," Spike said.

"Scuse me?" Mal said.

"I need to go back," Spike said. "Can you give me a way to do that?"

"Well, sure," Kaylee said.

Mal glanced over his shoulder. Spike leaned to one side and stared at her. "I mean, if they've got the damn thing workin' at all," Kaylee said. "Ain't no reason we couldn't use it ourselves, is there? Just gotta figure out where we're aiming."

River giggled. Everyone turned towards her, and she said, "Aim across universes, under the skin, past dimensions. All so you can fly home, swimming bird."

Something stabbed Spike to his core. He stared at her, then back to the others.

"Well, hell," Spike said. "I can live with that."

He lowered his gun. Mal immediately punched him in the face. Solid punch, too: Spike hadn't thought the man had it in him.

Spike didn't try to fight back. He'd more than earned a punch.

Actually...actually, he'd earned several. But that had to wait.

"Hold off a sec," Spike said, lifting a hand. "We gotta a plan together, before you beat the shit out of me."

"Yeah?" Mal said. He kicked Spike in the side, and Spike winced. "Fine. What plan?"

"How far is *Clairvoyance* from here?" Spike said, propping himself on his elbows.

"Five days or so, straight shot," Jet said. "But that would take us through Alliance patrols, so we'd wanna go around. You okay down there?"

"Fine," Spike said. "And no, we're not going around."

"We're not?" Zoe asked, stepping over to Mal's side.

"No, we're not," Spike said. "Or at least, *I'm* not. We're going straight in. We have exactly what they want. We're gonna give it to'em."

"Didn't we just decide that wasn't the plan?" Wash asked, appearing at his wife's elbow.

"Yeah, we did," Spike said, wiping a trickle of blood of his lip. "But that was when I was going to kill you all and do it myself. Now you're all gonna be alive."

"Sounds like you're forming a plan," the Shepherd said.

"I don't do plans," Spike said. "I get ideas. Plans are for other people."

"But it could work," Jet grunted, rubbing at his beard. "We do it right, we could take'em by surprise."

"Do what?" Mal asked. "They've got a whole lot of ships in there. Even when we had a gorram army on our side we couldn't beat'em. We got two ships."

"That's why we gotta be tricky," Spike said. "Can't take the Alliance head-on, but you already knew that."

Mal's mouth twisted. "You got something to say?"

"I don't know how to get past'em," Spike admitted. "Least, not all of'em. But I know how to get'em to drop their guard."

Mal studied Spike for a moment, mouth still twisted, then nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said. "I think I getcha."

"Get what, sir?" Zoe asked.

"We all know the Alliance wants River," Mal said. "Enough so they're lettin' these folk hunt us for a bounty, which means they're desperate and willin' to compromise. Likely they're gonna get sloppy if they think they're get her back."

"So you're just going to give her to them?" Simon said, with a faint trace of hysteria in his voice.

"No," Jet said, with slow realization building in his voice. "But that's what we're gonna let them think."

Spike nodded. "Send me on ahead," Spike said. "We'll tell them the *Serenity's* runnin' behind. I don't know much, but I'm pretty sure I can strong-arm them into letting me come alone. They won't want to risk River, and they know our rep back from Sol."

"And then what?" Mal said.

"That's what we gotta figure out."

Mal hesitated, glancing between Spike and River. "Could work," he admitted. "Could. Won't give us much time, though."

"We don't have much time, period," Spike said. "They're gonna keep hunting you."

"If they were desperate enough to use these idiots," Faye added. "They're not gonna stop."

Mal nodded slowly. "Ain't the only wrinkle, either," Mal said "Girl's a reader, and so are the other folks the Academy's bringin' along."

Made sense, Spike supposed. She'd understood him quickly enough, responded to his attacks before he made them. Only when he was operating at the level of hardwired instinct had he been able to get around her.

"We think they've been lookin' for her, somehow," Mal continued. "Likely they've got these other poors saps the Academy got involved. Could be they could read her, see our plans. Leastaways know you ain't alone."

"There's a way around that," Simon said. The others glanced back at him, and Simon swallowed. "I...I told you about that Alliance project, yeah? The one let that soldiers hear each other's thoughts? I know the chemical compounds we used to put them into a coma—deep and dreamless. If it works the same way, we could make it so they can't read her."

"Could read the rest of us," Book put in.

"We see what we're made to see," River whispered, looking up from her hunched place with Ein on her lap. "Like seeing a fire in the distance when everything else is black. They see me in the dark because I shine like a light. The rest of aren't carrying torches. You're hidden."

Interesting. Readers could only read other readers? No, that couldn't be right—she'd been able to read enough well enough during their fight. Maybe it was about distance? The other members of the Academy could find her *because* she was a reader, but the rest of them lacked that special quality? He saw sudden understanding and hope in the faces of the people around him, sign that they'd understood her message as well.

"Is she sure about that?" Mal asked.

Ein barked, drawing stares. Simon shrugged. "She'd know better than any of us." He dropped to his knees beside her, put his hands on her shoulders. "Mei-mei," he said. "You realize what I have to do, if that's true?"

River nodded, not looking at anyone. "Sleeping Beauty," she whispered. Faye gave a start by the railing, and Spike glanced at her, saw her flush and look away. "Put myself

to sleep, so the monsters don't get me. Wake up when the right conditions are met." She looked around the room, grimaced. "Don't make it kiss-conditional. A sign of affection from the current selection would be problematic."

"I know," he said. He rose to his feet, swallowing, then said, "I'll...I'll go get the drugs ready."

"Hold on," Spike said. "You, uh...you may want to stick around for this next part."

Simon gave him a puzzled frown. Mal glanced back at Spike. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Spike said. "We've got to sell this. I mean, really sell this. Can't have'em asking too many questions. Whatever we do is gonna be hard enough as it is."

"What's your point?" Jayne growled.

"I don't what we should do, exactly," Spike said. "But I know they can't expect the rest of you. Way I figure it, only way to make sure that happens is if they think everyone else is dead. They've read our records. They know it's possible I could beat you all." Spike rubbed the aching spot where Mal had punched him and braced himself. "But they'll know I couldn't do it without getting hurt."

A moment's silence. At last, a smile unfolded itself across Mal's face. "You need a beating."

"Yeah," Spike sighed. "I'm afraid so."

"Oh, I think we can oblige you," Mal said. "Yeah?"

No words spoken, just a shifting in the medley of folks gathered around the table. Jayne came forward, glaring at Spike. Zoe stepped to Mal's side, and Simon came around as well. Faye, smirking, sidled up to Jet, who cracked his knuckles.

"Really, Jet?" Spike said.

"Think I owe you one," Jet said, grinning.

"So," Spike said, and then Mal had punched him in the face and they were upon him in a barrage of blows.

Well, Spike thought resignedly. Guess I deserve it.

Session Eighteen: Was It All Worth It

"How's your ship?" Jet asked, hunched over his holographic table as he examined all the figures they'd laid out—estimates of their own resources and the potential strength of *Clairvoyance*. The sheer scale of their opposition was depressing—Alliance cruisers and hardened soldiers, the dangerous enigma of the Academy trainees and the myriad other powers that might be arrayed against them. Jet hadn't risen quickly through the ranks by being cowardly, but even so...this was scary stuff.

"Seems responsive enough," Mal said. "Don't exactly like the idea of Mr. Spiegel taking her for a spin, though. Doesn't seem the kind who cares a lot about collateral."

"He isn't," grunted Jet. "Almost more trouble than he's worth." His eyes flickered to Mal, leaning cross-legged over the table with a look of concern on his face. Jet repeated, "Almost."

"You really think he can pull this off?" Mal asked.

"Don't know if I think *anyone* can pull this off," Jet said. "But he's our best shot."

"Yeah," Mal said. "I gotcha." He leaned away from the table, staring pensively out the window behind Jet. Jet followed his gaze without thinking about it, eager for the starlit vista that always seemed to soothe his mind through all the troubles that hounded him.

"It's a good view," Mal said. Jet glanced at him from the corner of his eye and saw Mal staring out into the dark.

"Yeah," Jet said. "It is." Always had been.

"Makes ya feel a bit small, though, doesn't it?" Mal said. "It's all cold and dark out there, and it starts to feel like you're the only thing standing between your crew and that kinda world."

Jet grinned a little. "Not sure I'd call'em my crew," he grunted. "Just a buncha bums ridin' on my ship."

"Heh," Mal breathed. "I feel ya." He glanced at Jet out of the corner of his eye in turn, and the briefly locked eyes before chuckling together, turning to face one another. "So I gotta ask," Mal said. "I get why a guy like me ends up on his own ship. From the sound of it, though, you've been a lawman for a long time. How's a guy like you get to runnin' same as me?"

"I could stand to hear that," Jayne said from the door. Jet and Mal both stared at Jayne, leaning against the door frame with his arms folded across his powerful chest; a quick exchange of glances with Mal showed he hadn't noticed him either.

Jet shrugged, his grin fading. "It's not really the same," he said. "Bounty hunting's not exactly a respectable profession back in Sol, but it's sure as hell a necessary one. Police

ain't got the teeth to go after anyone high-profile—usually 'cause they're getting paid off—so bounty hunters can make a killing getting hired by a rival. It's got its abuses, sure, but it's an honest living, more or less."

Mal's good humor visibly drained away. "You got problems with the way we make a livin'?"

Jet snorted. "You don't 'make a livin'," he grunted. "You keep the hell away from the Alliance."

"Yeah, I do," Mal said. "I think we've both seen why."

"And I think you'd do it even if the Alliance was everything you wanted," Jet said. "You want your freedom, your...this." He gestured around them. "You want to go where you want when you want. If you happen to make a livin' while you do..." He trailed off, a weak grin unfolding on his features. "You're like Spike that way."

Mal's mouth twisted to one side in distaste. "What's your point?"

"My point is, I like the law," Jet said. "I like being...like Jayne said before." He nodded to the man standing in the doorway. "Lookin' out for the little guy. Guys who can't stand up for themselves. I can live with the chaos—maybe a little too much, to be honest—but I like the idea that I'm fightin' for order. For keepin' things peaceful."

"So you like what the Alliance is about?" Mal growled.

Jet sighed. "No," he said. "Because it's...it's like Jayne said."

He ran his organic arm through his beard, thinking. "Back where I'm from, law didn't have any teeth. Criminals had it all their own way, and it...it really feels like we didn't get any good done. Took out a few baddies, but more kept popping up. Gets like that, you gotta wonder what's the point." He glanced down at his left arm, felt it ache as he remembered the sniper bullet that had taken it. Remembered Fad.

"So yeah," he said. "When I got here, after they were...done with us..." Those months in white rooms under observation, their patrons reluctant to share the slightest scrap of entertainment for fear they'd learn too much of the Alliance, skin samples, blood samples, stool samples, and the constant watchful eye of their overseers. "I liked it. I liked having police who knew what they were doing. Yeah, you had corruption and people abusing their power in the Core, and there were still criminals no one could pin, but...but I felt like I was getting things done. I'd gone from this world where only the smallest of the small fry ever got taken down to...to this place where I *could* make a difference."

"But what they're planning now?" Jet continued. "It's...it's too much. Too much order." That was the right word, he thought—the word that best captured the dichotomy.

"Where I'm from, it's all chaos, and there are just these little islands of order you can sometimes find. Here it's...it's the opposite. It's chaos that's hard to find. And

people...people need both. Law to protect'em from the monsters, and chaos to keep'em free, keep things..."

Jet sighed and shrugged. "Bounty hunter's get pretty familiar with both. I liked being on the side of the law. Always have. But I also know when it's gone too far."

Mal nodded slowly. "I can respect that," he said.

"Don't know about respect," Jayne growled. "But I guess it make sense."

"And why we can't make plans," Jet said. "We come at the Alliance with too much of either, they'll own us."

"Just outlines, I gotcha," Mal said. "Four teams, right?"

"Do we count Wash and Faye?" Jet asked.

"Hell, do we count Spike and River?" Jayne added.

"Small teams," Mal said. "But still teams."

"Means I need to go through my guns," Jayne said. "Get Vera prettied up." He stepped back into the hallway. Jet stared after him.

"Vera?" Jet asked.

"You do not wanna know," Mal muttered. "I should follow his lead, though. You can take our shuttles?"

"At least one," Jet said. "And that might be all we need, yeah?"

"Might." Mal studied him for a moment, then extended his hand. "Mr. Black, I think it'll be a pleasure workin' with ya."

Jet grinned and enfolded Mal's hand in his prosthetic. "Mr. Reynolds, I think I feel the same."

Mal nodded, then turned and swept off the bridge. Jet leaned back, stared off into space again, thinking about Sol. Spike wanted to go back there—to that chaos and that madness, to that world where the police had no teeth and criminals and syndicates did as they willed. There wasn't order in the Syndicates, nor even controlled chaos; there were packs of wolves, dominating the nightmarish field of predators by weight of coordination and savagery.

Did Jet want to go back there? Wasn't there a better chance for peace here?

"Mr. Black." came the gravelly voice of the Shepherd.

Jet glanced back at the doorway. Book was standing there, hands folded behind his back, eyes looking out at that same starry vista.

"Commander Book," Jet replied.

Book nodded slowly. "I assumed they'd have given you my files," he said. "Wanted you to be prepared for me."

"The man responsible for the greatest disaster in Alliance history, traveling with one of the most wanted fugitives in the system," Jet said. "Yeah, it came up."

"You know why they haven't moved after me before," Book said. "Moved after *us*."

Jet sighed and nodded. It was the trade-off to the ordered universe that the Alliance aspired to create. The Alliance had to be an absolute authority, possessing might and righteousness in equal parts. Secrets like the Academy were double-edged swords, increasing Alliance capabilities while threatening them with destruction should their methods be exposed. Moving too openly against a small ship and its supposedly-ordinary fugitives would have provoked serious questions. Thus their every operation had to be clandestine, their desperate search for the Tams hidden beneath a veneer of public safety that prevented them from using their full strength against them. The results were less important than the process: the Alliance must not only be victorious, but untarnished.

Perfection. They chased perfection, and hamstrung themselves in the process.

"I gotta ask," Jet said. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here because it's where I need to be," Book said.

Jet shook his head. "What does that mean?"

Book pursed his lips. "Mr. Black," he said. "If you've read my file, you know that I have lived a...colorful life, to say the least." Jet nodded, and Book continued, "I spent most of that life fighting, believing that I was in control, that I survived by some inner merit, some toughness. But there were a lot of poor souls out there just like me. So why did I make it, when so many others failed?"

Book's gaze held a fierce conviction that pinned Jet in place. "Some might call it luck," he said. "Some might be arrogant enough to believe their own lies—they might believe they earned it, somehow. I know better. I know I only made it because a higher power was trying to guide my steps, though I blinded myself to its helping hands at every turn."

Jet sighed and scratched the back of his head, the hairs on his neck prickling with discomfort. "I'm not exactly religious, Book."

"*Everyone* is religious, Mr. Black," Book said. "We don't like to admit it, but we all have faith in something. We're all believers. Once, I believed only in myself. Our Captain Reynolds believes that all men should be allowed to choose their own ways. And you, Mr. Black...you believe in the power of law to do good. You believe that if authority is just wielded in the right way, you could make a brighter world."

Jet frowned, feeling a lump form in his throat. That couldn't be true, could it? Did he still believe that, after all his time? Hell, maybe it was just these past two years, seeing the

actual results come out of his work on Beaumonde, seeing that law could be wielded safely, the corrupt weeded out. Seeing that the system could work.

The same system that had made the Academy. The same system that would send warships flitting to every corner of the system.

"You're having a crisis of faith," Book said. "I'm familiar with the subject."

Jet nodded slowly, feeling his muscles fight him all the way. Hard to admit that fact. Hard to admit he was torn between the two, still grateful to an Alliance that had given him an opportunity to make a difference even though he now knew what they had done. What they planned to do.

"You know your part?" Jet asked. He hadn't been able to say as much when they'd started putting their plans together—it didn't seem like the others knew about Book's history, and Jet wanted to keep that information close to his chest unless he needed it. Besides, if a man walked away from a past like that, he had his reasons.

"When we reach *Clairvoyance*?" Book asked. "Yes, I think I can help."

"Good," Jet said. "You play Go?"

Book's bushy eyebrows quirked. "On occasion."

Jet sat down on one side of his table, flicked the screen on, bringing up a pristine Go board. Book took the opposite side.

They glanced as one to the vista of space outside their ship. Jet's mind was whirling, and he assumed Book's was the same.

"You move first," Jet said. "And while you're at it, tell me about the *Cortez* Disaster."

Book's eyebrows arched higher. "You ask a lot," Book said.

"Like you're not dying to talk about it."

Book's mouth twisted sardonically to one side in what was almost a smile. "And you, Mr. Black?" he asked. "Are you dying to tell me the story of your arm?"

Jet glanced down at the arm. Remembered Fad and Usui. Remembered a universe where he couldn't even trust his partner.

"Your move," Book called, and Jet looked up to find the Shepherd had started the game while he was distracted.

"Oh, it's gonna be that kinda game," Jet said, grinning.

The game went on for hours. The conversation went on for longer still.

Session Nineteen: Hang on In There

"I don't understand," Simon muttered, as he finished stitching up the last of Spike's cuts.

"What?" Spike asked, lounging easily back on Simon's exam table. He hadn't asked for anesthetic and betrayed no sign that he was in pain. Exactly like Mal.

"Your injuries are already healing," Simon said. "I've never seen anyone heal this fast."

"I'm not just anyone," Spike said, grinning.

"Idiot's always healed fast," Faye announced, strolling through the door. "It's God's way of compensating for his stupidity."

"Well, as long as it works," Spike said, his smile widening.

"But this is..." Simon shook his head. "It's actually *outside* the bodily norm. This kind of healing should take...days, at the very least."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Don't fix what ain't broke, doc," Spike said. He stood up and started shrugging on his shirt again.

"You were a broken a long time ago, idiot," Faye grunted.

Wash entered the med bay. "How ya feelin'?" he asked Spike.

"Been worse," Spike said. "Time to start learning how to fly this thing, huh?"

"Don't gotta a whole lotta time to do it," Wash agreed, nodding. "But the way you flew that fighter? I think you'll be fine."

"You're one to talk," Spike said, chuckling. "Never seen a transport move like that."

"Firefly's are a special breed," Wash said.

"Yeah?" Spike asked. "How?"

They walked out of the med bay together, chatting amicably. Simon watched them go, feeling confused and unsatisfied.

"You okay?" Faye asked.

Simon glanced at her. She was as odd as Spike, in her way; there was something of Inara's grace and poise to her, but also a stern core that reminded him of the ever-frightening Zoe. A peculiar mixture.

"Well," Simon said. "I've just treated the man who wanted to kidnap my sister, and she's..." He trailed off and gestured to the cot he'd set up in the corner, where River lay with her sleeping face creased into an uneasy frown. The drugs he'd used should have put her into a dreamless coma, but he could see her eyes twitching with the clear signs of REM sleep.

Breaking the rules even as she slept. Simon couldn't help but smile.

"How is she?" Faye asked.

"She's..." Simon shook his head. "I haven't known the answer to that question in a long time."

"Why?" Faye asked.

Simon gave her a puzzled frown. "Why?" he repeated.

Faye shrugged. "I got the gist of it," she said. "But why is she...?"

Simon shook his head. "They played with her brain," Simon said. Played. God, what a weak word for what they'd done. Taken the firm knowledge of the mind's limits and intentionally forced her beyond them, just to see what would happen.

"Yeah," Faye said. "I...I could see that." She sighed. "Getting away from them was...tricky."

"You got away from them?" Simon asked. How was that possible?

"They weren't watching us too closely at the end," Faye said. "Didn't take much to bust out."

Didn't take much? After all he'd had to do, all he'd had to sacrifice. Most of his fortune. His entire reputation. Everything he...

Simon laughed. It felt like glass gargling in his throat.

"You okay?" Faye asked, with a concerned frown.

"I..." Simon started, then trailed off. "No. After everything I've done to keep her away from them, we're...we're just..."

Flying right into the jaws of the lion he'd struggled so hard to avoid. And for what? To help the madman he'd just treated get home? This wasn't his fight.

