

FIREFLY:

The One Song

by
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I assure you, there will be grammatical errors. I apologize in advance. I am working on doing better. I have marginally improved, which you only need read my first book made available in 2004. Feel free to email me any corrections or complaints. I am simply a modest fan of distant worlds, science, and metaphysics; someone who finds himself caught up in the whirlwinds of something bigger than himself on a daily basis.

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Foreword

This book is dedicated to Joss Whedon, and the entire cast of the series/movie Firefly/Serenity. I started this with an idea to publish online way back when Firefly first went off the air, got distracted by life, and then only recently, like last month, revisited it. This series was deserving of a second and third season. The further away from that time, the less likely it would be so, and it's a shame because it was extremely well written. I love sophisticated, meaningful dialogue, and this show had it. It is my intent, my wish, to capture that here. I am not following cannon completely. I have not read the Firefly comics that followed, tying loose ends up after the movie, and so to those who are more dedicated than even I, I hope you will show tolerance. I am confused and surprised, that there are not any authentic Firefly books. I like graphic novels, don't get me wrong, I am just surprised there isn't more, because there is clearly a solid fan base.

Anyone interested in helping me improve this story, feel free to contact me.

Thank you, Joss, for these dreams and more.

May the blessing be.

PROLOGUE

Kim Li sat quietly in a meditative pose, on a rock, in the middle of his garden. The sand around the rock had been carefully raked to reflect concentric rings leading away from the rock, as if they were ripples in a pond. These rings gave the illusion of circles moving out to join other circles with their own centers. The rocks decreased in size away from the host rock where Kim Li sat. The rocks in their entirety described a curve, cutting a line through the sand to create a Yin Yang symbol, which was best observed from above.

Kim Li heard his guest approaching, but he did not acknowledge them. Their approach was a distraction, even though they were expected. He treated them as he did all distractions. He observed their presence in his head, counting the foot falls, noticing the thoughts their approach provoked, and realized he was drifting away from his goal. He didn't scold himself. He didn't allow himself to get angry. He simply returned to the mantra and descended back to the purer levels of thoughts. He did this until once again all his thoughts were refined. All was peace. He remained at peace until he became aware of the next stray thought. A stray thought that said his guest had waited long enough.

Kim Li stood, eyes remaining closed. He stretched, turned slowly, each foot placement and hand turn as if he were participating in a Tai Chi ritual. He jumped to the next rock, not opening his eyes, spinning, and leaped to the next rock, and in this manner went from rock to rock until he was on the path that wound its way through his garden. He followed the path, eyes closed, breathing deeply. He opened his eyes when his feet touched the wood of the bridge that crossed the gold fish pond slash mote. Once on the other side of the Bridge, he was ready to receive his guest, both mentally and spiritually. Fist in palm, he bowed to his two lead man, James Townsend, and his associate, Kelly Peirce. Then he recognized the man they had brought to him. Kim Li's bow was not so deep to the third man, but sufficient to be polite.

"Thank you for seeing me, Niska," Kim Li said.

"Your invitation was hard to refuse," Niska said

"This is strictly business," Kim Li assured him. "You have had a number of setbacks since your encounter with this rogue, Malcom Reynolds, and you're falling behind in your obligations to me. I want to know how you intend to repair the damage and return to a margin of profitably resembling your past performance."

"I assure you," Niska said. "My reputation is still strong and I will get even with Reynolds for the damage he has caused."

"I am not interested in your schemes of petty revenge," Kim Li said. "I am only interested in profitability. I think your obsession with Reynolds is preventing you from focusing on your true goals, maintaining the territory I assigned to you. Now, if you're unable or unwilling to return to the Path which I put you on, I am certain I can find someone capable of taking over your territory."

"I wish to serve," Niska assured him.

Kim Li nodded and motioned to one of his female servants. She brought a sword to him. She presented it bridged between the palms of her hand, bowing. He bowed to her, lifted the sword and slid it out of its scabbard. The metal gleamed as it turned in the

sun under his inspection. He observed Niska was beginning to sweat, but he held his ground. He smiled pleasantly.

“Do you believe in a higher power?” Kim Li asked.