"What if it works?" Faye asked.

Simon blinked, tearing himself away from his memories to stare at her. Faye, however, wasn't looking at him; her eyes were fixed on the ceiling. "Huh?"

"What if it works?" Faye repeated. "If we pull it off, and we stop the Alliance, and we go home and your sister's safe. What do you do then?"

"I don't..." Simon shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

"If you could go home," Faye asked. "Would you?"

If he could go home? Go back to Osiris? Go back to a life where the shadow of disaster didn't hang over every waking hour? To a life where he didn't have to wonder if every new face (and some of the familiar ones) might finally be the one to drag his sister back to that hell?

"I can't," he said.

"But if you could," Faye said.

"There's no going back," Simon said. He'd known that the moment he committed to signing on with the rebels, spent his small fortune on that one shot at saving his sister.

"Why not?" Faye asked. There was something a little haunted in her eyes. Simon suspected he wasn't the only one thinking of old ghosts.

Simon shrugged. "Because I'm not the same," he said. Because there had been a time when he supported the Alliance and didn't understand the Independents, when law and order had seemed like virtues unto themselves and not tools that could be abused by the powerful. Because if he went back to Osiris he wouldn't be happy. Why not?

"Because I'm not who I was," he continued. "When I lived there."

Was he content now? No, not at all. There was so much danger here, for him and for the others. So much could go wrong on a ship flying all alone through the dark. And so much could go wrong out of the dark and among people who might betray him and River at any time. Even the good things—even nights spent drinking and laughing after a job well done, even Kaylee leaning against him besides *Serenity's* engine as her breath tickled her ear—they didn't make things right.

He'd been terribly happy, as a doctor on Osiris. As a man who had seen the world in shades of black and white. As a man who could see the nurses slyly glancing at him from the corner of their eyes, and who didn't mind his occasional shy looks. As a man who knew that he could one day run his own hospital. But he couldn't be that man again. Too much had changed.

"I'd go back," Simon continued. "And I'd be a ghost."

Faye lowered her eyes and really seemed to stare at him. A sad smile unfolded itself across her face. "Yeah," she said. "I know the feeling."

And Simon got the feeling she really did.

"What about you?" Simon asked.

Faye blinked. "Me?"

"Is there a place you want to go back to?"

Faye's face shifted subtly. "Not exactly."

Simon pursed his lips in confusion. "What does that mean?"

"Means there's a place I want to see again," Faye said. "Find out if it's the place I want to be."

"Where is it?" Simon asked.

Faye studied him for a moment and then chuckled to herself. "Sorry," she said. "A girl's gotta have a few secrets."

She turned and sauntered out of the med-bay. Simon watched her go, his face fighting a strange smile. What an odd woman. Looking for a place she might want to go back to. Looking for a home.

Well, whatever else *Serenity* might be, it was certainly that. A home. He might not be content, but he could be at ease here as he could be nowhere else in the wide Verse. He wasn't always happy, but he was certainly alive, and alive in a way he'd never been before.

He looked at his sister, and found to his surprise that she looked a little more at ease than she had moments before, her eyes no longer twitching so fitfully beneath their lids. A little smile creased her sleeping features.

That was why he was sailing back into the lion's jaws. That was why it was worth the incredible risk. Because if they did this—if they could strike such a blow to the Alliance and the people who had done this to her—then their home would be a little safer, and their new world a little brighter.

Simon walked over to her and ran a hand across her warm forehead.

Session Twenty: Somebody to Love

Inara heard them long before she ever stepped into the cockpit, excited voices chattering back and forth.

"Seems a bit of a mess to handle," Spike said. "How did you keep away from me?"

"Firefly's are a bit weird," Wash explained. "Thing is, you really need an engineer to get the best out of them. Doesn't even have to be a good engineer, just someone who can get the engine to do what it needs to. But man, you got a Firefly at its best..."

"Yeah," Spike agreed. "Swordfish is kinda like that. Thing used to be a for racing, 'fore I picked it up."

"Racing?" Wash repeated. "That's why it handles even better than most fighters I've seen!"

"Yeah, but the fighters around here are built for a whole different kind of space," Spike said. "There's a lotta tradeoff involved."

"How's it stack up to flying a shuttle?" Inara asked, ascending the stairs. Wash and Spike glanced back at her, Spike in the pilot's seat and Wash bent over Spike's shoulder.

"Whole different kind of flying," Spike said, smiling a little.

"Eh, you haven't seen her handle a shuttle," Wash said. "Even Mal can't do the things she can do."

"That so?" Spike asked, studying her. "Where'd you learn a thing like that?"

"Is it something you learn?" Inara asked. "Or it something you've always known and just sort of...discover?" That's how it had been for her, at least; something about the feel of those shuttle controls in her hand had spoken to her. She'd never told anyone on the crew this, but that had been the real reason she chose this ship. Something about her shuttle, and about *Serenity*, had spoken to her, like a whisper in her soul.

"Am I a man dreaming I was a butterfly?" asked Spike. "Or a butterfly dreaming I am a man?"

Inara's eyebrows arched. "Zhuangzi?" she said. "You're full of surprises."

"You don't know the half of it," Spike smiled.

Inara smiled in turn, then headed back down the stairs. Behind her, she heard Spike get up and follow.

"Uh, okay?" Wash called. "I guess we'll just...we'll just talk later?"

"Come by the *Bebop*," Spike replied, one step behind Inara. Then they were out in the hallway, walking in companionable silence towards Inara's shuttle. Of course he'd known she wanted to talk. She suspected Spike Spiegel lived a lot of his life by intuition.

They reached her shuttle, and Spike eased himself onto her couch. Inara started making tea.

"Who's Julia?" she asked.

"A woman," Spike answered.

Inara chuckled. "Evasive, aren't you?"

Spike chuckled, too. "*The* woman," he amended.

"You're a Holmes fan?" Inara said.

"Not particularly," Spike said. "He was always too...inconsistent. He's a walking plot device."

"So she's not your Irene Adler?" Inara said.

"She might be," Spike said. "Guess we'll see."

Inara shook her head, then turned away from the tea as it started to brew. "She must be quite someone."

Spike nodded, watching her with those intriguing cats' eyes. Inara studied him in turn.

"Your eyes are different colors," she realized aloud.

Spike blinked, and his smile widened. "Not a lot of people notice that."

"It's hard to see," she said. "Were you born that way?"

"No," Spike said.

Inara laughed. "How can you say so little and make it sound like so much?"

"Sorry about that," Spike said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "I know that's a secret you Companions think you have on lockdown."

"You've met many of us, have you?" Inara asked.

"A few," Spike said. "Been to a lot of places the past few years. You guys are everywhere." He studied her for a moment. "Have to admit, though, haven't met one traveling like this. Companions can usually find more comfortable places."

Inara feigned a hurt expression. "You don't think my shuttle's comfortable?"

"Nope," Spike said, lounging back on her sedan. Inara chuckled.

"So," Inara said. "The woman."

"The woman," Spike agreed, nodding.

"Why?" Inara asked.

"You know why," Spike said.

Inara cocked an eyebrow. "Oh I do, do I?"

"You do," Spike said, nodding. "That's why you're on this ship, isn't it?"

Mal's face flashed through her head. "I don't..." She started. "I don't know know what you mean."

"You don't feel alive?" Spike asked.

"I..." Inara trailed off, confused, and risked a glance over to the dresser where her medicine was hidden. "What?"

"See, I didn't," Spike said. "For a long time. Then I met her."

"The woman?" Inara asked.

"The woman," Spike agreed. "The part of myself I'd been missing."

Inara shook her head. "I don't believe that," she said.

"Believe what?" Spike asked.

"People define themselves, Mr. Spiegel," Inara said. She certainly had. Yes, she'd been shaped into a Companion from an early age, but only because it suited her and fascinated her. That was her role in the Verse, and she played it well. And when the path laid out before her suddenly seemed confining (to stay in the house at Madrassa, to know what every day would look like until the day she died) she'd set out on her own path. That was why she was standing here, having this conversation.

"No one shapes you, huh?" Spike said.

"Of course people shape you," Inara said. "But that's not the same thing as defining you. You make those choices. She wasn't the piece of yourself you'd been missing. She was the person who showed you that piece."

Spike chuckled. "If it looks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck..."

"It's not the same thing," Inara insisted.

Spike sighed. "No, it's not," Spike said. "No one's the same. We're all dreaming our own dreams, so it all takes something different to wake us up."

"Are you a butterfly, Mr. Spiegel?" she asked.

"I wonder sometimes," Spike admitted.

"So do we all."

"You're wrong, though."

"I thought we just agreed, Mr. Spiegel."

"No," Spike said. "What we agreed is that no one wakes up for the same reason. I had to know I was alive. You had to know you were free." He grinned a little. "Had to go by

yourself, free of your house mothers, free of anyone who could tell you what to do, so you could really know what you *wanted* to do."

Inara glanced around her shuttle, where she felt more at home than she ever had on Sihnon. Was that all this was? A larger version of that old test?

She rose from her seat and moved back to her tea, pouring it out with all the ritual and ceremony she'd been taught. Spike leaned forward, taking the tea in hand and sipping it with surprising grace.

"See, there's a reason you knew to ask me why I wanted to go back to Sol so badly," Spike said. "Because you knew there *was* a reason."

Inara studied him for a moment. That wolf-like face, mysterious as so few men were.

"I didn't take you for a coward, Mr. Spiegel," she said.

Spike's eyebrows arched. "I didn't think I was one."

"So why are you running?"

Spike's mouth quirked. "And what exactly am I running from, Ms. Serra?"

"All this talk" she said. "And you've said so little about Julia."

Spike studied her for a moment. "Heh," he said. "What's that mean, do you think?"

"It means you're still running," she said. "Running because you don't want to die. Running because what's important isn't that she woke you up. What's important is that she's out there somewhere and you have to get to her. Because you know it means less without her."

"I thought people don't define us," Spike said.

"They don't," Inara said. "But whatever you've defined yourself as...you know she's integral to it. The part of your definition you're missing. And the thought you might not find her again..."

She trailed off, letting the implications speak for themselves. The idea that one part of himself might really be gone forever. It was a form of death.

"Coward, huh," Spike mused. He wasn't smiling anymore. "Then I guess you are too."

Inara chuckled. "Companions aren't known for their monogamy, Mr. Spiegel."

"No," Spike agreed. "I bet you'll always see that side of people. The side in need of...companionship." He managed a wicked smile, and Inara laughed in turn.

"But the thing is," Spike said. "You're lyin' to yourself. You know why you're here."

Mal's face flashed unbidden through her head again, staring at her with that look he sometimes got, like he could see right through her, like he knew her as she didn't know him. He didn't, of course—no one did—but that was a powerful feeling.

"He's a man with a cause," Spike said. "A man who can watch out for you without limiting you. He's a partner."

"You don't know him," Inara said.

"I knew him the moment I saw the two of you in a room together."

Inara gave Spike a withering look. "So you kept hitting on me because...?"

Spike grinned. Inara chuckled.

"It's too bad," Inara said.

Spike tilted his head. "What is?"

"You and me," she said. "Coming alive before we met."

Spike gave her a wistful smile. "I guess I wouldn't have minded fumbling around with you."

Inara laughed again. "Somehow I don't think there'd be much fumbling, Mr. Spiegel."

"I dunno," Spike said. "Been out here the boonies so long, I think your skills might be going to rust."

"And you haven't touched a woman since Julia," Inara said. She knew it absolutely; no one like Spike could have, not when she was such an integral part of what defined him.

Spike nodded. "You're not wrong," he said, and stood up, setting his tea down on her table. He headed for the door. Inara didn't try to stop him.

When he reached the door, he paused and looked at her over his shoulder. "Even if I make it back to Sol," he said. "I may never find her again." He opened the door. "Don't be like me."

He left the room. Inara stared after him, then looked around her shuttle. The only place she'd ever felt at home. But was it the shuttle? Or was it *Serenity*? Or was it...

Mal's face drifted through her head slowly this time, and instead of shying from it she examined it. No, it wasn't just Mal that kept her here. She loved this ship. She loved the freedom, and the danger, and the intrigue. She loved the crew: Zoe, serious and ever-focused, and jibing Wash beside her, and the two of them had a love like nothing she'd ever seen, enhancing each other; Simon, sacrificing everything for his sister and keeping an impossible determination through it all; River, fighting so bravely to overcome what had been done to her; Book, struggling with the compromises required of the Rim but never really wavering in his faith; Kaylee, bright and bashful and innocently enthusiastic in a world where that was all-too-rare. And Jayne...

Well. Jayne was there too.

But all of this was only possible because of Mal. This whole strange slice of chaotic heaven. Mal stood at its head. Leading them through the woods, making sure they didn't

get lost. Mal hadn't revealed to her the part she'd lost. Mal had built the only place she truly felt at home. The only place she truly felt free. The place she'd been missing all her life without knowing it.

Everyone wakes up in different ways, right?

She sipped at her tea.

Session Twenty One: Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy

"You can't stay here, Inara," Mal said. "No, listen. This isn't your fight. Ain't got nothin' to do with you. You can take your shuttle and..."

Mal trailed off, staring at the mirror. Even his reflection didn't look convinced.

"Well," he muttered to himself. "That ain't exactly a thought to inspire confidence."

He grimaced, then stepped out of his cabin and out into the corridor, taking a steadying breath as he walked. It wasn't that he didn't want to go to *Clairvoyance*. This felt like a fight worth fighting, not just for River's sake but because the Verse was already small enough as it was and he didn't want it getting any smaller.

But he'd faced the Alliance before, and seen just what they were capable of. He knew exactly how dangerous this fight would be. And he didn't want Inara getting involved. Hell, the plan didn't really need her or her shuttle.

Speaking of, he was almost there. He moved across the crosswalk, then stopped as the door to her shuttle opened and Spike Spiegel stepped out.

Mal wasn't totally sure how to describe what happened in his mind then. Like his thoughts were flinching. But flinching from what? From images like lightning flashing in a norm, bodies intertwined in Inara's shuttle with the incense hanging thick like a cloud of-

"You messin' with my crew?" Mal said aloud, trying to force the images back into the dark.

Spike studied him for a moment, leaning back onto Inara's door. "Messin' with?" Spike repeated. "Companions choose their own company, remember?"

Mal had launched himself towards Spike before he quite knew what he was doing. Spike stepped into his lung, so their faces were almost touching. They froze as though ordered to, staring at each other, centimeters from touching.

"I don't want you near my crew," Mal whispered, anger flaming through him so he could barely see through it.

"Is she on your crew, Sergeant Reynolds?" Spike asked. "Seems to be me she's just along for the...ride."

There was venom in Spike's tone, a barb that should have slipped through Mal's ribs and pierced his heart. But instead, it somehow calmed him down, banished his anger so he felt he could see right through Spike, uncapped a well of memories that he rarely looked in anymore and let it flow so he understood everything about this speck of a man.

"I knew guys like you during the war," Mal said, speaking from instinct and intuition, speaking with a certainty that was vindicating. "Guys who'd been fighting too long, who

couldn't remember what it was like not to fight. Mad dogs bitin' at anything that came near'em. That's all you are, ain't it? A gorram dog who doesn't know where he's supposed to be or who he's supposed to fight."

Spike blinked, then closed his eyes. "Heh," he breathed. "There was a time you weren't wrong, Sergeant."

"Don't call me that," Mal said.

Spike nodded. "Ain't a mad dog anymore, Captain," Spike said. "I bled that part of myself away a long time ago."

"That's what you tell yourself," Mal said. "That's the lie you cling to, because you don't want to believe you could be the same. But it's still there. Waitin' for you to slip up and let him off the leash."

"Yeah?" Spike asked, opening his eyes and staring at Mal as though he had him laid out on a microscope. "What part of yourself do you keep leashed up, Captain?"

"The part that ain't shooting you stand," Mal said.

"And why do you want to shoot me, Captain?" Spike asked.

"You know why," Mal said.

"Do you?" Spike asked.

Mal's calm shattered, splintering like a boat on the rocks. Suddenly he was floundering, more confused than angry, fighting to orient himself. Why?

"I-" Mal started, and didn't know what he was trying to say.

"The part you keep leashed," Spike said. "That's the soldier, right? The one who fought in the war. The one who risked his life because he believed in the cause. The one who died."

Died? He didn't die. At the time, he'd wished for death. Those days spent on that ruined planet among the silent dead and wailing wounded, waiting for someone to figure out what to do with'em. No serenity to be found, nothing but desperation and death, stomach pangs and your throat always aching with thirst.

"'Cept he didn't die, die he?" Spike said. "You just made sure he couldn't get out. 'Cause you didn't every want to hurt like that again. So every cause worth dying for, every cause ya might want to risk your neck for, that gets shoved to wayside. It's the desire of a dead man. But he ain't dead, Captain Reynolds. He's you."

Me. Yeah, old soldier keeping the watch. Except he knew too well how easy it was for the people who followed you to die. Believe in any cause you like, but who says that cause means a damn thing? Who says that cause won't get everyone killed? Only cause worth following was in keeping those people safe. In keeping your crew safe.

The ship snapped back together. Mal felt stable and calm again.

"Julia," Mal said aloud.

Spike flinched as though struck. Mal couldn't help but feel satisfied.

"She's worth killing for," Mal said. "She's worth dying for. She's worth tearing apart the whole damn Verse for. But I get the feeling you ain't seen her in a long damn time."

"What's your point?" Spike asked.

"You're trying so hard to remember her, ain't ya?" Mal said. "Trying to remember the person who made ya forget you were a mad dog. And every day you go without seeing her, that dog wakes up a little more. How long before you for get what she was like, Spike? How long before that dog comes roaring back?"

Spike closed his eyes and said nothing. Mal smiled a little, though it felt like a grimace.

"You think I don't know why you were talking to Inara?" Mal said. "You want to remember what it's like. You want to make sure it wasn't just a gorram dream."

"Is that how she makes you feel, Captain?" Spike asked. "Like you're waking up from a dream?"

Mal took a steadying breath, hating the weak slimy feeling in his guts. "What?"

"Like you had your ship," Spike said. "Your little consolation prize, your way of sticking to your guns even though the Alliance had taken everything else from you. You built your crew and you started finding a way of life you could swallow down, and then all the sudden she comes waltzing in and you realize none of it means a damn, not even the war, because there she is."

Inara, proud and unbowed and absolute, like something out of a storybook, something from a whole 'nother world. In his shuttle, in his ship, a waft of perfume in the air that almost brought tears to his eyes and he never knew why.

"Did I do something to piss you off?" Mal asked.

"She's right there," Spike said. "And you're too chickenshit to do anything about it."

Mal stared at Spike, and laughed.

It surprised Spike, Mal saw that on his face. Hell, it surprised Mal; he hadn't know he was going to do it until he was doubled over, shaking with it, clutching at the railing for support. His laughter carried out over the cargo bay.

"What's so funny?" Spike asked.

"I...I didn't..." Mal gasped, tears pooling in his eyes. "I didn't take you for such a gorram romantic."

This deadly dancer, this killer who moved like a lethal wind, who could duel a born and bred assassin to a stalemate—he was outraged over love. Livid with it. That was funny, no two ways about it.

"Romantic," Spike repeated. "Huh." He grinned. "Truth be told, I never thought of myself that way, but...hell."

Mal wiped the tears from his eyes, chortling still. "How'd you get to be like that?" Mal asked.

"Same way you got to be so scared," Spike said. "One day you just...wake up."

And that made a strange sense to Mal. He remembered seeing those ships come down over the Serenity Valley. He remembered realizing they were never going to win, that all he'd fought and sacrificed for her was as dead and broken as Shadow. He remembered tearing the cross off his neck and leaving it in the dust of that godforsaken valley. He remembered those weary days, first as a prisoner, then as a vagabond, until he and Zoe found this ship and real freedom.

But hell, maybe Spike was right. Maybe all he'd been doing was running. Running from the fact that the right side of the war had lost. Running from the fact that you couldn't have faith in a God who could let all that hurt mean so little.

And he remembered Inara, absolute and unflinching, nothing like he'd expected. The thought of her was every bit as infectious and maddening as the cause of independence had ever been.

"There's things worth getting hurt for, Sergeant," Spike said. "Take it from a romantic."

Spike strolled off down the walkway. Mal watched him go, then turned his eyes towards Inara's door.

He stared at that door for a long, long time.

Session Twenty Two: It's a Hard Life

Zoe stood by the large window, looking out into the starry black with her arms folded in front of her. Part of her lamented the existence of such a window—it was an obvious vulnerability in the *Bebop*, something that could easily break and leave them all floating through the void. But it was entrancing, in its way. All that black.

She'd spent hours with Jayne and Kaylee, getting their weapons ready, figuring out every phase of the plan. She was tired, and Wash was busy learning how the Swordfish handled so that she'd just be distracting him if she was with him. There was nothing left to do but wait.

But that was alright. She liked waiting. Some of the best moments in our life had been spent waiting. Listening to the music of the browncoat camps, listening to Mal boast and brag and bully, making everyone feel like they were really on the cusp of something, saying whatever they needed to hear to make sure they felt like part of the army, part of the cause. Listening to Wash's jokes, or feeling him, or touching him.

Too much of her life had been spent in frantic moments. She might excel in such times, but she did not relish them.

"You like the view?" Faye Valentine asked.

"Not sure," Zoe said, without looking back at her. "But I'm not sure I can look away, either."

"I know that feeling," Faye said. She stepped forwards until she was just visible from the corner of Zoe's eye.

"You don't like me, do you?" Faye asked

Zoe shrugged. "Not sure I have an opinion on any of you," she said. Hard to, really. It was a big, strange story, but it was a big, strange universe. These people were just floating on by, same as them. Only chance they'd all run into each other.

"You put up a good fight," Zoe mused, thinking back to the casino.

"That's a high compliment, coming from you," Faye said.

"I know," Zoe said. She stared out into the darkness a moment longer, then asked, "You don't like me."

She saw Faye shake her head from the corner of her eye. "I don't *get* you," Faye said.

Zoe chuckled. "Not much to get."

"You don't believe that, do you?" Faye asked.

Well, yeah. Of course she did. Zoe's life hadn't been that complicated. She'd been career military since the day she learned how to shoot a gun, signed up with the Browncoats

because she'd seen what the Core worlds could do to those that didn't fall in line. She'd fought until she couldn't fight anymore, and when Mal called for her, she went to him, because she's always trusted him to lead her through the chaos and she trusted him now, too, when there was nothing left to trust in.

One surprise in her life, really. One time when she'd decided to do something that didn't seem all that natural.

"Ain't nothin' interesting about me," Zoe said aloud.

Faye sighed. They stared out into the darkness for a while longer.

"You're happy," Faye said.

"So?" Zoe asked. Of course she was happy. Not content, but she'd learned a long time ago that no one was ever content. You never got to be content, at least not for long. But you could sure as hell be happy, if you knew how to be. Zoe had never really known how, but she'd gotten lucky enough to find it on her own.

"That's a rare thing," Faye said. "None of my..." She trailed off.

"Your what?" Zoe asked.

"I was going to say friends," Faye said. "But I'm not sure that's the right word."

Zoe chuckled again, thinking of Jayne. "I know that feeling."

Faye nodded. "They're not..." She sighed once more. "Spike is obsessed. You've seen it. And Jet...Jet's always so sad."

Zoe thought of Mal, and closed her eyes as a sad smile crept across her face. "Know that feeling, too."

"Ed's fine," Faye mused. "But Ed's always fine. That's not really saying anything."

Zoe laughed. "She doesn't seem bothered by much."

"I'm not sure she even knew we were captured," Faye said.

Captured. Right. Held in the clutches of the Alliance, just like Zoe and Mal. Just like River, who always looked at her with those scared, confused eyes when she thought Zoe couldn't see. Zoe knew why, though. River was a reader, after all. She knew Zoe had thought about how to take River out, if worse came to worse.

Sad to say, she took a little bit of comfort in the girl's fears. It seemed like a tacit confirmation she could do it, if she had to.

"And you?" Zoe asked.

"Me?" Faye repeated.

"Your friends are obsessed, sad, and oblivious," Zoe said. "What about you?"

Faye shook her head. "Me," she said again. "I don't..."

They stared out at the darkness again. Zoe wasn't really thinking of anything in particular, just feeling her memories drift slowly through her mind, clouds whose shapes she could observe without trying to force them one way or another.

"I'm looking for something," Faye said at last.

Zoe waited. Faye added nothing else.

"What?" Zoe asked.

"The place I'm supposed to be," Faye said.

Zoe nodded slowly. "Hard place to find."

"You found it, didn't you?" Faye asked.

"No," Zoe said.

Faye jerked her head away from the window to stare at Zoe. "No?" she repeated.

Zoe turned her head slightly to give Faye an amused glance. "No."

Zoe liked *Serenity*, but it wasn't the place she was supposed to be, anymore than the Serenity Valley, or the Alliance prison camps, or the ship she'd born on. They were just places.

Faye searched her face. "So why are you like this?" she asked.

"Like what?" Zoe said.

"You just seem so..." She glanced over her shoulder, towards the airlock connecting the *Bebop* with the *Serenity*. "Serene," she managed.

Zoe guffawed, loudly and awkwardly, so she seemed to spasm with laughter. "Serene?" she repeated, wiping a tear from her eye and turning to face Faye. "Ain't nothin serene around here."

"You are, though," Faye said. "Even during the fight. You're just...calm. Like a tiger."

Didn't feel calm. Felt focused, sure, but that wasn't the same as calm. That was tunnel vision, narrowing your attention to the task at hand. Anything else was liable to get you killed one day. It was a gorram miracle the Captain and Jayne hadn't died already.

Well, maybe not that miraculous. She'd pulled them out of the fire more than once, and there was nothing miraculous about her.

"You're not like the other," Faye continued. "There's something...*whole* about you, I guess."

"That's got nothing to do with the place," Zoe said.

"So what is it?" Faye asked.

Zoe considered for a moment, thought about her time with the Browncoats in general and Mal in particular. Thought about all the places she'd seen along the way.

"There's not a place you're supposed to be," Zoe said. "There's a *way* you're supposed to be."

That made sense, as far as she could tell. Once she'd gotten good at fighting, the trick was in finding things worth fighting for. Protecting her ship from the dangers of the Verse. Looking out for her fellow Browncoats. Giving Mal the support he needed so his heroics didn't get them all killed.

And Wash, of course. Wash of the gentle hands and the strong arms.

"You can't just *be* home," Faye said softly.

"You surely can," Zoe said. "Places change. People change. Nothing's ever gonna be the way you thought it was. But you find the right way of moving, well, you're home wherever you end up"

"I don't..." Faye trailed off. "I don't understand."

"Home ain't a place to go to," Faye said. "Home is under your skin. You don't feel good there, you don't feel good anywhere."

Faye studied Zoe for a moment. "And you do, don't you?" she asked.

Zoe nodded. Hell, she'd earned it. Hadn't felt that way on the ship she was born on, hadn't even felt that way when she saw what the Alliance was trying to do. Started to feel that way with Mal, though. Like they were walkin' on some road she liked the look of, a road that wasn't always easy but that sure as hell felt right.

Hadn't really understood the feeling until she'd met Wash. Annoying her with those stupid jokes again and again until all at once she saw the audacity of it, laughing in the face of all the dark he was flying into.

But the trick was that Wash and Mal were just walking the path with her. It was her path. Taking these talents for war and puttin'em to use in a way that made her feel good. Not always righteous. Not always easy. But always basically good, like she was doing what she was supposed to. This was the life she wanted. Mal helped her walk it and Wash made it worth walking but even without them...

The idea of it—of being without the Captain or Wash, of being left alone—suddenly hit her all at once, and she turned away from Faye and stared out into the dark. Other than that sudden turn, she showed no sign of this frosty vertigo yawning in her stomach, the bleak, lonely dizziness. She kept her breathing steady.

Even without them, this would still be her path. It would just be a whole lot lonelier, and a helluva lot harder

"You want to go home?" Zoe asked. "Stop lookin' for it."

She could still see Faye from the corner of her eye, staring at her with her mouth slightly open, her eyes wide and searching. She looked as though she were about to ask something else, then shook her head and walked away.

Zoe kept her eyes fixed on that vast darkness, bigger even than the black thoughts hanging heavy in her head. She placed her hand against the glass and studied the distant gleams of cold starlight. That was all you needed to see—all that space, all those worlds, every one of which would keep on turning long after you died. But that didn't mean you didn't fight for your life. You kept your whetted edge, fought tooth and nail to survive. Kept walkin' your road, come hell or highwater.

There'd be more fighting soon. For now, though, she had a moment's quiet, and she'd savor it.

She put her hand onto the glass, and smiled out into the abyss.

Session Twenty Three: I Want It All

Faye's feet seemed to be moving of their own accord, taking her out over the *Bebop* that had been her waystation for so long. Not home, though. Never home. Home was a memory she couldn't find, dim glimpses of a bright young girl cheering her on, a girl who left her feeling like a funhouse reflection, misshapen in her own skin.

Home was a way of being? But Faye didn't know how to be. All she knew was the echo of that memory, that dim sense of restless wrong that had hung over her since the day she'd woken up.

When Faye's feet took her to the *Bebop's* hangar, she found Spike and Wash already there. Wash was seated in the Swordfish's cockpit, with Spike lounging back on one of its wings with his eyes closed. The two were chatting amiably.

"This is old-school!" Wash exclaimed. "You don't see a lot of fighters built for dogfights!"

"It's why they never see me coming." He opened one eye as Faye entered the cockpit. "Got a sense of her?"

"I think so," Wash said. "Need to practice a little more."

"Good," Spike said.

"Your wife's back that way," Faye called, on instinct.

"That so?" Wash said, rising out of the cockpit with a maniacal gleam in his eye. "I should go...talk to her and..." He trailed off. "I can't think of any clever innuendo."

"You can tell us when you think of a good one," Spike said, waving one hand dismissively.

"No I can't," Wash muttered, sliding down out of the Swordfish. "It loses something. Maybe something about a bridge, or...isn't bebop a kind of music...?" He was still muttering to himself as he left the hangar.

Faye strolled over to the Red Tail and ran her hand along the smooth metal of one of its guns, smiling faintly. She'd never thought to get her hands on her little ship again. How could she? Escape had been hard enough; escape with the *Bebop* or any of their possessions on it had been an impossible dream.

At least, until the Alliance had handed it to Jet again.

"Sometimes I can't believe we made it out," Faye said.

Spike laughed. "We wouldn't have," he said. "If it weren't for Ein."

Yes. Ein. The rest of them were of tremendous interest to the Alliance, but Ein was just a dog, an idle curiosity they'd quickly forgotten about. And one day Ein had trotted up

with an ID Card in his jaws, and somehow Spike had managed to conceal it through every intense search. Until the day had come for him to use it to get them access to a computer, and Ed had whizzed her way through the Alliance security systems, and they'd grabbed two shuttles and flown their separate ways.

"You could have come with me," Faye said.

"I wanted to be alone," Spike said.

"You always do."

Spike didn't say anything. Faye sighed and trailed her fingertips along the deadly length of one of the Red Tail's guns. They hadn't talked about it much, when they'd parted ways. Jet had refused to follow them, but with the prison in panic around them, as cell doors opened unexpectedly and other prisoners went free, Spike and Faye had been enough to fight their way to the shuttles. Faye wouldn't have minded if Spike followed, but she didn't want to follow him. This new universe was full of new possibilities, and she didn't intend to let the chains of her old life tie her down again.

"What have you been up to?" she asked.

"Bit of a revenge story," Spike said. "Might make a good movie some day."

"That so?" Faye asked.

"That's so," Spike said. "You?"

"I..." She trailed off and closed her eyes. God, how to describe the last two years? Running wild with Ed and Ein across the universe, hiding their shuttle in crumbling slums or flying into the most fabulous galas. Gambling her way around the poker tables of the rich and poor, the politicians and the criminals. The *Geppetto* had been their crowning achievement; she'd gambled for four months, in swanky hotels and in underground tables, until she'd won the tickets, and with Ed on her side...

She looked around the *Bebop's* hangar again. How was she supposed to know it would lead her back here?

"It was different," Faye said. "Better."

"Better?" Spike repeated. "Better how?"

"Just..." She sighed, trying to dispel the cloying fog her conversation with Zoe had raised around her thoughts. Home was under the skin? But Faye couldn't remember ever feeling at home. All she had was the ghost of a memory, glimpsed through a wall of static on an old recording.

"There were no ghosts," she whispered.

It felt like a lighthouse pierced her misted mind, clarified and sharpened her emotions and her ideas. Ghosts, that was the term. She had been shrouded by ghosts since the moment she awoke in the hospital years ago, sleeping beauty rising to meet her prince.

She had been haunted by absence. A dead man who wasn't dead. Debt she could never shake. A treacherous universe that seemed determined to con her from her first waking memory.

And the ghost of the girl she might have been once. A girl who had a home. A girl who could be that earnest and honest and sincere.

Spike chuckled. "Funny," Spike said. "That's why I want to leave."

Faye stared at him. Spike lifted himself off on his hands and gave her a cat smile. "Too few ghosts here," he said. "Nothing to chase."

He fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket. Faye studied it for a moment. "That looks like your usual brand," she said.

"It is," Spike said.

"You kept it all this time?" she asked.

"Had ten left when the Alliance grabbed us," Spike said. "Got four now." He drew two of them out and gestured towards her. She cocked her head.

"You're being awfully generous," she said.

"Well, hell," Spike said. "Sometimes you tip the dealer, right?"

Faye grinned. "*You* tip the dealer?"

"I would if you weren't such a cheat."

Faye hefted herself up onto the wind of the Swordfish and let Spike light her cigarette. She took a deep, steady drag. She felt the smoke blossoming through her throat and into her lungs.

"Everywhere I went, she was there," Spike said.

"Julia," Faye said.

"Julia," Spike agreed.

Faye shook her head. "Why is she worth this?"

"What would you give?" Spike asked. "To find your ghosts?"

"I..." Faye trailed off. She didn't have an answer. She'd never had the opportunity. You can't find the ghosts you can't name.

But if she could? If she could name her ghosts? If she could pierce the veil that lay over her dreams and remember...?

Faye sighed and took another drag on her cigarette.

"You don't have to come, you know," Spike said.

"I know," Faye said.

"Do you want to?" he asked.

"I don't know," Faye answered.

Spike nodded. Faye stared up at the ceiling, puffing on her cigarette. This 'Verse made sense to her. Just enough chaos so people like her could live. Just enough order so no one saw her coming. This place made her feel like she could really build something. Like she wasn't just a piece of trash tumbling through space.

"You don't know you'll find her," Faye said.

"No," Spike agreed. "But I know for sure that I won't, if I stay here."

True enough. No Julia where they were. No ghosts. Here, they were the ghosts—creatures who had appeared from some beyond, from a different time and a different place. They were haunting this universe, and Faye loved it. It was so much more peaceful this way.

Peaceful, yes. But hopeless, too. Because all those old questions...how could she lay them to rest where she was? Wouldn't she be haunted by those ghosts all the rest of her days, if she couldn't give them names?

"I won't find mine here," Faye said.

"Nope," Spike agreed. He took a drag off his cigarette and then asked, "Do you want to find them?"

She wasn't sure. She'd wanted to solve the mystery of her memories, to stop her restless wandering and find a place she could lay her head. But now she was here, in this 'Verse that didn't have any of those ghosts. She felt at ease here. Sure, she still carried her niggling doubts, but everyone carried those. Chasing hers had brought her nothing but grief. Maybe it was better to stay.

"I don't know," Faye said again. "But I want the option."

Spike grinned. "Romani to the end, huh?"

Faye glanced at him, her lips quirking. She wasn't sure if she was trying to smile or trying to frown. "What makes you say that?"

"You always want the choice," Spike said. "Even when you don't know what you want."

Faye grinned. "Yeah, well," she said. "Better than being stuck, isn't it?"

"Got that right." Spike took another drag off his cigarette, then ground it out on the Swordfish's wing.

"Hey!" Jet barked. Faye and Spike looked over to the hangar entrance and found Jet glaring at them, hands on his hips. "You can't smoke in here!"

Faye glanced at Spike. "Is he serious?"

Spike shrugged. "Apparently."

Jet scowled and stomped towards them. "We can't take risks with any of this!" he said. "These are the only fighters we got. You light something on fire..."

"Whatever happens, happens," Spike said.

Faye smirked. "If that's what you think, maybe we should play a card game."

"Card game, shark game, Faye plays well!" Ed sang, swinging out from a vent above them and swinging by her feet.

"How long have you been up there?" Faye asked, barely looking at Ed.

Somewhere above them, Ein barked, and Ed giggled.

"You've got the dog in the vents?" Jet demanded.

"Doggy, doggy, where did you go? Up in the vents or down below!" Ed swung out of the vent and landed in a crouch on the ground. She reached up and caught Ein as he tumbled out of the vent, barking as she cradled him.

And Faye felt her face tug up into a smile. How long had it been since they were all together like this? How long since the gypsies of the *Bebop* made their wandering way as one?

Home is a place you feel, isn't it?

"What the hell are you smiling at?" Jet demanded.

Faye laughed. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

One way or another, she was free to choose. And she was never more at home then when she was the one deciding her future.

"Go, go," she mumbled to herself. "Me. Me. Me."

"Do your best," Spike said.

Faye's head snapped towards him, and found him smirking up at her. "Always so selfish."

Faye couldn't fight the grin unfolding across her face. "Well, that's what it takes to be a cowboy."

Session Twenty Four: Don't Stop Me Now

Spike kept his hands on the helm and took several deep breaths. The *Serenity* was a lot more fickle than anything he was used to flying: it depended on there being someone tending to the engine, and Spike's cover story meant that he and River were the only ones aboard. Those engines were not being very responsive: it had taken Spike a long damn time to get this close.

And the closer they got, the more his heart raced.

The Alliance was a boogeyman on a scale Spike had never had to deal with. Red Dragon was insidious: they could be anywhere. Spike had spent a long time keeping an eye out for their agents. But while the Red Dragon could be anywhere, the Alliance were *everywhere*. They were a government on a scale no one dreamed of in the Sol System.

And he was flying right into their gullet.

A signal on the cortex. Spike pressed a button.

"This is the Alliance cruiser *Zhuge Liang*," came a voice. "Identify yourself."

Spike pressed the buttons in the order Wash had showed him, and got a visual on the incoming cruiser—a sleek, shark-like vessel not all that much bigger than the *Serenity* but bristling with weapons. Green light glowed along its outline.

Spike took a steadying breath and glanced over at River, sprawled lifeless across the copilot's seat. He reached for the mic. "This is Spike Spiegel," he said. "With a special delivery for *Clairvoyance*."

There was a moment's silence. Spike felt the weight of worlds hanging in the balance.

"Acknowledged," came the response. "Surrender your nav controls and you will be guided to the station."

"Yeah, about that," Spike said. "Having some trouble on my end. Nav took some damage, and I'm not sure what I'm dealing with."

Another silence. Spike kept coasting through space, towards *Clairvoyance*.

"We'll send a tech team to you," came the officious voice. "Prepare to be boarded."

"Anyone tries to board me, this whole ship blows," Spike said conversationally.

A moment's pause. Then, "Please repeat, *Serenity*?"

"Confer with your superiors," Spike said. "I'll wait."

More silence. Spike was starting to get a bit bored.

"Acknowledged," said the voice. Spike was pleased to note the begrudging tone. "How do you wish to proceed, *Serenity*?"

"If you've got a tech crew that could override my controls and guide me in?" Spike suggested.

"If that was an option, why not suggest it in the first place?" the voice demanded.

"You know why," Spike said.

Had to make it clear what he was willing to do, if they pulled any tricks. Had to make it clear that they were walking a very tight rope to get River Tam back in the fold. Had to make it clear that they'd take care of Spike, or Spike would make sure they never got River Tam.

Ed had done a good job buffing the *Serenity's* computer security. It took them close to an hour to remotely get around the augmented security and take control of the helm. It took another two hours to guide them towards the *Clairvoyance*. It swelled in the distance, until the complex station became visible, the framework around the massive Gate.