“No,” Niska said.

Kim Li nodded and gave a casual glance to James and Kelly, who suddenly took Niska by the arms and drove him to his knees.

“Wait, wait,” Niska cried.

“Perhaps your lack of belief in a higher power is why you are failing me,” Kim Li said.

“I don’t subscribe to a deity paradigm,” Niska said, whimpering.

Kim Li nodded. “Ah, perhaps we are just failing to communicate,” Kim Li said. “Asking you if you believe in a higher power is not necessarily limited to deities, though I, personally, think you should reconsider the available data and philosophies concerning a supernatural or Supreme Being, and many lesser beings, but I am not pressing the point. I am just pointing out there’s always a higher power. Local police force will give you a ticket if you’re speeding. On this world, the police are a higher power than you. Local principalities, mother-nature, the Alliance, the military, these are all examples of higher powers that have an influence over your life and the decisions you make. You have to answer to them if you cross them. As good as your reputation was, there is always someone greater than you, and you’re fool if you think otherwise. Even I have a higher power that I must answer to. It’s the way of things. No man is an island or a god unto themselves. We’re social creatures. We depend on networks. So, again, I ask you, do you believe in a higher power?”

“Yes, yes,” Niska said.

“I’ve always liked your ability to see reason,” Kim Li said. “So, tell me about your higher power?”

“You are superior to me,” Niska said. “I answer to you.”

Kim Li placed the tip of his sword in a strategic point on Niska body, just below the shoulder bone.

“So, where’s my money?” Kim Li asked, applying pressure.

“I’m delinquent and beg for leniency,” Niska pleaded.

Kim Li added more pressure and the tip of the sword pushed into Niska’s body. He screamed and tried to back away, but was held firm by James and Kelly.

“Give me a time table for you getting back on schedule?” Kim Li asked.

“Six months,” Niska said.

Kim Li pushed the sword all the way through Niska’s body, without puncturing the shirt on the far side, just lifting it from Niska’s body. Niska screamed horribly and began to sob.

“I thought this sort of stuff was your forte,” Kim Li said, leaning in close to Niska. He put a hand on Niska’s face and used a thumb to catch a tear. “Could this be your true self? It’s to be suspected, I suppose. Most bullies usually can’t take what they dish out. I wonder if there is something I can do to help you grow into something more than what you are?”

Kim Li smiled, flexed the hilt of the sword, and then pulled it out real slow, enjoying the wailing. He took a towel from his lady servant, cleaned his sword, and returned it to its scabbard. He bowed to his servant, offering the sword to her in the same

manner in which she had presented it to him, respectfully. Even gracefully. Kim Li waited for Niska's sobbing to fade before he continued.

Kim Li turned to enjoy the breeze and the sun on his face, smiling up at the sky. He closed his eyes and took in a breath. "Breathe, Niska. The air is so much nicer after surviving a trauma. And the silence after a good cry is hopeful," Kim Li said, motioning for James and Kelly to let Niska go. He watched Niska crumble to a heap on the path. "Especially if you learn from the experience. There are other ways to rule, Niska. It doesn't have to be with fear and might. Give poor people credit, charging them just enough interest that there is hope that they can pay off their debts. And give them things to buy with that credit. That's one way to rule. And celebrate them if they step up and pay off their debt, because you know they will be back. You can also treat those you serve with respect. You earn loyalty, but also you come to the realization that you serve them as much as they serve you. Just a different perspective for you to consider. This Reynold's thing could have gone another way. He demonstrated his genuineness when he returned your money. He could have taken it and made himself scarce. That's a person who would be loyal. And, given his propensity for barely making ends meet, there would have been other opportunities to call him to service. Never burn bridges when you don't have to. You never know when you might need to return to the other side of the water."

Kim Li petted Niska like he would a dog. "I don't know if this is taking or not. And, it's only a suggestion, Niska. Not telling you how to govern your territory. Well, as long as you maintain the profit margin that I have come to expect from you, I won't tell you how to govern your territory," Kim Li said. "So, I'll return you to your affairs."

Kim Li bowed to Niska, bowed to James, and then bowed to Kelly. James and Kelly picked up Niska, who cried out in pain again, and they escorted him out.