A way home. A way to Julia.

When they finally docked (cargo bay to the docking port, Spike wanted as much visibility as possible) Spike was waiting for them in the cargo bay. River was on a gurney in front of him, and he had a gun pressed against her head. The doors slid open to reveal only two men in suits, one with a thinning head of brown hair, the other taller and bald. They had their blue hands clasped in front of them, and stood like statues before a gleaming hall of white.

"Mr. Spiegel," said the brown-haired man, inclining his head. "Welcome."

"Thanks," Spike said. "How do you want to do this?"

"An interesting question!" admitted the brown-haired man. "We are at a bit of an impasse, are we not?"

"We doubt you will be willing to let her go until your goal is in reach," said the bald man.

"But we cannot let you move towards the gate with her in tow," the brown-haired man finished.

"Right," Spike agreed.

"To be honest, it occurred to us to kill you," said the bald man.

"I assumed," Spike said.

"But we have your records," the bald man continued. "Your reflexes are astonishing. Even with all the technology available to us, you might kill her before we stopped you, and all of this will have been for nothing."

"I figured she's worth a lot to you," Spike said.

"More than you know, Mr. Spiegel," said the brown-haired man.

"She is the key," the bald man said.

Spike cocked his head. "Thought you guys had a whole bunch like her?"

"We do," the bald man said.

"And we do not," the brown-haired man said.

The brown-haired man gestured down the hall with one blue hand. Spike hesitated, then gestured with his gun, indicating they should lead. The brown-haired man nodded and pivoted on his heel, the bald man moving in perfect sync beside him. Spike pushed the gurney after them, eyes alert for any danger. But the gleaming white halls were empty.

"We have cleared this wing of all non-essential personnel," the brown-haired man called, without looking back at him. "We did not want to frighten you. A valuable prize must be preserved at any cost."

"How valuable is she?" Spike asked.

"More valuable than a human has any right to be," the brown-haired man said. "But perhaps human is an inadequate word for our purposes."

"You don't think she's human?" Spike asked.

A door slid open ahead of them. The two men walked through it. Spike followed them into a high-ceilinged, open space, with padding on the floors and walls. A training room, if Spike was any judge of such things, with one door directly ahead and two to either side, clear lanes of gleaming white cutting through the red padding. Spike checked his corners as he walked through the doorway, but there was still no one in sight.

"Would you want to be called a monkey?" asked the brown-haired man.

"Huh?" Spike said.

"A man is like a monkey," the brown-haired man continue. "They are both hairy mammals proficient at climbing and manipulating objects with their five-fingered hands. But the monkey cannot build as men can build. He does not ply the stars or destroy his enemies in nuclear fire."

"She is so far beyond the others that it might said she occupies a higher rung on the evolutionary ladder," said the bald man.

The door opened in front of them. They stepped through, and Spike followed them until the door slid closed a few feet in front of them, with the blue-handed men just beyond.

"What the hell?" Spike barked, digging the gun into River's comatose forehead.

"She is in a class unto herself," came the voice of the brown-haired man, radiating through speakers Spike couldn't see. "With her help, we will be able to perfect our Gate."

Spike pulled the gurney up onto the mats and rolled River back into a corner, pressing himself back into it as his eyes swept the room for danger. His mind was mulling over what the brown-haired man had said. "Is it not ready yet?" Spike demanded.

"Mr. Spiegel," said the voice of the brown-haired man. "If it was ready, why would we have such urgent need for her? Why would we risk losing you and your friends on the universe? Even a test-fire at this point might destroy it."

"We need her to get the project back on track," said the voice of the bald man. "The fact that you are here is a bonus."

"A..." Spike trailed off, his mind stumbling over itself. "What?"

"We've reviewed your records, Mr. Spiegel," the brown-haired man said. "You encountered a young man who had been in an accident involving Hyperspace. His body was frozen in stasis. No matter how he might be hurt, he could not die."

"Your case is less pronounced," the bald man said. "But no less intriguing."

"My..." Spike stared at them, his head reeling. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Surely you noticed, Mr. Spiegel?" asked the brown-haired man. "How quickly your injuries seem to heal. How neither you nor your friends had aged, though two years had passed."

"We confirmed with frequent tests of your late friend, Mr. Black," the bald man said. "Your body naturally returns to the state it was when you were subject to your own accident. We believe you could be killed, but your body resists time's effects."

"Such an ability could be very useful," said the brown-haired man. "And very profitable."

"We would not give Mr. Black the resources we did if it were not a worthwhile investment," said the bald man.

"And that investment has been returned to us," the brown-haired man said. "The key to immortality and the key to hyperspace. Alliance Senators that reign forever over a dominion they control absolutely. Yes, Mr. Spiegel, we are very pleased."

Spike dug his gun into River's head. "I'll kill her," he said.

"Will you?" asked the brown-haired man. "I don't think so."

"The telepaths we've created may not be as powerful as she is," the bald man said. "But working in concert, they are capable of a great deal."

"Revealing your conspiracy with friends hiding beyond our borders," said the brown-haired man.

"And sharing that information with us through our own modifications," the bald man said. "Modifications you couldn't hope to detect, no matter how many worms you may have left in our system."

Oh shit, Spike thought to himself, jerking up his gun and sweeping the room.

"Come now, Mr. Spiegel," the brown-haired man said. "Surrender peaceably, and we won't destroy the incoming shuttle you thought you'd hidden from our sensors."

Spike flinched as though struck. Then the two doors perpendicular to the ones the blue men had walked through slid open, and in walked the children.

Perhaps children was the wrong word—some were older than River, and some younger, of myriad races and colors and genders, hair long and short and black and blonde and red. But each wore loose white scrubs, and each bore the haunted look that radiated out from River's eyes in every idle moment, the surest proof of the hell she'd been put through. Children was the only one Spike had for them; only children could look that broken. Only children could be so wholly betrayed by the world.

"Give up, Mr. Spiegel," said the bald man. "One way or another, we will win. We will finish our Gate, and we will wrest the secrets of your immortality from your genes. Help us, and you can partake in our bright future."

"Yeah?" Spike said. "Just like these kids, right?"

"There is nothing in this universe without cost, Mr. Spiegel," said the brown-haired man. "You know this better than most."

"Their sacrifices will build us a brighter world," said the bald man.

Spike grinned. "It's funny," he said. "Everywhere I go, someone's always spouting the same bullshit."

He jerked his gun down to River, and fired. River jerked once, gasped, and then slumped lifeless to the gurney.

There was a heavy silence in the wake of that gunshot.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!" howled the bald man.

"SEIZE HIM!" roared the brown-haired man.

The children swarmed towards him, each moving with the lethal balletic grace River had demonstrated back on the *Serenity*. None of them had her speed, though. And Spike had it on good authority that none of them were as telepathically keen as she was.

Spike's eyes swept the crowd, looked for the ones who were closest to her level of skill—the ones a trifle ahead of the pack, the ones already moving in response to the instinctive motions of his hand. He lifted his gun. He fired seven shots. Seven more children fell, and now they had closed in a ring around him and were rushing towards them.

He extended a hand to the gurney. River took it, springing up as though they were tangoing and kicking one of the nearest children, sending them skittering away. There backs were still pressed to the falling, facing the broken children who surrounded them.

"How's your stomach?" Spike asked.

"You shot me," River said.

"So...?"

"So you shot me," River said.

"Right." Spike discarded his gun—he'd already used up the compound bullets therein, the chambered round designed to wake River up and the seven tranquilizers designed to buy them some time. The children were all around, watching them with those hollow eyes. Broken soldiers forced to fight in a war they'd never wanted a part in.

That war could end today, though. If Spike and River could hold out here.

"You will stand down, Mr. Spiegel," said the bald man. "If you don't want your friends to die—"

"They aren't my friends," Spike said. "Do whatever you want."

He and River hurled themselves into the fray, spinning and kicking and chopping, fending off the attacks of the countless Academy students who surrounded them. And now Spike didn't have to hide his grin. He might have flinched when the Alliance had revealed they had seen the shuttle, but that was only because they'd taken the bait.

Go get'em, Wash.

Session Twenty Five: Ride the Wild Wind

The proximity alert rang out—missiles locked on and racing towards Faye Valentine's shuttle. Wash grimaced and studied the console in front of him, watching those approaching missiles.

"Twenty seconds," he whispered.

"I hear you!" Faye shouted from his left.

Wash tightened his grip on the controls. His heart was racing in his chest, and his head felt somehow disconnected from his body, as though he were floating freely through the void. He took a steadying breath.

"Ten," he said.

"You ready?" Faye asked.

A shaky grin unfolded across Wash's face. "No," he said. "But I never am."

Hadn't been ready for hard flying as a student, learning how to outfly even his instructors. He was never ready. Readiness defeated the purpose. A ready pilot wasn't a good pilot; a ready pilot was overconfident. A ready pilot started to believe they were the ones in control.

A good pilot knows that control is illusion. A good pilot knows they they are sailing through a hurricane, and they are but a leaf on the wind.

He pressed a button. A moment before the missile hit, the Swordfish and the Red Tail detached from the shuttle. Faye's little shuttle exploded, and Wash and Faye went tumbling out into the dark. Wash could still see the remains of the shuttle as the missile hit, another fireball coursing through the debris.

"Sad to see it go?" Wash asked.

"A little," Faye said, through the screen on his left. "But what's gambling without a little risk?"

The fighters were inbound now—Wash could see them on his radar. Not too many just yet—they were just investigating the wreckage, confirming the dead and the nature of the explosion. He waited just a little longer.

"Now," he said.

The Swordfish roared to life and raced towards the enemy fighters. The screen to his left showed him that the Red Tail had done the same.

He'd spent a fair bit of time with the Swordfish over the past week, using on-board sims to get a feel for her controls. But the reality of the fighter was something entirely

different. Besides its souped-up racer's engine, it used air brakes, so you felt the gs a lot more intensely you did aboard a normal fighter.

But Wash wasn't used to piloting fighters. He was used to piloting transport craft like the *Serenity*, where the artificial gravity could floor you and tear your ship apart if you weren't careful. It was why piloting the ship required such close coordination between him and Kaylee. Now his familiarity with the promptings of gravity gave him an edge over the fighters in front of him. It told him how far he was drifting, where he was moving, how he needed to turn to weave through his enemies' surprised barrage.

His hands fingered the triggers of his ship. He didn't want to kill them. Not really. But this was how it had to be. This was the nature of a dogfight. Two pilots behind their weapons of death, testing their mettle against one another.

He fired. The ship exploded in front of him.

"Woo!"

The cry of exultation surprised him; he was used to the thrill of flying, but this was somehow better still. It was the thrill of battle, yes, and he'd fought before (if only to rescue Mal) but this was more than that. It was the perfect joy of a flight competition and the exhilaration of a daring escape from perilous circumstances. Any choice he made could kill him or kill someone else and his nerves were singing with the intense consciousness of his fragility. He was so mortal and so powerful.

The cloud of fighters turned to follow and fire, but Wash sped between them, his cheeks aching with the gs he was demanding from his little craft, guns blazing as he led them, anticipated what they'd do in reaction to him. Alliance fighters might be the top of the line, but these pilots had never faced anything like the Swordfish, and they'd never faced a fighter with Wash behind the helm.

He was a predator in the air, a falcon hunting other birds just as nimble. Yes, his instructors had taught him to never think of himself as in control, but this wasn't control, this was a more glorious way of falling, one that let you choose your currents. Not a leaf on the wind, but a bird.

He spun, and saw the explosions of bullets and blasts that just missed them as his body ached with the forces around him. He dove, twisted, moved so fast that darkness started to rim his gaze, but everywhere he turned and pulled his trigger ships were destroyed. They had never flown against someone like him. Someone who rode the wild wind, and used it as a weapon even more able than the guns he used.

"Jesus, Wash!" Faye squawked.

"How many have I gotten!" he called back.

"All of them!"

All of...?

Wash stopped, studied his monitor. No fighters in range. Just a lot of broken wreckage.

"How many..." he started.

"Six," she said.

Six? He'd taken out six rival fighters? He'd done that?

He'd killed people. A lot of people. And that made him feel a little sick, but somehow that sickness only enhanced the singing of his nerves, a dark counterpoint to the melody of adrenaline. He was that powerful now. He was a kamikaze the way the old Zero pilots had only dreamed of being, a divine wind that smashed apart any who would harm him or his friends.

"You?" Wash asked.

"Two," Faye said. "Eight total. I-"

An alarm sounded inside the Swordfish. He heard its dim twin through the connection between him and Faye, and glanced at his monitor. A large ship was approaching. An Alliance Cruiser, with an escort of fighters.

"I take it that's the *Zhuge Liang*?" Wash asked.

"Looks like," Faye said.

Wash took a steadying breath. Alliance cruisers were notoriously dangerous; they possessed the best balance between power and speed. The Alliance had larger and better-armed ships, but their small cruiser fleet had been able to cut every Independent craft to ribbons, moving with the fighters for added devastation.

"How many fighters?" he asked.

"Escort of sixteen," Faye said.

Wash nodded, his fingers tingling. Sixteen fighters.

"Think you can get me through those fighters?" he asked.

"I can punch you a hole," she said.

"That's all I need."

They moved together, perfectly in sync, the Swordfish spearing its way through space as the Red Tail hurtled along at his side. The *Zhuge Liang* and its escorts swelled on screen. Wash tightened his grip on the controls.

"Go!" Faye shouted, and burst away from him. A flurry of new targets on his sensor array; a moment later, missiles raced by, leaving wakes of smoke behind them. Wash burst forwards, gritting his teeth as the intense speed of the ship heaped gravity upon him, his vision darkening as he raced alongside those missiles. The fighters were swarming ahead, firing their own missiles in turn, and his whole screen was a thick cloud of danger and the space in front of him glimmered with stars that threatened his

destruction and somehow it felt as though he could hear the wind even in the silence of the cosmos.

Explosions all around, buffeting him with waves of force, but each slight touch was prompting enough and he whirled through, spinning the Swordfish through the dense cloud of bursting missiles, the fierce g's clutching at his heart and narrowing his vision but sight was only one part of flying, and a leaf on the wind could soar through the heart of a cyclone and come out unscathed, so who was to say what a bird could do, spreading her wings and testing herself against the fiercest winds the world could offer her?

A sharp, sudden impact. The tight spirals of the Swordfish went wide.

"SHIT!" Wash shouted, fighting desperately for control, assessing the damage. A glancing piece of shrapnel had hit the left wing, and with it the air brakes. There'd be no tight control now, in the thick of the fighters all around, with the great grey-green bulk of the Alliance cruiser looming ahead. How many fighters left? Hard to count, way they were moving and weaving.

Okay. No control. Ride the tumult like a surfer riding a wave. Ride that wild wind as best you can.

He spun out, far away from the barrage of missiles rising from the *Zhuge Liang* and from the fighters all around, and he turned with ever chance buffet and blast, shying away from any destruction and firing as he went at any targets that crossed his path. But he couldn't hold out forever. The *Zhuge Liang* was too damn dangerous.

But there were too many people on that cruiser, and Wash didn't want to kill them all. Maybe it was arrogant, maybe it was hypocritical. After all the fighters he'd blown up in the past few minutes, the fighters he might still destroy as this battle went on...what right did he have to decide now to stay his hand?

Except that was different. The fighters were trained Alliance pilots, testing their skills against him. If they lost, it was a matter of skill. But a creature like the cruiser was an even more complicated thing than *Serenity*. A bigger crew, manning more stations. No matter how dangerous a weapon it might be, it was just like them. Just a crew doing the best they could.

Maybe it was hypocritical. But Wash could live with a little hypocrisy.

All this flashed through his head in a little less than two seconds. A moment later, he deployed the immensely powerful main gun of the Swordfish. He was still spinning and whirling through the enemy barrage, white-hot death glowing and flashing in all directions, only his instincts between him and destruction, but he trusted those instincts, he knew how to fly, he knew how to soar...

And for the first time in his life, he knew how to hunt.

He fired.

The blue-white burst of electric energy crackled its way out as he spun, cut its way through a fighter and then out along what Wash recognized as the *Zhuge Liang's* engine block. If he'd missed, it would explode, and kill everyone on the ship. If he'd aimed it right...

A burst of fire and shrapnel as a plume of hot plasma tore out into space. Their core breached, but breached into space. They had hours at most to get it repaired or get it ejected, or it would blow and kill them all.

And the cruiser started to turn.

"YEAH!" Wash whooped, even as gravity pressed down against him, spinning out so he could engage the fighters. But the fighter escort was retreating too, forming a screen for the fleeing cruiser. How many? Looked like just eight. Christ, had he and Faye really done that much damage?

"You didn't take it out?" Faye asked.

"It's out of the fight," Wash said. "By the time they've got her up and running again, we'll either be done or we'll be dead."

"That's encouraging," Faye muttered.

"Yeah, well..." He trailed off and his eyes fixed on the sensors. New readings coming from *Clairvoyance*. Fighters, by the look of it. He couldn't tell exactly how many—the cloud was too dense. At least 40.

"Okay," Wash said. "Okay, well that's...huh."

He felt his confident exhilaration draining away. How could they possibly have that many fighters?

"Yeah," Faye said. "This'll be fun."

Wash took a steadying breath. Left wing damaged, and with it the airbrakes and some of the thrust. Plasma cannon already used, in need of a long recharge. Only the machineguns and his skills between him and death.

But they were where they needed to be. Drawing all the attention of their enemies, so they didn't see the shuttles sneaking up from the opposite side of the station.

"Let's fly," Wash said, and they surged forwards together, towards the cloud of fighters, towards the exhilarating contest on the edge of life and death.

Session Twenty Six: Action This Day

"Wash and Faye have got'em locked up," Jet grunted, studying the sensors feeding them information from the battle ahead and the computer feeding him information from Ed's bugs inside the Alliance system.

"She maskin' us?" Mal demanded, clutching the shuttle controls in a white-knuckled grip.

"Best as she can," Jet said. "But we're the expendable ones here. If we don't get Inara's shuttle in there..."

"That's the way it should be," Mal said. "She...*they* need to stay safe."

"Ain't no ruttin' way to be makin' a plan," Jayne muttered. "I don't wanna be expendable."

"This was your idea, Jayne!" Zoe said.

"I wanted to do somethin'," Jayne grunted. "Didn't say I wanted to get killed for it." He jerked his head towards Book. "Ain't helpin' that we got a Shepherd with us. What are you here for, anyways?" Give us the rites?"

Book's lips quirked, though he couldn't quite smile with the knot of doubt and guilt gnawing at his stomach. "Man like you might need to confess if you're gonna have any chance of avoding Hell, Mr. Cobb."

"Gave up on that a long time ago, Shepherd," Jayne said.

Ha, well. So had Book, long before he ever wore a Shepherd's robes. All the good he might do didn't erase the bad. You couldn't erase the bad; those sins were set in the past, far firmer than stone. All you did was help to make this 'Verse a slightly better place to live, so that in the end you hopefully didn't leave the world a worse place than when you entered it.

And Book had sins aplenty to atone for, while he still had time.

"We go in first," Mal said. "Make sure they're as confused inside as they are outside. Only way we get through this."

"*If* we get through this," Jayne muttered.

"Odds are against us, sir," Zoe said.

"Well when the hell ain't they?" Mal demanded.

"Perhaps there is something we can do about that," Book said.

The others in the shuttle all turned to stare at him. Book's eyes were fixed on the swelling, spinning wheel of the *Clairvoyance*.

"Mr. Black," he said. "I believe it's time I do what I have to do."

"I know," Jet said. "Already had Ed set up the connection."

"What connection?" Mal asked. "Just what the hell's going on, Shepherd?"

"Captain," Book said. "You'd be doing me a great personal favor if you let Mr. Black fly the shuttle for a moment while the rest of you left me on my own."

"The hell?" Mal demanded. "This ain't really a time to be switchin' off, Shepherd."

"Force of habit, Captain," Book said. "Always have to compromise myself a little."

A moment of selfishness even in his attempt to atone. But Book was only human. Just like the men and women arrayed against them.

Mal studied Book for a long time. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Trust him," Jet said.

Mal glanced at Jet, then back at Book. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay." He stood up, and Jet took his seat.

"Hang on a gorram minute-" Jayne started, but Mal grabbed him by the arm and pulled him towards the back of the shuttle. Zoe stopped long enough to give Book a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder, then followed her captain.

Of course Zoe sympathized. She was so gifted at violence because she fully understood the consequences of her actions. She chose the path of war, but she chose it with a terrible empathy. He'd always thought she would have made a fine Operative.

Fact was, an Operative was so dangerous because they fully understood the realities of the Alliance, and acted in support of it nonetheless. An Operative was not a fanatic, blind to reality: an operative was a believer, fully aware of the flaws and foibles of the beautiful thing they'd devoted their life to serving, sacrificing so much not in spite of those flaws but because of them.

And that was why Book nursed this wild hope. Because while many of the soldiers ahead of them might believe in the Alliance cause, they certainly weren't Operatives. Just men like Book had once been, looking for their purpose.

Book took up the mic.

"This is Commander Derrial Book," he said, and knew his voice was being transmitted through the corridors of *Clairvoyance* and to every Alliance ship nearby. "I'll assume you know that name. I'll assume you've heard of the Cortez Disaster. Of the destruction of the *Alexander*."

Of course they did. One of the greatest Alliance disasters in history, in terms of life and materiel lost.

"What you may not know is that the Cortez Disaster was not an unfortunate accident," Book said. "It was not an act of ignorance but one of sabotage and malice. Those men

died because of me. Their blood is on my hands. I did it for a cause I believed in, but that does not absolve me."

He paused to let his words hang in the air, and also because it hurt to say these things, to give voice to the gnawing sins that he had so long kept hidden from others. Jet's eyes remained mercifully fixed forward.

"Just like it does not absolve you," he said.

"I know you," he continued. "I served with men just like you, men still in the service today, defending a cause they believed in. I know how difficult it is to see your ideals make contact with the necessities of reality. I know the sacrifices and compromises you have had to make, the justifications and deep questions you've wrestled with long after the lights are off and you should be asleep. I know that you are not empty followers obeying your commanders because you lack the will to think for yourselves but men of conscience and conviction. You follow orders because you know what happens when you don't. You know the lives of your comrades rest on your discipline."

"But you also know you're lying to yourself."

God, how many years had Book spent lying to himself? Pretending that he had survived by some inner virtue, some strength that others lacked? Pretending that the things he did to Independents just like him had been justified by the damage he would one day inflict on the Alliance they all hated? Pretending that the deaths of all those men aboard the *Alexander* had been permissible in the name of liberty? Pretending that killing the man who had been Derrial Book before Book had stolen that name was justified in the name of a righteous cause?

All sins, every one. Credit where credit was due to the Captain; he might sin, but he always knew it and he always shouldered that burden. Book suspected that was why Zoe followed him so faithfully.

"You didn't ask for this duty," he said. "You wanted to be out there, protecting the people, or having adventures in the Rim as part of something bigger than yourself. You didn't want to be standing guard in this secret place. Hearing what they do to these stolen children. Seeing it first-hand."

He'd heard enough from River to know that fact for sure. No one with any shred of a conscience could believe that the torment inflicted on these children was worth what it might one day buy. Just another illusion, sold by the Alliance to the desperate.

"You tell yourself that their sacrifice is building a better world," Book continued. "You tell yourself that there's nothing ever achieved without cost. You tell yourself that if you refused to do your duty, someone else would simply take your place, and all you would have achieved was adding your pain to theirs."

"But these are justifications. You know this is wrong. And every moment you stand idle, you become more and more complicit in their torment."

He closed his eyes. All the faces of the people he'd hurt and killed cascaded through the darkness behind his eyelids.

"We often know when something is wrong," Book said. "Though we deny it and justify it to ourselves, we can sense the wrongness. That is why we reach so desperately for rationalizations. But the right thing can be much harder to do. That is why I'm giving you this chance."

He leaned forwards. "We are going to save these children," he said. "We are going to stop what has been done here. We are going to do all this, whatever the cost, because by such actions we will make this world a better place."

His voiced softened. "You don't have to join us," he said. "You don't have to turn your weapons against the people you trust and care about. But if you harbor doubts—if you ever, even for a moment, questioned what was being done—you will never see a better chance than this. Stand aside. For once, let your inaction serve a noble cause. For once, stay your hand, and let evil reap what it has sown."

He paused for a moment, weighed other words, other sermons he might give. But he had said his piece. Now the only thing left to do was wait.

He lowered the mic and stepped back from the console. Jet said nothing. He didn't need to. They both knew exactly why it had to be done. If their roles had been reversed...

What a laughable thought. Say what you would about Mr. Black, but he had no such sins to his name. He would rather lose his arm than betray his principles.

"Can we come in now?" Jayne demanded.

"Not yet!" Jet shouted back.

Book gave him a quizzical look. "Not yet?" he repeated under his breath.

Jet gave him a broad grin. "Never hurts to keep a guy like that waiting."

The corners of Book's lips quirked. They waited together for several seconds. Book found he wasn't thinking of all his sins anymore. He was just enjoying this moment of quiet.

"You can come back now," Book said. Mal, Zoe, and Jayne walked back into the cockpit.

"What was that about, Shepherd?" Mal asked.

"Oh, you know we preachers," Book said. "Just have to say our piece, even when no one wants to listen."

"Well," Mal said. "Thanks for talkin' their ears off instead of ours."

"Ready to dock," Jet announced. "It's not gonna be easy."

"Ed can't just hack us through?" Mal asked.

"Hard enough to keep us off their sensors," Jet said. "If we were docking automatically..."

"They'd be able to see us," Mal sighed. "Yeah, I got it."

"Okay," Jet said. "So what's the best..." He trailed off and tapped his ear. "Come again, Ed?"

"What's she sayin'?" Jayne asked.

Jet frowned. "Says docking authority sent us a request. Wants permission to get our trajectory and prepare docking procedures."

"Yeah..." Mal grunted. "I'm thinkin' no."

But Book's mind was on the words he'd spoken, on the plea he'd made. "Hold on," Book said.

"You think it's worth the risk?" Jet asked.

Book hesitated for a moment, his eyes flashing to the prosthetic Jet had earned for the sin of trusting his partner. If there was any man who had reason to fear betrayal, it was Jet Black.

And Book could see the doubt in his eyes, the quick reflexive twitch of his organic arm to his prosthetic which he hastily passed off as a scratch behind the ear. Well, Book wouldn't begrudge him that. Not after he'd had the people he cared for most in the Verse leave the room so he wouldn't have to air his shame in front of them. If Jet didn't want to show his doubts, Book would pretend he hadn't noticed.

"What the hell," Jet breathed. "Gotta have faith in people some time. Ed, make sure you're ready if they try anything funny."

"You serious right now?" Jayne growled.

"Well, Mr. Cobb," Book said, smiling a little. "If a man like you can join a crusade, why can't they?"

Jayne grumbled, but seemed unable to come up with a response. Mal, however, gave Book a peculiar look that somehow made Book feel exposed and vulnerable in a way he'd long denied himself. In a way he'd long feared being, even when he was alone.

"What the hell did you say, preacher?" he asked.

"Something worth hearing," Zoe said, before Book could think of an answer.

Mal cocked his head. "You were listenin'?"

"Didn't need to listen," Zoe said. "I know the man."

Book felt something warm unfolding in his chest, filling his throat and chest and making his fingers and toes tingle. God, he was not alone. For the first time in his life, he was truly not alone.

The shuttle rattled. Book tensed. Everyone else in the shuttle did the same, waiting for the inevitable shoe to drop. For their brief defiance to come to an end in an explosion, a miniature *Alexander* to make them all suffer for Book's sins.

No explosion followed. A moment later, Jet nodded. "We're docked and locked," he said. "We can...we can go in whenever."

"Have to admit," Mal said. "Didn't think it would be this easy." He stepped to the airlock and started to open it. A moment later, a bullet whined its way towards them and bounced off the hull with an audible *clunk*. Mal yelped and ducked for cover. The other people in the shuttle followed suit, Book's old instincts taking over before he quite knew what he was doing, his heart racing and a flat taste of adrenaline in his mouth as he pressed his back against the corner.

"It's a trap!" Jayne shouted.

"If it was a trap, they'd have just blown us up," Mal scowled. "Why're they wasting time with guns?"

Because there are men who believe in what the Alliance is doing, and will pay any cost to see it achieve the greatness they believe in. Because there are other men who have harbored their quiet doubts, and wanted to see those doubts laid to rest. Because there are men out there standing for what they believe in, letting their avowed enemies in to put an end to evil and still others defending that evil in the name of righteousness. And who was to say the end wouldn't justify the means? Who was to say there wasn't paradise waiting for them?

But paradise or no, Book wouldn't let them keep hurting these children. He wouldn't let them commit sins on this scale.

"There won't be too many of them," Book said, grabbing a rifle. "Let's go."

"How the hell do you know that, preacher?" Mal asked.

"Because he made an effective case," Jet said.

"About what?" Mal asked.

"About fighting for what you believe in," Book said, staring into Mal's eyes.

Mal's mouth twisted sharply to one side, and something—Anger? Regret? Relief?—flared in his eyes. He nodded slowly, and drew his pistol from his side.

"You sure you're up for this, Shepherd?" Zoe asked him.

Book smiled sadly. "I have to practice what I preach."

All men believe in something. One way or another, the men of *Clairvoyance* were standing for their beliefs. Book would never be able to live with himself if he didn't do the same. And if that meant bloodying his hands, well, it would be a drop in the ocean compared to all the men and women who'd died because of him.

Besides, if there were any cause worth killing for, it was in the defense of children. Maybe it was just another empty justification, but if it was, it was the best he'd ever had. "Let's go," Mal said, and together they burst forwards, opening fire. Jet, Jayne, and Zoe were only a step behind him. Book took just a moment alone to himself.

God. Please help me to do the right thing.

Then he followed after.

Amen.

Session Twenty Seven: Pain is So Close to Pleasure

Light flashed from muzzles, bullets whizzed through the air and drew sparks from the gleaming white of this Alliance abomination. They'd managed to dock with some kinda hangar by the looks of things, cluttered with welding tools and racks of metal. A dense fighting field, with plenty of cover.

Alliance should have been able to hit them coming out of the airlock. Whatever the preacher had done, it seemed to have bought them some space. And a little space was all Malcolm Reynolds needed.

Mal flung himself into the open, firing at each place a muzzle had flashed. Weren't much hope of hitting his targets, but that wasn't his plan. He just needed their eyes on him for a fraction of a second.

Then his crew was upon them, Zoe bursting out right besides Jet, cutting swiftly through the tall shelves of repair equipment. Shouts of surprise rang out, followed by gunfire.

Mal flung himself to the ground. A moment later, Book and Jayne emerged from the shuttle, sweeping the room with gunfire, keeping their enemies pinned. And while they did that, Zoe and Jet moved like clockwork through the various pieces of cover, clearing out their enemies one by one.

"Which way, Ed!" Jet shouted.

"Room's clear, Captain!" Zoe called.

Mal rose to his feet. "Jet?" he said.

"Back-up server room's that way," Jet said, gesturing down one curving hallway. "Ed says there's an armory between us and it, though."

"Then let's get there first!" Mal shouted, and led the way sprinting down the hall.

So. Here he was again. His old gun in hand, his browncoat on, and Alliance Marines firing at him from a superior location. One small ragtag group against the juggernaut rolling out across the 'Verse.

The question, Malcolm Reynolds, is do you feel a sense of dread, knowing you're up against a monolith you can't possibly bring down? Or do you feel a sense of joy, now that all the ambiguities that have defined your life for so long were gone, and now there was only the righteous war of a man facing the monstrous machinery of a government gone too far?

Is it possible to feel both? Because Malcolm Reynolds is pretty sure he feels both. He's desperately afraid that his crew is going to get killed in this stupid fight, that he's gonna lose Zoe and Kaylee and Wash and Inara, god Inara, why did he let her come when she...?

No. Everything they did was to keep her and the folks on her shuttle alive, trusting her hands because outside of Wash they had no better pilot. They were the real hope. They were the one bullet they could fire that might pierce right to the heart of the Alliance. All Mal was doing was making sure they had time to take their shot.

Besides, he was kinda enjoying this.

He felt that old grin on his face, the one he'd worn throughout the war until the day those Alliance battleships had descended on Serenity Valley. It was a fearful grin, yeah—a grin that knew just how close death dogged his every step, waiting for him to slip up so the man who carried his bullet could gun him down at last. But in a 'Verse cluttered with shades of grey, fighting the Alliance was always a cause he could believe in. Fighting to make sure those shades of grey got to do just as they pleased, rather than cowering beneath the Alliance's shadow.

Maybe history had decided the Alliance would shape the future. But they didn't get to be everywhere at once. He had seen Shadow burning. He wouldn't let them burn any more worlds, or any more poor souls.

There's a serenity to an earnest fight with the factions clearly drawn and defined. Alliance was always so rigorous in wearing their uniforms, so proud to be part of the force bringing civilization to the Rim. Hell, Mal didn't think he could blame'em—the browncoats were a uniform too, after all. Just made it easier to tell who was who when the bullets started flying, and everyone was glad for that. No one wanted to be the asshole shooting down your friends.

And truth was, Mal had been that asshole too many times in recent years. He'd had to gun down too many people he thought of as friends, and had people he thought might be friends gunning for him. Patience, as obsess with the new order as the Alliance. Saffron, betraying just for the sake of betrayal because the 'Verse made more sense to her as a place of cruel chaos than one of freedom. Badger, always looking for his chance to turn them over. Tracey, unable to trust.

Movement from the corner of his vision. Mal turned and fired, winging one of the two Alliance soldiers bursting out of what looked like a barracks and forcing the other one darting back behind the doorway. "Jayne!" he shouted, and Vera swept gunfire across the corridor, because Jayne might be as mercenary as they come but when he'd chosen a path he walked it, and damn if there wasn't something admirable in that. Mal ran alongside the stream of tracer fire, trusting Jayne to hold steady. He burst through the doorway, saw the marine's eyes flash wide just before Mal's bullet found the soldier's forehead.

When was the last time he'd been part of a pitched battle like this? No, truth was, he remembered, though he didn't want to. He remembered Nandi and the Heart of Gold. God, what a woman. She had Inara's grace and unyielding will, refusing to let her fate be dictated by the arrogance and avarice of a man long used to getting his way. Not so

different from him, just trying to do her best to protect her little crew from a 'Verse full of would-be giants all-too-eager to crush those they thought of as insects.

And crush her they had, in the end. But at least that giant was no more. Even an ant could kill, given cause and cleverness. And if Mal wasn't being modest, he had more than enough of both.

More soldiers down the corridor. He ducked, trusting Zoe to be there when he did, and of course she was with her shotgun at hand, because when had Zoe ever failed to step to his side even when he felt himself falling? Truth was, he could never really blame Wash for being jealous. Truth was, Mal knew he depended on Zoe more than was fair of any human being, because in years and years of fighting and frenzy she'd never once failed him, when everything else had. No more Shadow. No more browncoats. But Zoe Alleyne Washburne was still by his side, and that meant Mal hadn't lost yet.

She fired, and the marines scattered, and Mal was off and moving again, rolling forward as he felt bullets bite into the floor around him, scattering bits of broken metal against his boots, and then in three quick shots the soldiers had fallen and he was striding forwards again, racing for that armory as the bodies fell in front of him. More soldiers in Alliance grey were racing towards him, raising their rifles with shouts of alarm, but Mal was running and his legs were burning and each breath was fire and somehow every ounce of exertion just seemed to make him run faster, until he felt he was half a thing of fire and wind.

He fell to one knee and opened fire. To either side of him, Book and Jet did the same. Interesting men, those two. Heavy pasts and heavy hearts and heavy hands. You could feel the weight of them, the solidity. Those men never did anything lightly. When they fought, it was with true conviction.

Mal had seen too many sacrifices like Nandi. Too many people crushed by the ever-turning wheel of progress and power, all their suffering ignored by high-minded idealism that ignored the nitty-gritty necessities of those who didn't walk the halls of influence. Book and Jayne might long for order and authority, but they never accepted those who abused their power. Their vision for the future might be different from his, but they knew what it shouldn't be. United by their enemies and the crimes they could not abide.

He was off and running again, and Zoe, Jayne, Book, and Jet were with him. Unlikely allies, in their way. Pulled together from the far corners of this 'Verse and even from a whole 'nother one somewhere out there. But they knew what they were doing. They were gonna break this damn wheel, so the people on the Rim would be safe.

The five of them swept down the hall, following its gentle curve until they reached a colossal grey door set on the inner wall. More Marines were racing towards them.

"Ed, get that door open!" Jet roared, firing several quick shots towards the oncoming soldiers.

The moments stretched. Mal felt his heart rise into his throat, knowing how easy it would be for the Alliance to close in on them again, and crush them before they ever had a chance to fight.

Then the doors slid open, to reveal racks of rifles and grenades and all manners of nifty weapons, the cutting edge of the Alliance assembled and ready for their use. Only problem was, there were about a dozen soldiers in grey scattered throughout the room, already picking and choosing their weapons. All looked up as the door opened.

"Shit," Mal hissed.

The room burst into a frenzy of motion and gunfire. Sparks flew from walls where stray bullets found their resting place. A grenade rolled to one side and the ensuing explosion set off a domino effect of shattering weapons, new explosions, and electric bursts. Everyone scattered for cover as the room turned into a storm of shrapnel and potential death.

Mal rolled with the first blast, found himself face-to-face with an Alliance soldier. They jerked their weapons towards each other, and in so doing knocked their guns out of their respective hands in a resounding *clang* of metal on metal. They yelled at the same time and leapt towards each, rolling on the ground, flailing at each other.

A heavy blow just above Mal's eye, so he saw stars. His knuckles aching with the impact of the punches he rained down on the soldier. A knee in his stomach. His knee in the soldier's groin. His left hand found a piece of metal, and the piece of metal found the side of the soldier's neck. With a gurgle, the soldier went limp.

He rose to his feet, casting wild eyes about the room. The fight was already over. Every Alliance soldier was fallen. Jayne was cursing and limping on an injured leg, and Jet's prosthetic was smoking. The door was closed behind them, but ringing with heavy impacts and hissing with the sound of a cutting torch.

"We're locked in," Jet said. "Lotta soldiers coming our way."

Zoe shot the door mechanism on their side. "Is that gonna help?" Book asked.

"Might," Zoe said.

"Will someone ruttin' help me with my gorram leg!" Jayne shouted.

"We didn't bring the Doc with us," Mal grunted.

"I got him," Zoe said, helping Jayne to the door and pulling a medkit off of her back. "Just a patch though."

"Mostly after the painkillers," Jayne growled.

"Trust me, we know," Zoe said.

Mal took a steadying breath and gestured to Book, and they started arraying themselves to fight—moving empty racks of weaponry to serve as cover, taking their pick of the

Alliance weapons that had survived the opening frenzy of fighting. Mal himself was making a tidy pile of grenades.

"We're sure there's only one entrance?" Mal shouted.

"They wanted this place to be defensible," Jet replied. "It is."

There was a line of burning red in the middle of the door. Christ, were they almost through? They moved fast, credit to 'em. But that was okay. The more tied up they got in fighting, the less likely they'd be to notice Inara's shuttle, hurtling through the chaos of the dogfight outside, with Ed doing everything in her power to hide it from Alliance sensors. He trusted Inara to get them through the fighting, and he trusted Kaylee to take the back-up server room and do what needed to be done.

But he wasn't gonna let them get hurt along the way. He'd seen enough of his people die. While the Alliance trained all their weight and fury on Mal, he'd let Inara and the others strike a real blow. Hell, he had a penchant for hopeless last stands. Maybe he could make it work for him this time.

Jayne hobbled to his own place of cover and readied Vera. Mal, Zoe, Book, and Jet all trained their weapons. The grey door collapsed, and they descended into gunfire and madness and violence. But Mal was still grinning. He couldn't help himself.