CHAPTER ONE

Time and space hadn't put enough distance between the crew of Serenity and events surrounding Miranda to lessen the pain of loss. To make matters worse, that fiasco had come with a bit of notoriety, something Malcom Reynolds had always, mostly, managed to avoid. Consequently, he was finding it more difficult than normal to find a legit paying job, or even one of his less 'legit' jobs that would have him and his crew once again running under the Alliance radar. Things were hardly better for Inara. Some of her regular clients had decided not to see her given the fact that she was in the news. Too many people hated the lime light and with her connection to the Serenity crew, and the very real possibility was that she was still being scrutinized by the members of Parliament and the Senate who were embarrassed by the Miranda Fiasco, as it was being called by so many, that the stigma, or paranoia, that they too would be scrutinized was too real. Many of the people who had harbored Serenity after a heist, or some other less 'legit' job, had been hit hard by Alliance. Hit hard meant many of them were wiped out to the last man and woman, and the ones that didn't get hit were no doubt still scared of the very real possibility of repercussions falling their way. What it boiled down to was that Serenity was shy on friends and hard pressed for employment. So, whether these unnamed members of Parliament were actively engaged in putting the squeeze on Inara and Serenity by applying political pressure and influence to block them from work was irrelevant. They were working less and things were getting rough.

Technically, Doctor Simon Tam and his sister, River, were no longer wanted by the law. At least, publicly they had been removed from the most wanted list. Given his abilities and knowledge, there were a number of hospitals that would welcome him, even given his questionable status with the law. He had wanted to discuss this move with Kaylee, Serenity's mechanic, but he was almost certain she would never leave the Captain or her work, especially now that things were really tough for Serenity as a whole, work wise, but also because of the death of Wash. Kaylee made no secrets that Serenity was her home and that the crew was closer to her than family. She would be hard pressed to leave at best of times. Knowing this only made it only harder for him to tell her that they needed to leave.

Simon found Kaylee in the engine room doing things which he found completely alien to him: mechanical things. Sure, he could see the analogy that Serenity was a living thing and she was just a doctor as he was, keeping the thing alive with the maintenance she performed. She was lying on her back when he found her in the engine room, tightening something with an odd sort of wrench. She really didn't see him till she stood and turned around to stow the tool. She wiped her face, smearing the grease she didn't know she had on her, smiled and kissed him as she went by.

"This is the only torque wrench I have that keeps its calibration," Kaylee said, putting the tool up. Once she had placed it where it belong, she turned back to see Simon studying her. "What?" she asked. And then she smiled fiercely and hugged him. "Am I?"

"It's official," Simon said. "You're pregnant."

Kaylee screamed a happy scream and kissed Simon enthusiastically.

Simon kissed her back, but with less enthusiasm, as he wanted to be serious for a moment. "Kaylee," he said. "Would you marry me?"

Kaylee's eyes grew even wider and her mouth made a small O as she was so taken back and then suddenly she found herself nodding even more enthusiastically and then was hugging and kissing Simon so fiercely he could scarcely get his breath. "Yes, oh, yes, yes, yes," Kaylee said, punctuating each yes with a kiss.

"Good, because I want you to come with me and River to Canton," Simon said. "I have an interview for chief of staff at Trinity Hospital, the largest hospital on the moon."

Kaylee acted as if she were sucker punched and backed away, shaking her head no. "We can't leave the Captain and Zoe. Not in their current state."

"We can, Kaylee. They're capable people," Simon said.

"They need me," Kaylee said.

"I need you," Simon said. "They can hire another mechanic."

"They can't hire another mechanic," Kaylee said.

"No, probably not," Simon said. "That would require them to actually pay someone."

"My needs are met," Kaylee said. "I have shared in the good times. I'll share in the bad."

"They're all bad, Kaylee," Simon said. "They've never paid you what you are worth, but that's really irrelevant. I have a chance to make a good living, not just for me, but for us. For you. For the baby. You need to think of our child. We can't raise a child in this environment."

"Why not?" Kaylee asked. "What's wrong with this environment?"