Today—just for today—there would be no murky choices. Today—just for today—there would be no pointless sacrifices. Today, Malcolm Reynolds was gonna be a righteous man. Today, Malcolm Reynolds was a believer once again. Because whatever else the Alliance did, however far they might reach, they couldn't be allowed to finish this place. They couldn't take the sky from him.

Session Twenty Eight: Radio Ga Ga

"Oh stars in the dark

What do you see?

How many shadows

Creeping by..."

Ed hummed to herself, fingers of one hand flying across her keyboard as she used the other to prop herself more securely, precariously balanced upside down with her feet in the air and the crown of her head against the floor, teetering to and fro. Outside, stars tumbled by in an upset, intermarked here and there with blossoms of fire. Ed smiled.

"Are we clear, Kaylee?" asked the beautiful one with the voice like a song.

"Ain't nothing coming I can see, Inara," Kaylee said.

"Does that mean there's nothing coming, or does that mean we can't *see* it coming?" asked the Si-man.

"Simon, don't worry," Kaylee said. "It means if there is something coming, we won't know it until we're dead!"

"That's...comforting," the Siman managed.

"Doctor, doctor,

Hear my heart.

Beat, beat, beat,

Oh my drum..."

She saw the Siman glance at her out of the corner of her eye. "Is she..." the Siman said.

"Is she talking to me?"

"She's *singing* at you," Kaylee corrected him.

"O-okay."

"ED, HURRY!" Jetman yelled in her ear.

"Fly away now, Jetto Jet

Be safe soon now, do not fret..."

Singing, singing, listening to the music and the cadence of the pulse in her veins and using it as her metronome as she let her fingers fly across her keyboard and her eyes flit across the screen. People were all music and if you could hear the music you could see the patterns and the holes and the wholes and the silences and rests, and you could see the little flaws in a clever program and use those weaknesses to make them do what you

needed them to do. And what she needed to do was make sure that the Rivergirl and those like her had their fair chance to dance with existence.

Not everyone was so lucky as Ed. Not everyone got to roam free and safe across the wonderful world. It was so easy to see what you needed to do and how you needed to do it if you understood the quiet music of life, but if no one ever gave you the chance to start dancing you could never learn.

But some people couldn't hear the music. Ed knew it. Ed had seen it. And Ed had made it her constant cause to help out however she could. To listen to the music, and show them how to dance to it.

She paused and studied the screen, grinning at the numbers and code splayed out before her. "We're readdddddd!" she shouted.

"You sure?" Kaylee said, hunching next to her. Ed sniffed twice and grinned—she loved the way Kaylee smelled, dusty and oily and sweaty. She reminded her of her time spent on Earth, all battered and dirty and hard at work, chugging on like an old choo-choo.

"Sure sure!" Ed said.

"Looks good," Kaylee agreed, standing up.

"Can you actually read that?" the Siman asked.

"No," Kaylee said. "But she sounds confident."

"That...that doesn't seem like the standard we should be using," the Siman managed.

"We don't have anyone else who knows computers, Simon," Inarahymn sang in exasperation. "We either trust her or we don't."

"Trust trust trust, do not rust, no muss no fuss!" Ed chanted

"Ya see?" Kaylee said.

"You understood that?" the Siman asked.

"Sure did," Kaylee said. "She's saying trust her."

"Or...or things will rust?" the Siman managed.

Kaylee sighed, moved towards the Siman, and rested one hand on his chest. "It's okay, Simon," she said. "Really. We gotta do this."

The Siman hesitated, then nodded. "I know," he said. "I just...I just don't want to let them down."

"We won't," Kaylee said. She turned her gaze to the front of the building. "Inara?"

"Landing," Inarahymn said quietly. "Get her suited up."

Kaylee moved back to Ed. "You ready?"

"Floating, boating, flying through space!" Ed said agreeably. She closed her computer and put it in the sealed bag Kaylee had brought along for them. Kaylee started pulling out the space suits.

"Turn around," Kaylee told the Siman, as she pushed him into his hands.

The Siman blinked. "What?"

"Turn around," Kaylee said. "I don't want to compete with Inara."

The Siman rolled his eyes. "I'm a doctor, Kaylee."

Kaylee's eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Inarahymn was suddenly there, placing a hand on both Kaylee and the Siman's shoulders. "Is this *really* the argument you want to be having right now?"

"Guess not," Kaylee mumbled.

"Ready!" Ed exclaimed.

The others all turned to stare at her. Ed waved at them, her ill-fitting spacesuit flapping around her body—they'd had to cut down one of the ones they'd gotten for River, and even so it didn't quite mesh with Ed's body. The gloves in particular made her fingers feel clumsy, like her hands had fallen asleep. She giggled.

"When did you..." the Siman started.

"You were wasting time," Inarahymn said, grabbing one of the suits and beginning to peel her dress off at the shoulders. Kaylee grabbed the Siman and swiveled him around. It was funny, like a dance move done too quickly. The Siman almost fell. Ed giggled.

It wasn't long before they were all in their space suits, and Kaylee was helping Ed with her helmet since the big gloves made her fingers feel clumsy, like they were asleep. But that was okay too. She'd keep dancing.

"ED!" shouted Jet.

"Now!" Ed called.

Inarahymn, fully clad in her own space suit, nodded and pressed a button on the side of her console. Ed kept a careful grip on her computer, just in case. In front of them, one section of the *Clairvoyance*—to be specific, the section of the *Clairvoyance* that contained the space station's back-up server room—began to hiss with air escaping into space. She could see it, grey-white tendrils of breathable atmosphere drifting away into the vacuum of space. Slow enough so anyone inside had time to get away, that was the important thing. You couldn't always avoid hurting people, but you could always avoid killing them. You just had to listen to the music.

They waited until the air was all gone. Until the room was clear.

"Let's go," Inarahymn said.

Inarahymn's shuttle was already magnetically locked to the side of the *Clairvoyance*, and she'd secured her sweet musky belongings before they'd even left *Serenity*: before their shuttle had drifted free, to float silent and swift across the darkness, like a bat in the night. A moment later, its airlock door popped open, and the four of them floated free into the abyss.

Ed laughed. She couldn't help herself. Gravity's constant weight was removed and she was floating. She'd always loved it when the *Bebop's* gravity failed and she could go swimming across the void. This, though—this space suit, this place, this universe—this was all something new. Hearing the radio buzzing in her ears in a way that seemed to burst like static and dance with the starlight and blossoms of fire still breaking out across the dark...these were beautiful things.

It was just a moment's free-floating. Then they activated their magnetic boots and fixed themselves to the outer surface of the spinning wheel. Ed landed on her hands and knees and crawled across to the hatch they'd blown, hissing out the grey mist of fleeing air.

"Ready ready ready!" Ed chattered into her radio.

"Hold on," Kaylee said. She made her way to the hatch and flipped something on the side. A whole section of metal floated freely off the wheel of *Clairvoyance* and out into the black. Ed surged past her and into a room stacked high with servers. They looked like the Earth analogs with which she was familiar, and she giggled with glee. Truth was, Alliance computing technology was way ahead of what the Sol system had in most ways, but the basic forms hadn't changed. The server room looked the same, but it contained loads more data and loads more possibilities.

It would have been difficult by herself. Not necessarily impossible, but certainly risky. As always, the music of the universe had provided for her.

"Data data

flow so freely

Show me truths that

Only you know!"

"One sec!" Kaylee said, pushing herself through the air and landing besides the servers. She started pulling cords and inserting new ones. She gestured casually with one hand, and Ed giggled and shoved her computer in its pack towards her. It spun wildly through the zero-g and landed easily in Kaylee's hand.

"Oh no," the Siman whispered. Ed glanced over to where he was standing. There was a dull fiery glow coming from one of the doors.

"Kaylee, we don't have much time," the Siman said.

"I know," she said. "It's fine. We're in."

"Good," the Siman said. "Ed-"

"Onnnnnnnnn iiiiiiiitttttt!" Ed squealed, and flipped her computer out from its case. She started typing the moment it booted up, sifting through the connections and programs, spinning wildly in zero g to adjust to the bizarre directions her frantic fingers flung her computer, giggling at the mushy sensation of her suit's ill-fitting gloves mashing keys.

"Okay," Kaylee said. "Ed, we gotta shut down-"

"No no no no no!" Ed hummed, her fingers flying across the keyboard.

"No?" Kaylee repeated.

"Look look look look look!" Ed said. With a casual flick of the wrist that sent her computer into a barrel roll (and she followed it with a similar twitch of her legs, giggling all the while as she and the computer spun together) she activated a screen against a far wall and started displaying the information she'd found. The documents she was after were actually among the least-guarded of the secrets here in *Clairvoyance*; all of them were crucial security information, released in the event of an escapee.

"What is this?" Inara asked, staring at the screen.

"Ed," the Siman said. "Ed, these are...these are the trigger phrases for the Academy subjects."

"Huh?" Kaylee said.

"Each subject was conditioned individually with unique code phrases that would send them into a killing frenzy or pacify them if they got out of control or...or a whole bunch of things," the Siman said. "These are...security documents, I guess? They're supposed to help lower-level staff control them in case of...anything."

"Translate translate translate!" Ed shouted.

"Translate?" the Siman said. "Why?"

"Need to know need to speak need to tell!"

"Ed, slow down," Inarahymn breathed. "What is our plan here?"

Ed grinned. "Gotta tell our man on the inside!" She giggled again—her joke was too funny.

The other three stared at her. "Who?" Kaylee asked.

Session Twenty Nine: You're My Best Friend

River Tam has never liked fighting.

That River Tam is good at fighting is only a fact of her physical makeup, a genetic pattern as surely as heart disease on their mother's side or male-pattern baldness on her father's. Had she told Simon about that genetic marker yet? She should, when she got the chance. He deserved an early warning. Or maybe it was Kaylee that deserved the early warning.

Irrelevant minutia, cluttering her brain like cobwebs in the attic, hanging thick and clinging close no matter how she tried to shake them off. That's all her head was these days, a ruin cluttered with junk and debris, except some of the toys in her attic were dangerous, explosives hidden by some malicious prankster long ago. She was poisonous, and she had learned to enjoy her poison. It was so much easier to give in to the lies of the Hands of Blue, and believe herself a tool to be wielded by others.

We do not have time for self-pity.

What River Tam has never liked fighting. What River Tam has liked—what River Tam has *loved*—is dancing. Dancing is art, dancing is a way to transfigure your body into music, to weave yourself into soaring melodies that exist beyond the material and make yourself a part of that immortal cadence. Dancing is as close as humans really come to godhood.

River Tam has never liked fighting. But doing it alongside Spike Spiegel makes it bearable. Fighting at his side is like dancing, like sex. Though River Tam has never had sex, her broken brain has felt its ghost among the worlds and in the rooms of *Serenity*. She can see the parallels; pleasure reflected, refracted, made prismatic with glory by two bodies devoted to one another, confident and capable.

River and Spike had devoted their bodies to violence, but that intuitive understanding, that *devotion*, was the same. She towered above her body now. She was in some timeless realm where violence was music and she couldn't help but dance.

The Academy students may not be quite at her level, but they are each talented and dangerous and prepared to capture them alive. They can read her and Spike's thoughts, in some sense. They should have long been defeated and returned to this place that she had hated.

But no one had bargained on dancing partners like River Tam and Spike Spiegel.

They whirled together, hand in hand, flowing effortlessly into each other in a mesh of counters and blocks and flowing attacks. Their enemies—dozens of Academy students harvested from worlds in the Core and on the Rim and on all the myriad planets between—rushed towards them, bodies honed to be weapons as sure and strong as any laser rifle

or gun, the best and brightest stolen from every world and sharpened into killing machines.

But they were up against two far sharper weapons. A dancer who had been made into a killer. A killer who dealt death like dancing. Against each other, they had found a rare equal in two universes' full of disappointments. Besides each other, they had discovered what true partnership was—a natural equilibrium that could be neither disrupted nor opposed. One a madman whose violence had been so ingrained in his soul that he could live no life free of killing; the other, a young dancer who had been turned into a murderer against her will. But together they found both pleasure and regret; together they found both joy and atonement. Together...

Who could stand against them?

River fell back before two of the children, and Spike whirled in from her right and drove back her attackers in a flurry of frenzied kicks. River swept low beneath his legs, lathering down a rain of prodding blows targeting pressure points across the childrens' bodies, aiming to cripple and incapacitate. Her left arm was still numb from an attack that had made it through her guard, so she swung it clumsily, deflecting the worst of their attacks.

Just at the edges of her vision, movement flickered. Spike lunged forwards, and River threw herself into him, pivoted over his shoulders and snapped one chopping hand into a child's throat and sent them gagging backwards. The room was littered with the kneeling and the fallen. None knocked out—they couldn't afford to cause that kind of trauma or damage to their brains.

Dozens of trained killers, but River and Spike were still standing, even fighting handicapped by concern for life and limb. They were too agile, too powerful, too effortlessly aware of intention, action, aim, technique. They blended together and threshed their way through the room, whirling into each other, snapping kicks and palms, shielding each other so naturally that all the fury and force of their opponents still could not stop them.

Even if River hadn't been able to see into peoples' minds, she suspected that she and Spike could have done exactly this. There was a rhythm to their interactions, a fundamental understanding predicated on the raw level of instinct. They were dancers, and there's always something a little mystical between such creatures, something that exists beyond the body and blood and flesh and thought, something that could only be spoken at the level of the soul.

They were not meant to win. They were a glorified distraction, a circus so that their enemies would see the true dagger aimed for their heart. But that didn't mean they couldn't enjoy their performance.

So River was happy, in spite of herself and this violence she hated. She was dancing, taking this thing that had been forced onto her and owning it, weaving it with Spike's

own talents. They struck at necks and joints, threw the other Academy students through the air, whirled together to counter their attackers, flicking kicks and spins and tosses and always always always they stayed close together, moving into each others' guard, over each others shoulders.

She was glad she could revel in the ecstatic violence. If she couldn't, the voices of the Hands of Blue might have driven her mad.

Well. Madder.

They babbled phrases in Chinese that sent her muscles spasming. They were her triggers—sleep, fight, turn, stand down, hurt, punish, wait. Each one brought with it hours of memories—the way they'd carved these phrases into her psyche with drugs and pain and casual kindness, shaping her to be the monster they wanted.

She had come here prepared for that—with Ed and Ein's help she'd already begun peeling back the old layers, making sure she couldn't be taken out or turned against the others with a chance phrase. But nothing could prepare her for their voices. For their calm menace, and all the reminders that came with it.

"River Tam," said one.

"Stronger than we thought," said the other.

"And we always thought you were strong."

She might have been able to ignore her own memories—God knew she'd had enough practice, trying to shake those wretched ghosts. But hers weren't the only memories she had to deal with. The other Academy students...

Listen to yourself, using their word, programmed and altered and ticking along to the clockwork they designed for you, ticking only as they told you, tolling only as they need, listen listen students students students? STUDENTS?

No, not students at all. Students was a lie, a word chosen by those Hands of Blue so their superiors could deceive themselves and pretend that they weren't breaking children and turning them into monsters.

The victims of the Academy had their own ghosts, buried beneath the professional masks they had been carved into by months and years of careful conditioning. But those voices brought them screaming back in earnest. She was in the beating heart of a hell carefully and intentionally designed by those terrible voices, because the suffering it produced was valuable to them. Because they believed the end justified the means. She had felt that belief on too many occasions to name. They did not harbor doubt.

And their belief had left its scars on the souls of every person in this room save one. All save Spike Spiegel.

But where her wounds slowed her down—how could they do otherwise, when she was fighting so hard to escape the shape they'd chiseled her into?—it sharpened the other victims, whetted their blades. It was all she could do to keep moving

A frenzy of attacks, blows ringing them in all directions. She staggered into Spike, who somehow moved with her, flung her into three attackers. She was grateful for his instincts—plunge her right into the heat of the violence so she could drown her ghosts.

But they were not so easily drowned.

"Slowing down, River Tam," said one.

"Lagging," said the other.

"Weakening."

"Worsening."

"Remembering."

"Your place is at our side, River Tam," said one.

"You fight against your very nature," said the other.

"Don't you remember?"

"You wanted this."

"You wanted to join us."

"You wanted to be made strong."

She staggered and almost fell. It was all she could do to flee backwards, away from the hounding fists of the other victims of the Academy, shelter in Spike's shadow and cling to the tattered shreds of their divine rhythm. It was all she could do to escape those memories.

Yes, she'd applied to the Academy, to situate herself among the bright and beautiful of the world, and the truth was that first month had been one of the best in her life, pushed to her limits both physically and mentally, in the presence of peers who could match her for the first time she could remember. And even in that heady company, she excelled.

It would be easy to say that when the first troubling shadows presented themselves, she had been suspicious. But there had been others first, Others who objected to the strange lessons and the violence and the peculiar machines. Weaker ones, in River's eyes. And as much as River Tam had always hated violence, she'd hated weakness more. She had always been strong. She'd be strong now, even as her doubts harangued her.

Now it was too late. The Academy had gone too far and done too much, but River had had asked them to do it. Had wanted them to.

She had wanted so badly to be strong.

"Give up," one said.

"Come back," the other added.

"Take your rightful place here."

"Lead the other students."

"Build a brighter future."

"Build a better future."

"Build a more perfect world."

A more perfect world. Had River Tam ever dreamed of that? Surely not. Surely she hadn't been so arrogant. Surely she'd known how powerless and fragile she was. Hadn't she?

The Academy loomed in her mind—not the way it had been, not the nightmare and terror and pain that had broken her, but as it had been in her young dreams. That dream had sustained her far longer than it should have. She had believed their lies because she had so wanted to imagine that world. A world where she was powerful enough to make everything behave the way she said it should.

But they were lies. She knew that. She knew that because of them. Because of the Hands of Blue.

two by two two by two by two two by two

hands of blue hands of blue hands hand hand hands of

blue blue blue blue blue blue blue blue

"Oh, screw you," Spike said, settling a protective hand on River's shoulder, and River was filled with the strangest sense of clarity. As though she were perched on a tall rock in the midst of a raging river, watching it whirl by her. Not separate it from it, exactly, but somehow able to stand through it. To see above and beyond it.

"It's not your world to make," River whispered. "It's not any of ours."

They were surrounded by broken souls like her, driven by the terrible words of the Hands of Blue. They had all been tortured and turned for the sake of being able to go everywhere, to see into the minds of dissenters and weed them out. She wanted no part of that world. More, she wanted to dismantle it. She wanted to be *free*; part of the tumbling maelstrom, moving according to its currents, finding her way through the tumult.

She wanted the serenity she'd only found in these last few months.

River Tam and Spike Spiegel stood shoulder to shoulder against the victims of the Academy, bruised and hurting but determined to hold the line.

The door behind them opened. A squawk of surprise from the speakers.

"Who is that?" demanded one of them.

There was no one visible. But River heard a question that made her grin.

Are you well, Rivergirl?

Session Thirty: Las Palabras de Amor

Radio silence. A long, long time spent lying idle in almost total darkness, waiting for Spike to leave and set their plan in motion. To lead the grand diversion; an entire army of zealous souls burning with righteous indignation and bound together by one bright cause, so that the myriad psychics serving aboard the *Clairvoyance* would not know the plan until they had already been saved.

That was important; they could have no reason to suspect anyone else was aboard the *Serenity*, just waiting for their chance to strike. Their scans of the ship shouldn't show him; he had hidden himself away very well, in the specially-lined crawlspace that Mal and his crew used for their smuggling. It wouldn't have worked if he wasn't so much smaller than a man, but there were advantages to his size and shape.

"Ein Ein Ein Ein Ein!" Edlove chanted over the radio embedded in Ein's ear. Ein shook his head to ward off the pain he felt at that fierce squeal of sound.

"We know the magic woooooooooords!" she sang.

Ein barked once to let her know he understood, then rose to his feet and forced the panel on the wall aside with the stubborn bone of his skull. He trotted out of the ship and through the cargo bay doors, left carelessly connected and unguarded as a means of passage into *Clairvoyance*. Even from here, he could hear the sounds of the battle raging throughout the station; the gunfire from Jet and Mal's team, the desperate reports of the fighter pilots trying to contain Wash and Faye.

And all the time he trotted, Edlove was feeding him information, relaying the words of Simon and Kaylee and Inara. The information flitted across the visor he wore over his eyes—once a part of a video game console back in Sol System, long since modified by Ed so it was practically useless to humans, so innocuous that no one had thought to confiscate it. He considered the knowledge they gave him—the different trigger phases spent to inspire obedience, tranquility, fear, rage, violence, and silence from the many Academy subjects who had been stolen from across the 'Verse to serve the interests of the Blue Sun Corporation.

How curious a thing this was! Two bands united across the frontiers of universes, misfits made whole by each others' presence, fighting against a terrible foe. Blue Sun. Their name was everything you needed to know about them; men who considered themselves the very heart of a system, a thing that made the very planets bend to their will.

They had decided they would reshape children to their service. And Ein could not help but sympathize with such children. Ein knew what it was to be broken, melted down and reforged into a shape more pleasing to your smith. And perhaps it *was* a better shape, stronger and harder and more suited even for your own purposes, but that did not change the monstrosity of the process. The ends did not justify the means.

Ein remembered what it was like to be an ordinary dog. He remembered the ignorant fear, unable to make sense of the tests and probes and madness as the men around him tried to remake him. It was chaos and confusion and terror he could never shake, never knowing what the next test would be or why it was happening. He had hurt all the time without knowing why.

Until one day, he *had* known why.

He remembered the dawning understanding as those tests had worked, as his thoughts had quickened, and he had seen more and understood more. He had slowly pieced together his growing understanding with the injections and shots and surgeries.

Whatever was being done to him was *changing* him, expanding his intelligence so that he thought more like the creatures that towered over him. Where once he had only been able to piece together a few phrases, understand aggression without necessarily understanding the reason, now their language began to unfold before him. He could make sense of their words, their arguments, and their aims.

Data dog. That was what they called him. They had wanted to make him this way—make him smarter. And they had been willing to destroy him to do it.

Ein would never have wished those tests on anyone, but he didn't regret them, either. Ignorance wasn't bliss; ignorance was ignorance. The dinosaurs couldn't see the meteor that killed them. Ignorance only *felt* like bliss. If you don't know you're in danger, you don't know to feel fear. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be afraid.

Knowing you're in danger is wretched. That knowledge is a constant weight, a fear that strains and shreds until it feels like you are clinging to the ragged tatters of your sanity. But it is far worse to be blind to danger and have it drown you. Knowing you're in danger means you can fight against it. Knowing you're in danger means you can send an email to Abdul Hakim while your sole warden sleeps off a bad hangover, and let him know the prize of his life is waiting for him if he can seize it. Knowing you're in danger means you can keep moving, waiting for your chance to escape.

Waiting for a place that feels like home, no matter how afraid you are.

Ein had buried himself in knowledge, because as wretched as it could be, it gave him the tools he needed. Not only to protect himself, to but to protect his family. To protect Spike Spiegel, dismissive and indifferent and willing to risk his life for Ein moments after they'd first met. To protect Jet Black, taking care to make sure that Ein was as safe and cared for as the rest of the crew. To protect Faye Valetine, who treated him seriously even when she was opposing him.

And to protect Edlove, who had taught him what true adoration felt like. All dogs knew love, but no dog Ein knew but him knew the love sweetened by intellect, when you understood the full scale and grandeur of what someone would do for you. It was love beyond trust; it was love understood as a cosmic force as undeniable as gravity.

He had been luckier than he'd had any right to be. When his intellect had failed him, the kindness of a stranger had saved him. And so Ein had learned the fundamental truth of ethics: those with with any good fortune, however small, must use that fortune to help those with less. As repayment for the favor the universe had done them, and as obligation to give others their fair chance.

And it seemed to Ein that none had been so sorely put-upon as the poor stolen children of the Academy.

He trotted to the door. Edlove opened it without him having to say anything. It opened on a padded battleground—the bodies of the fallen were scattered at its fringes, those still fighting (though almost none without visible bruising, favoring one arm or one leg as they nursed their injuries) ringing the pair at the center of the room. Spike Spiegel and River Tam, both looking still more battered than the children of the Academy.

"Who is that?" demanded an arrogant voice from on high, pretending to godhood because that was easier than dealing with the inhumanity of their actions.

Ein ignored them.

Are you well, Rivergirl?

River turned her eyes and offered a lilting half-smile. *Why ask questions you already know the answer to?*

Function follows form.

You have that backwards.

We'll see.

"Ein?" Spike barked. "What the hell?"

Spike Spiegel could wait, however. There were far more pressing matters to attend to.

There had been 57 Academy students when Spike and River had been trapped. Fourteen were presently beyond his reach; some were tranquilized, some were too dazed to focus their awakened senses. Perhaps 40 turned their attention to Ein, and he could hear their thoughts buzzing as they did so.

Intelligence?

Impossible. No demonstrable proof of non-human intellect that we can recognize.

Can sense emotion from animals. If animal can be intelligent, we could sense it.

Your assumption is built upon false principles.

Identify species.

Canis lupus familiaris.

No, Ein thought, with sharp clarity. Every single member of the Academy froze as though struck and turned their gazes towards him. *Canis lupus sentis.*

And then he opened the floodgates.

Data dogs were interesting creatures unto themselves, as Ein had learned in his own research, but no one who set out to make one did so in the hope of uplifting dogs to the level of men. Where was the profit in such endeavor? Who would fund it? No, the goal of the researchers had been quite different. They had wanted to learn how to alter the brains of mammals, to enable them to learn faster and analyze more quickly. Dogs had been one of their first test subjects.

In Sol System, Ein was limited by his need to hide and by the fact that Edlove was the only one who could really understand him. But here he could bring the full weight of his abilities to bear. He had Edlove feeding him all the details—the code phrases that the Academy children had been forced to internalize, by pain and fear and love and pleasure and all the myriad sensations the Blue Suns could inflict upon them. The words that were their leashes.

But for all their wicked talents, the Blue Suns could not have pierced the stolen childrens' minds. Not entirely. They had warped them, true. Bent their bodies and minds into new shapes, like hedges trimmed to please a distant eye. But you could not change the substance of them. If you could just remind them what they were...

Remember who you are, Ein told them.

Remember who we were, River said.

Look to her, Ein reminded them. *See what courage looks like. Standing tall in the face of your nightmares. And there are nightmares aplenty.*

He invoked their fear and let the sea of their terror batter him—dim glimpses of needles and probes and scalpels slicing through skulls, of minds laid bare and tormented until they obeyed properly, of lonely broken children given scraps of love and attention so they would listen to you, knowing that doing so was the only hope of warmth and comfort they had in a world of icy terror. These poor children had been reforged into weapons, but a weapon that would not fire on command was not a weapon you wanted in your hand, and the Blue Suns had done everything in their power to make sure these human weapons forgot their human side.

So Ein would make them remember.

He shared his own inner brightness—of lazy days spent half-dozing in the *Bebop's* ramshackle living room, nudging Go pieces across the board as Jet pretended he wasn't nervous, of Faye Valentine using him just the way she used everyone else because whatever else she might be she was never condescending, and for all her supposed dislike of him she had watched over him for two years as they'd gambled their way across the 'Verse. He shared the memory of Spike Spiegel, cursing and throwing himself after him to save his life when he had no reason to.

And he shared his memories of Edlove. Of strong thin arms and lanky legs and dancing and wild songs in the night, howling at the moon together and sleeping curled up together in the eternal twilight of Sol space.

The children answered in turn, with memories of parents and nascent lovers, of stolen moments of warmth and comfort and solace among one another through all the nightmares they'd been forced through these past years. These things were more than memories. They were hopes. Hopes of what could be.

You are strong and bright, Ein said. It was for that reason you were taken. It was for that reason they tried to darken you and sharpen you to their ends. But you are free creatures. And you can break their chains, if you only have the courage to try.

Ein trotted across the room, and barked.

"Einein?" Edlove said, puzzled.

Ein barked again. He needed Edlove's help just one more time. But he also needed her to avert her eyes. The music of the universe sometimes required darkness, and he could not stand for her to know that. Not yet.

"Okay, Ein," Edlove said. "Be good."

Not today, Edlove.

Ed walked. And he felt the children of the Academy fall into step behind him. The door in front of him opened, and he led all the Academy children still standing. River fell into step behind him.

"Uh, what's..." Spike started. "What are you..."

"Are you coming, Spike Spiegel?" River asked.

There was a loud sigh. A moment later, Spike Spiegel, bruised and battered with fresh wounds all across his body, trotted to his left.

"Why is Ein leading us?" Spike asked.

"What's happening?" asked one of the voices from above.

"You will stop at once," said another.

The children hesitated—Ein could feel it. But they were too filled with long-buried hopes. And they had two shining examples before them. Ein did not think of himself as such an inspiration, but he was a lab-grown thing shaped from birth to the whims of men on high. If he could find such joy, how could these children fail?

When the children failed to stop, the voices on high spewed their words—every trigger, every command, orders to attack, to fall asleep, to freeze, to hurt. The children flinched with the associations that came with such ghastly memories, but data dog and telepaths made for potent combinations. In seconds, they had softened those powerful words. Not removed—such memories were deeply ingrained, triggers at the level of instinct. They

stumbled and slumped and some nearly fell, but then they grabbed onto each other and staggered on. They were strong.

And with Edlove's help, they soon found their way to the Hands of Blue, still trapped in the monitoring station where they'd holed themselves up once they'd sprung their trap on River and Spike. The doors opened when Ein arrived, and the two were waiting, guns drawn, eyes wide, a bank of computer monitors behind them showing all the fighting—teams shooting at one another, Mal and company holed up in desperate defense, Swordfish and Red Tail flickering through the night. From here they had endeavored to capture all parties and win their grand gamble. It was only now—now that Edlove had trapped them in their tower until their enemies had come upon them—that they realized how things had spun out of control. They wore a thin veneer of calm, but Ein had seen too many men in fear's grip. He knew that wide-eyed terror.

"You will stand down," said the bald man.

"You will return to your rooms," said the brown-haired man.

Ripples of terror spread among the children. Oh, what subtle ways souls could be warped by others, and the Hands of Blue had warped so many children so personally. They had been the ultimate boogiemen, human cattleprods commanding obedience. There were worse creatures far above them, but those wretched men were out of reach. The Hands of Blue were here, and they had sins aplenty to pay for.

May I speak? Ein asked.

A wave of gratitude made his knees tremble. He had reminded them in no uncertain terms of hope, and they wanted to return the favor however it was possible. God, but how could they be so strong? How could so much decency endure after the horrors they had faced?

Rivergirl?

Ready.

So Ein composed a melody, and River conducted for him, using the full force of her mind to spread his message among the children here assembled.

"I'm astonished," said a tall Chinese child.

"You have been locked in one small room," said a too-thin black child with a sprained ankle.

"You have seen your own soldiers fall into civil war over the methods you employ," said a chubby red-headed child.

"And you still think you have broken us enough that we will bow to you," said a tan, lanky child with a black eye.

"You really believe you can turn children into tools."

"That we are servants to your will."

"That when the wheel turns, we stand by you."

"We're building a better world!" shouted the bald man.

"So are we all," said a full-lipped child who would have been beautiful if her eyes weren't so haunted.

"So were the Mongols when they burned the world in conquest," said a Filipino child with strong arms.

"So were the Confederates when they pretended slavery was an ethical law of civilization," said a tall brunette child with pale skin.

"So were the Nazis when they purged every person who ever made them doubt their righteousness," said a sallow-faced child with a budding beard.

"We are all heroes in our own heads," said a too-small child whose father had been so proud of her Navajo heritage, before he had died and his daughter had been made a ward of the state.

"We have seen so many men who inflict pain and terror and whisper justifications like prayers," said River Tam, and echoes of Ein's nightmares trailed along her words, mingling with her own.

The bald man and the brown-haired man wore mirrored expressions of wide-eyed animal terror, as they heard their tools turned to a different purpose. But Ein felt no guilt. He had asked, and they had consented. He would not use. He would suggest.

River Tam, Spike Spiegel, Ein, and 42 Academy children stood outside the door, staring in at the Hands of Blue.

"I have a family," River Tam said, kneeling by Ein's side and resting a hand atop his head. "A man who believes in the law, even though he has seen it misused. A woman sorely used by the universe who can't give up in spite of that. A man who is so burdened by compassion that even in the depths of his despair he cannot give up on others. And a girl who really believes that she can save the world without hurting anyone."

"I know better," the stolen children said in unison. "I know that there are things so monstrous that they must be excised like tumors."

The bald man pointed his gun and pulled the trigger, aiming for Ein. It clicked harmlessly, as well it should. Edlove had disabled their guns from afar.

Ein shared his grim memories once more, and the children answered in kind. Ein could not get revenge for what had been done to him, but these children could, and these children deserved it. What better way to grapple with your nightmares than to tear out their source with your bare hands?

They surged forwards in one silent wave, a human flare of telepathy and lethal talent, led by River Tam. They fell upon the Hands of Blue with all the terrible power that had been bred into them by years of awful procedures. The grunts of the Hands of Blue rose into yells, then rose into agonized screams. It took 22 minutes for them to die.

In the first minute, another man knelt by Ein's side, and rested a hand atop his head. Ein and Spike Spiegel could not share memories or thoughts: Ein could understand Spike, but not the other way around. Yet somehow there was still comfort and intimacy here. They were united by some invisible thread that even Ein, for all his talents, could not see.

"Good dog," said Spike Spiegel.

They stayed like that until the war was won.

Session Thirty One: Long Away

Mal almost felt for the poor Alliance bastards.

Their forces were hamstrung: the men and women whose pangs of conscience had troubled them so long had finally stood down, leaving only the monsters that thought that torturing children could really be justified. But neither side could have guessed that this might have been more than a rescue mission. Hell, how could they, when even Mal himself hadn't rightly known? How could anyone have guessed that the children these Blue Suns had poured so much money into, spent so much time breaking, might be able to save themselves?

42 children with bloodstained hands, sweeping through the base with the eerie precision of readers, anticipating the Alliance soldiers and finding them in their hiding places. They had fear on their side, too: every man and woman on this base knew what those children were capable of. And even if they'd been willing to roll the dice and try their luck against the supermen, they knew what would become of them if they hurt just one. These children were a precious resource, and the Alliance wasn't in the habit of burning resources it could use. Look at what they'd spent trying to get River back.

Trapped between a rock and a hard place. No, that wasn't right: trapped between a rock and the wolves you'd been hunting.

That was how it happened: one moment Mal and his were bleeding and fighting, barely holding their armory against the enemy, everyone around him injured. The next, the Alliance soldiers were falling with shouts of pain, and those children were sweeping through, knocking down any man or woman dumb enough to stand in their way.

'Course, the kids were angry and trained and good at hunting. But after things had settled down a bit, it got a bit more complicated. Kids got less angry, started roaming around, and trying to keep them in order was like herding cats. Never mind that all Mal could think about was any one of'em could probably kill him with a kick or some shit. So, y'know. More like herding lions.

Keeping the kids together, keeping the surrendered soldiers under guard, they slowly took control of *Clairvoyance*. They found every station staffer who'd stood down at Book's request, and had them take their companions off in every shuttle and ship they could find, sailing off into the dark with their beacons blaring. The station belonged to the children and the dog that was always running at their heels and the baffled men and women who'd set out with the intention of rescuing them. By the time it was all said and done, it belonged to Mal and the strange company assembled across two universes.

They reunited at the testing station where the scientists had done most of their work: rows and rows of computer consoles overlooking a panoramic window view of the Gate proper, a perfect circle of shining metal floating in the dark. Kaylee and Ed were poring

over the controls while Simon and Book tried to keep the Academy children together, prodding wounds and patching them as best they could. River and Spike stood in their midst.

"How we looking, Kaylee!" Mal shouted, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his upper arm where an Alliance round had caught him.

"Hard to say, Cap," Kaylee said, scratching at her head. "This ain't any kind of math I get."

"Transdimensional physics require lateral thinking to the extreme," River said, shaking off Simon and striding to her side. "Complex even for broken brains. We have several."

"I'm not done, River!" Simon said.

"Ain't got time for being careful," Mal said. "We got...what do you figure, Wash?"

Wash shrugged. "None of those ships were that fast or armed," Wash said. "But we don't know what got sent before we boarded. Could be on their way now."

"So we gotta move fast," Mal said. "Think you can handle it, little one?"

River gave him a withering glance. Ein barked, and the children surged forwards as one. Book and Simon squawked in surprise, tried desperately to restore order, gave up as the river of children surged past them. They were flying among the controls now, changing direction on their own whims (which seemed weirdly in tune with the barking sounds from the dog).

"Am I missing somethin'?" Mal asked.

"We usually are," Wash said.

"It's always a bad sign when we're lumped together," Mal said.

"I take offense to that."

"Remember the time we got tortured?" Mal asked.

"Oh," Wash said. "Huh."

"Yep."

"Maybe we should never have our own adventures."

"That's what I'm saying."

"Are you sure I should be touching this?" Kaylee asked River, fiddling around with some of the wiring on one of the consoles nearest the window.

"This equipment deals with dimensions man was never supposed to know about, much less alter," River said.

"That don't exactly make me feel more comfortable," Kaylee said.

"We need to override their safeties," River said. "It wasn't ready to activate yet. Even if it was, it wasn't meant to go where we need it to."

"And where is that, River?" Book asked.

"Home," Spike said.

Relative silence. The Alliance children worked quickly, quietly, maybe reading each other's intent, maybe reading River's. Everyone else had turned back to look at Spike.

"Your 'Verse," Mal said.

"That's the idea," Spike said.

"How does that work?" Simon asked.

"Like I know," Spike said. "But she'll make it work."

"Elementary," River said.

"I guess the question is," Spike said "Who's coming with me?"

Silence in the room, and truth be told Mal felt a strange moment's temptation. Because he understood, for all his faith and fight and fury, for all the sweet taste of clean victory on his lips. This world of his, this was an Alliance 'Verse. He'd fought with all his strength and rage for a different world, but that had come to naught. Winning here didn't change the 'Verse. Another world might be different. Might be free. And Faye and Spike and Jet had painted a picture worth considering.

He inhaled deep, through his nostrils. He turned his eyes around the room, and found his crew looking similarly confused. Simon to Jayne to Kaylee to Book to River to Inara, and her dark eyes fixed on his and he found he was drowning in them, on quiet promises he didn't want to believe in.

It took every ounce of will to find Zoe's eyes, and he found his answer there.

"Nah," Mal said.

Spike's eyebrows arched. "Was I asking you, Captain?"

"Yeah," Mal said. "You were." He jerked his head around. "Me, and all of us."

Spike grinned. "Yeah," he said. "Guess I was."

"This is my world," Zoe said.

"And so is she," Wash added.

"Did a lot to fix it," Jayne grunted.

"And gotta do a lot more, since we know how," mused Kaylee.

"Stuck it out through the hard times," said Book.

"Risked everything," Inara agreed, glancing at Simon.

"And it's...it's looking a lot more hopeful," Simon said.

"Hope is illusion," River said. "Facade and facsimile." She lifted her eyes to Spike, smiled at him, and Mal envied that smile. Total confidence. "But it's our illusion."

Spike closed his eyes and his smile widened. "Good answers," he said. "Doesn't mean I won't miss you."

"What about us, Spike?" Jet asked.

Spike opened his eyes. Jet was staring at him from his spot leaning against the door they'd all entered through.

"Dunno, Jet," Spike said. "What about you?"

"You taking my ship?" Jet asked.

"Couldn't take it from you if I tried," Spike said. "Sure I can find some bucket of bolts to get me through."

"Yeah, you sure you wanna go taking Alliance tech back to your 'Verse?" Mal asked.

"Seems a mite troublesome, given what yours nearly did to us."

Spike nodded. "That's a fair point."

"I could stay," Faye said.

Mal's head snapped her way: from the corner of his eye, he saw Spike's do the same. Faye was leaning against a wall, her arms braced under that peculiar yellow top.

"Yeah?" Spike said.

"I could," she said. "Not a bad place. No debts chasing me. Good people." Her eyes flickered to Mal. "Assuming you don't mind?"

Mal's mouth twisted to one side. "Well, we did just blow up your quarters," he said.

She waved a hand idly. "Could probably find new ones around here."

"Don't," Mal and Spike said at the same time. They glanced at each other in surprise: Spike nodded at Mal.

"Don't?" Faye repeated.

"You'd be...we wouldn't mind ya," Mal said. "But it's not..." He looked back among his crew, then back to her.

"We're here 'cause it's where we're supposed to be," Mal said. "Cause any other place in the 'Verse, well...that ain't home."

"It could be for me," Faye said.

"It could," Mal said. "But it ain't exactly true. Maybe not in this 'Verse. What about in that one?"

Faye closed her eyes. "It's not lookin' hopeful," she said.

"It doesn't," Mal said. "It never does. And then..." He trailed off, and found his aching face was smiling.

"And then the strangers come to town, and change follows in their wake," River said.

"Oldest story in the world," Mal said. "But it's always a good one."

"There's nothing for me there," Faye said.

"You're sure about that?" Spike asked.

She looked to him. "*Bebop's* not home," she said.

"It's not?" Jet asked.

"Faye!" Ed said, hopping off of a computer console and squatting in front of Faye. She pawed at her ankles like a dog. "Faye-Faye!"

Faye hunched over, staring into Ed's face. "Yeah?"

"Fay-faye!" Ed said again. "Come home!"

"You've got one," Mal said softly, and her eyes lifted to him. "Home ain't easy. Home is hard. But it's...there's no place like it. Bein' with the people you should be with. Bein' where you should be." He shrugged, looking over his crew. "There's no other place I can be, since I found it."

"Come back with us, Faye," Jet said.

"So you're going, Mr. Black?" Book asked.

"Yeah," Jet said. "I think I gotta try."

"So you're past your crisis," Book said.

Jet shrugged. "Not sure there was ever a crisis, Mr. Book," Jet said. "Saw law go too far, and moved to stop it. Now I gotta go home, and help my world, too."

"Heh," Jayne said. "Poor bastards."

"Us or them?" Jet asked.

Jayne shrugged, and Jet chuckled.

"You should be warned," River said. "Replicating the conditions that brought you here will remove fringe benefits."

Jet blinked. "Huh?"

"Hyperspace warped your at the cellular level, made you fixed points in timespace," River said. "Sending you through the same energy will likely undo this."

Jet blinked again. "What?"

"We're immortal right now," Spike said. "I think."

"Oh, right," Jet said. "I forgot."

"You forgot your immortality?" Book said incredulously.

Jet shrugged. "It just...doesn't seem to make much difference. Besides, like I said." He jerked his head out the window, towards the gate. "That place is home. We'll do what we have to to get there."

"Home, Faye," Ed repeated.

"Home?" River called, slipping to Ed's side and assuming a mirror squat. Ed pivoted to face her. "Alone, grown, gone?"

"Home!" Ed squeaked. "Friends!" Her eyes suddenly saddened. "Ends."

"No ends," River said, folding Ed's spindly fingers between her own. "New phrases. The song goes on. We keep singing."

"Singing, singing, in your 'Verse or mine!" Ed hummed.

"Singing, singing, until the end of time," River chanted.

The dog barked and trotted to their side, nuzzling against first one and then the other. Mal leaned over to Wash. "So what's up with the dog...?"

"If someone knows," Wash muttered. "They're not telling us."

"You're all coming with me?" Spike asked.

"Like you could get away from us that easy," Jet said.

"And I guess there was never any doubt what you'd choose," Inara said.

Spike and Mal turned to stare at her. She was smiling at Spike in a way that made Mal ache.

"Well, you know how it is," Spike said. "Once you find that place..."

"If the man's life is good, and the butterfly's is good," Inara asked. "Does it matter which is the dream?"

Spike grinned. "How 'bout you let me know when you figure it out?"

They were interrupted by the sound of alarms, long shrill pulses filling every inch of the base.

"The hell's that?" Mal asked.

"Remodified security systems to alert us to incoming Alliance signatures," said River.

"Alliance?" squawked Kaylee.

"Crusiers and dreadnoughts and carriers, oh my," River whispered.

"How many!" Mal shouted.

"How much is this facility worth?" River asked.

Well. That was a worrisome answer.

"Guess we ain't got time for more talkin'," Mal said. "How soon can we fire?"

"We can fire now," River said. "But we should leave first."

"Why?" Wash asked.

"The device was not ready to fire," River said. "It will work now, but there will be side effects."

"What kinda side effects?" Mal asked.

"Earth-that-was," River said.

"Oh," Spike, Mal, Jet, Faye, Book, Zoe, and Inara all said together.

Huh. Sounded like there was a real story there. Pity he wouldn't get to hear it.

They moved, faster than Mal would have believed, the stolen children and his crew and the people from another universe. Disparate folks, poor and rich and strong and weak and a million other things. But they moved, and the dog barked and Jet barked and Mal barked and ships were flying and the Gate...

Oh, the Gate.

Mal had seen sights of wonder and horror in his days. Alliance cruisers over the skies of Serenity Valley, flashes of blinding neon light that obliterated cities and battalions. But he would carry the sight of the *Clairvoyance* for the rest of his days. The Gate burned with golden light that tinted towards red at the very last moment, as though a sun had suddenly gone supernova. The slender bulk of the *Bebop* was an insignificant mote before it, hurtling into that light without fear. He could see the Gate coming apart from where he was standing, watching as it came undone, watching as the tech of two universes and a considerable chunk of Alliance resources went up in celestial flames for one psychotic firing into a parallel world.

"Seeya, *Bebop*," Mal said into the radio, squinting against the incandescent radiance.

"Seeya, Space Cowboys," Spike replied, in a voice filled with static, and then the light was too blinding and the *Serenity* accelerated to escape the destruction.

Space cowboys, huh? Had to admit, Mal liked the sound of that.

Last Session: Bohemian Rhapsody

God, but there was seduction in a warrior woman, lean and riddled with long-healed scars, wearing the silk robe he'd bought for her so long ago, threadbare in all the right places. She was a thing of art in flesh, a mountain range of a woman that daunted with raw, relentless beauty, bearing the marks of contests and conflicts and catastrophes he could not imagine.

"My wild wind," she breathed.

"My warrior woman," he grinned back, sliding his fingers up one muscular thigh, slipping them beneath the hem of her robe and-

"Hoburn!" shouted one voice.

"Hoban," another voice disagreed.

"Mr. Ho!" shouted another.

"Mr. Washburne!"

"Mr. Washington!"

Wash groaned and moved to the ladder. "I told you kids to stay away!"

"Wanna fly!" shouted a voice.

"Teach us! Teach us to fly!"

"Later!" Wash shouted. "I'm...busy!"

"Busy?" said a voice.

"You're at ease," said another.

"At attention," said a third.

Zoe snorted behind him. Wash whirled to glare at her. "Sure?" he said, his voice slightly strangled. "If that...helps?"

"Fly, Washingho!" shouted one of the kids.

"Are you..." Wash ground his teeth and ran his hand through his hair. "We could just keep going," he muttered to Zoe.

"Somehow the psychic children calling your name is not setting the mood, hon."

"They're psychics!" Wash exclaimed. "They're always listening!"

Zoe frowned. "And that makes it better...how?"

"I..." Wash wilted. "It doesn't, I guess." He sighed and grabbed his shirt, buttoning it up and clambering up the latter. "ALRIGHT!" he shouted, pushing his way out among them. "LET'S FLY!"

"Howash!" shouted a slender child with honey-colored skin. "Why mad?"

"Who said mad!" Wash barked. "Not mad at all! Not at all!"

"Fly, Wash!" shouted a wiry black child from the back of the crowd.

"Fly!" repeated a pale child dangling from the ceiling.

"Yes!" Wash said. "I get it!"

"Like the wind!" shouted another.

"Let's soar!"

Wash sighed and struggled to make his way through the crowd.

Zoe sat back on their bed, staring up at the ladder and grinning as she adjusted her robe. Big changes aboard the *Serenity*. A huge crew, and what to do with them? Psychic children more broken than River Tam, but each talented, and each refusing to leave them be.

Zoe couldn't deny: it was nice to have little ones underfoot.

Wash stumbled down the hall, trying to keep the children under control. Jayne passed by, walking the other way, with his own small entourage. "Now, a murder rap's gonna keep you off the street way too long," Jayne said. "You kill, you wanna do it where law ain't gonna reach you. Border planets are usually safe, and if you gotta shuttle ready you can pull somethin' off in the Core, but you always need a bolt hole handy."

"Can we borrow your shuttles?" asked one of the children.

"Can't borrow it," Jayne said. "Can use it, though. 'Specially if you don't tell the Cap'n. Now, if you need to make a point, you wanna focus on body parts that'll hurt and heal and let'em pay you back. Knees are good. So're fingers."

"Can we use this?" asked one, brandishing Jayne's knife.

"What the ruttin' hell!" Jayne shouted. "Give that back!"

The children giggled and took off running. Jayne cursed and went jogging after them.

"Try and teach'em somethin' useful and they..." He huffed and increased his speed. "Give me back my gorram knife!" he shouted, stumbling past the med-bay.

Simon looked up, watched Jayne in pursuit of a psychic supersoldier with a knife held with the point towards the ceiling, and mumbled, "Oh, good. That's going to end well."

"Sloppy work," said the child stretched out in front of him.

"I could do better," said his friend, swinging her legs from where she was perched on a counter behind him.

"I'm sure you could," Simon said. "And where in between all your supersoldier training were you given instruction as a trauma surgeon?"

"River always said you were nice," pouted the child behind him.

"River was lying," Simon said. "Which you'd think a pair of telepaths would have known."

"No one's as good as River," grumbled the child in front of him.

Simon almost smiled. "No, I suppose not." He looked over his shoulder again. "You're watching?"

The child nodded sulkily. "Good," Simon said. "Maybe you can fill in for me, worse comes to worse."

The speak buzzed above him. "How you doin' there, sweet cheeks?" Kaylee's voice said.

Simon flushed. "You really...please don't call me that."

"Call you what I want, you steamin' hunk," Kaylee said.

"I don't..." Simon frowned. "Wait, have you been drinking?"

Kaylee, laying back against her pillow in the engine room, grinned and took another sip from her glass. "Maaaaybe."

A tray floated to her right, with a grinning dark-haired child holding it. "Sasha, where'd you even find a tray?" Kaylee asked, plucking the drink from her hand.

"Made it," Sasha said.

"It looks very good," Kaylee said, her eyes moving past Sasha to the small cordon of children working on her engines. "Watch those gravity couplers!" she shouted.

"Watching!" called one of them.

"You're letting them touch the engines?" Simon shouted through the speaker.

"They're good at it!" Kaylee said.

"Can I touch a brain?" asked the child in front of Simon.

"Only with yours," Simon grunted.

"Ew," said the children and Kaylee at the same time.

"So glad I'm here," Simon grunted under his breath, and then all at once the children started, staring up from the engine and away from Wash and away from Jayne and away from Simon. As one, they gave a shout of joy and sprinted out, streaming down together towards the cargo hold. Kaylee sighed and rose from her comfy position in the corner of her room, still sipping her drink. She found Simon leaving his med-bay.

"Aren't you supposed to be sober when you work on engines?" Simon asked.

"Just as sober as you doing surgery," Kaylee said.

"That's...pretty sober."

She grinned. "Well, maybe I'm smarter than you."

"Did I ever deny it?" Simon asked. Hand-in-hand, they walked after the children.

The one holding Jayne's knife off-handedly tossed it back towards him. He yelped and caught it between his fingers.

"Ruttin' hell!" he spat, sheathing the knife and looking around to make sure there were no other children to thieve it from him. He hadn't imagined that the children would be like this, buck-wild. Worse than River. He got River, in some strange way. Crazy brain, but crazy that made sense from time to time. These kids were worse by far.

So why couldn't he stop smiling?

Neither could Shepherd Book, wandering down to the hold still crammed with all the special equipment and supplies they'd taken from the *Clairvoyance*, watching the children stream in and crowd around River Tam, standing on a box she'd gotten from who-knew where, fashioned into her stage and pulpit. Sacrilege, really, and he couldn't shake the feeling she was poking a little fun at him. But he'd come to enjoy her little sermons, and who was to say she hadn't earned the right to mock him? In the face of all her fears she had met the burdens of her conscience, and he was proud of her.

And River Tam stood in front of the other students of the Academy, thoughts as glacial and hard to read as mirrored ice gleaming in sunlight, blinding all the other students so they could not look ahead, so they would as surprised as anyone listening to an unknown lecture for the first time.

"We are sad," River Tam said.

"We are sad," murmured the other victims of the Hands in Blue.

"We have earned that sadness," River said. "We have our scars, inside and out. We have pain that will not heal. We are sad. We will always be sad."

Rapt silence from her listeners.

"And we are happy," she added.

A rustle of smiles among the students of the Academy.

"We are happy because those who hurt us have been repaid," she said. "We are happy because we have suffered, and we will never suffer like that again. We are happy because we have gifts, and we can use those gifts to make sure there will never be anyone else like us."

Murmurs of agreement, mental and physical.

"We are happy," she said, lifting her head away from the students, raising it towards the little landing hanging just above the cargo hold. "Because we are free, and we get to decide what that freedom means."

Mal sighed, bracing his head on the railing of the landing overlooking the cargo hold (a relatively easy repair, thanks to the help of the *Bebop*). He looked everywhere but at River, looked to the Alliance goods they'd pried and stolen from the most advanced Alliance facility there ever had been or ever would be. A good haul.

And forty more mouths to feed. Forty young, slightly-insane, slightly-telepathic mouths. Forty mouths that all had assassin training. One of which seemed to be making a speech directed very much at him.

"It's gonna be a weird few months," Mal mused.

"It's been a weird few years, Mal," Inara said, leaning on the railing next to him. Her hands—so carefully manicured and maintained, and so strong in spite of that fact—gripped the metal bar for support.

"I ain't exactly arguin'," Mal said. "But this is weird even for us."

Inara chuckled. "Yes," she said. "I suppose it is."

"That's the strange thing about the black," River continued below. "It leave no trace of you behind it. No subtle traces on sand or snow or broken branches in the forest. There is nothing left behind."

No, not a thing. Not the *Clairvoyance*, or the men who had run it. Not the Independents. Not Shadow. He'd dealt the biggest blow of his life to the Alliance: he'd taken their gear, taken the children they'd hurt, and he'd destroyed a base that had absorbed a good portion of their financial pie. He'd hurt'em bad, but they were still around. Even if he'd killed'em, there'd be no way of bringing back what he'd lost along the way.

"But there is nothing in front of us, either," River said. "Nothing but the black, and all those stars. All that space means we can go where we want to go. We have the whole sky to choose from. So choose. Fly. And remember: we are the lucky ones. We are the ones who get to choose."

Hell, she was right, wasn't she? His ship in his sky, to go where he could. He was damn lucky. He still had his choices.

He rested one hand on top of Inara's before he could stop himself. He felt her tense almost as though she were flinching, almost pulled away himself, almost cracked a joke, almost tried to pretend this wasn't what he wanted.

No. He was free. He went where he willed. He would chase any stars he wanted. Hell, who knew? He might even get there.

Inara felt the calloused hand fall on hers, and was so struck by the suddenness of the gesture that she tensed. God, how long since she was unsure with another's touch on her? Touch was a Companion's world, from the clumsy and fumbling to the harsh and domineering to the graceful and easy. But Mal's touch was different somehow. Strong, delicate, hesitant, unexpected, dreamed of. It was the first step into a world she didn't

dare enter. She could be a Companion and she could be with Mal, but she couldn't do both.

But she'd already made the choice, hadn't she? Spike Spiegel had shown her as much.

So she flinched, tensed, felt the weight of worlds hanging on her shoulders and on her choices, and then felt a smile bloom across her face (bloom, yes, that was the word, like springtime come at last, warm sunlight beneath every inch of her). She folded her fingers up into Mal's.

She saw his eyes widen, ever so slightly, his mouth open, ever so slightly. He took a whistling breath and sighed, "Inara..."

"I know," she said.

Hand-in-hand, watching River and the saved children. She noticed that they were not alone: Kaylee and Simon were back towards one corner, Wash and Zoe and Jayne and Book all arrayed down below. Carelessly, she traced a nail along the back of Mal's hand.

Here they were. Changed and victorious, with a wide open future before them, no saying where they might go or how they might get there.

Inara could not help but wonder: what had become of the men and women who'd made this miracle possible?

The *Bebop* hurtled towards that terrifying gate, a thing of magnificent light. It was breaking already, cracks in its shining casing hurling lances of bleak radiance out into the black as it pulsed with the terrible energies that had turned men and women to living ghosts and obliterated Earth, once upon a time. The *Bebop* was shaking with the fierce forces pulling at them, space and time unraveling as they tried to jump between universes. The closer they got, the harder the ship shook.

"ED!" Jet bellowed, fighting the controls.

"Hyperspace, hyperspace, lead us home!" cried Ed, her hands flying across her keyboard, Ein perched at her side, nosing towards screens and towards equations.

Faye and Spike stood behind, clutching at the railing, watching helplessly as their future, their fate, their journey home, was decided for them. Jet bellowed and Ed chattered and Ein barked and they plunged and for one terrible moment, Faye wondered why.

Why was she doing this? What brought her back? Why was she risking death and worse to reach a universe that had brought her nothing but questions and pain?

But she knew the reason. She'd seen it on the faces of the men and women behind her now. Inara, utterly at ease in a way Faye had never been. Kaylee, completely at home aboard her strange ship, inhabiting the space Faye had just been passing through. Zoe, not content, but happy, right where she belonged. Simon, standing beside a person he'd

sacrificed everything for. Mal, holding his crew together, holding his home together against all the storm and chaos of his universe.

She wanted that. She *needed* that. She was tired of being a visitor. She wanted to be home again. And for better or worse, home was through this Gate, and if there was any chance she'd reach it, however small, then it was worth the risk.

So she and Spike clung tight into the railing, and sailed into the white storm of hyperspace. Until there was a crack in the light, a vicious burst that almost blinded her. And Hyperspace bled.

Spike's mouth dropped. "Oh," he whispered.

There, just ahead, a ship loomed into view, lost in a cloud of burning crimson light, barely visible through the scarlet haze. But any one of them could have recognized that silhouette. They knew the shape of the *Bebop* too well.

"Is that..." Jet started.

"Yeah," Spike said. "I think it is."

"Circle, circle, spinning roundly," Ed sighed. "Beginning is also end."

What could have brought them to another universe? A channel from that universe, a tunnel in hyperspace that should have been impossible, because the technology of Sol required two gates. But the technology of the Alliance required but one gate and a destination. Aim that gate home, and make a path. The same path that had led them there in the first place.

There was a flash of mingled white, crimson, and gold, and their ship floated free, the only *Bebop* in Sol. And that other crew was off onto a new adventure, of a kind none of them could imagine, with a cast that they could never meet again.

Jet sighed and studied his instruments. He smiled. "We're home," he said.

Home. Right. Home, where the government was so toothless that the criminals like Xiang Bei ran rampant over anyone they chose, with nothing to fear from those above. Where debts hung heavy on their shoulders, and ghosts chased them at every corner. Where the music of the universe hummed softly, weaving through the starlight, painting an irresistible picture of possibilities.

Home, yes, with all its myriad problems. But a home they could fix without succumbing to the same travesties and tragedies of power gone mad. A home where one day they might find answers to old questions, faces to fill blank memories. A home where, with all their good fortune, they might leave a place slightly brighter than when they'd entered it

Jet looked back over his shoulder, found Spike and Ed and Faye were all smiling. Hell, even Ein looked like he was smiling, mouth wide, tongue out, looking to each of them with sparkling eyes.

"Home," he repeated, and suddenly they were all laughing, Ed on her back with her legs kicking, Jet clutching at the console for support, Faye and Spike almost falling off the railing, Ein barking like mad.

Home. After everything—after psychics, slavers, casinos, assassins, after criminals and cowboys and rebels—home. Their home.

A home where anything might happen. A home for the homesick, and the mad, and the dogged, and the lovelorn.

"Where we headed?" Jet asked, wiping a tear from his eye

Spike grinned, and opened his mouth.

ANY WAY THE WIND BLOWS