"It's not normal," Simon said.

"For whom? You?" Kaylee asked. "What is normal, Simon? A baby born here will think this is normal."

"And I don't want a baby thinking this is normal," Simon said.

"What, being surrounded by people who would love it and look out for it? This ship is more than just a family, it's a village," Kaylee said.

"More like a circus," Simon said.

"You take that back," Kaylee said.

"You're right. That wasn't fair. These are good people. Well, except for Jayne, and except when they're thieving," Simon said.

"We have to eat," Kaylee said.

"Yes, we do, and that's why we need to go, so I can earn a living and feed us," Simon said.

"I like my life here," Kaylee argued. "Is your offer of marriage only contingent on me moving off so you can have status?"

"I'm trying to think of what's best for us," Simon said.

"Oh, no. Don't make this about us when it's about you. My life is good because it's simple. I don't need things or wealth or status to be happy," Kaylee said.

"I don't want to live the rest of my life on this ship!" Simon said. "Especially if I don't have to. We don't have to run any more."

"Have you asked River what she wants?" Kaylee asked.

"I'm sure she knows I've been considering this move," Simon said.

"Not the same as asking her what she wants, because I am betting she wants to stay here, on Serenity," Kaylee said.

“She has to come with me,” Simon said.

“So you’re not going to ask her, you’re just going to tell her,” Kaylee repeated.

“She has to come and you have to come, because it’s the right thing for us all,” Simon said.

“We have choices,” Kaylee said.

“I refused to be trapped here,” Simon said, and then realized, partly by the expression of anger that flashed across Kaylee’s face, that he had misspoke.

Kaylee backed away, pointing to him. “No. Don’t even say that. We’ve all made choices here. You made choices. I’ve never done anything but be nice to you. I’ve never made any demands on you.”

“I know,” Simon said. “I’m sorry. Trap was wrong...”

“No,” Kaylee snapped. “It was the right word, so don’t try to soft soak it. If you don’t want to be here, then you move on and find your happiness elsewhere. Knowing you, though, I doubt you’ll ever find happiness.”

“What do you mean by that?” Simon demanded.

“If you can’t be happy here, then you can’t be happy anywhere,” Kaylee said. “Why do you think poor folks who are unhappy continue to be unhappy even after they won the lottery? It’s because happiness is a choice. You said you’d be happy if you got your computer, you thought you’d be happy if you got a certain grade, you thought you’d be happy after medical school, you thought you’d be happy after you rescued River, you thought you’d be happy after River’s health improved, you thought you’d be happy after you were free of the law...”

“Stop this,” Simon said.

“No, you stop this,” Kaylee said. “Happiness isn’t a destination. It’s a choice. You’re not even happy that I’m pregnant.”

“I am happy that you’re pregnant,” Simon said.

“No, you’re not,” Kaylee said. “You’re just falling back into your old routine of now I need particular home and a certain job and a certain level of provision and certain schools for the child because you can’t escape this brainwashed expectation of what life is supposed to be like as Doctor Simon Tam. You keep chasing this stuff and you will never be happy.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to marry me?” Simon asked.

“I’m saying I don’t think I can rise to meet your expectation, must less sustain it,” Kaylee said. “People think I’m just naturally happy, just happy me all the time, but it takes work and effort and a certain perspective, and I don’t have the strength to carry your weight if you can’t choose to be happy in the moment wherever you are.”

“I want you in my life,” Simon said.

“Do you? Do you, Simon? Or, do you just want the idea of me?” Kaylee asked. “Trapped?! Indeed. You’re a Doctor. If you didn’t want me or a baby, you know how to prevent them.”

“So do you,” Simon said.

“Yes. We both could have... and my fault in this is in believing you had settled in here and that this was our home. I will not let you use this or me as an excuse for being ‘trapped.’ Damn you, Simon. Get out of my engine room. And get your stuff out of my room, while you’re at it, because if you’re leaving, I don’t want to get any closer to you.”

“Kaylee,” Simon said, moving closer to her.

“No!” Kaylee said, pointing at him and backing up. “Out. Now!”

Simon thought about saying something, thought about staying and trying to pull her into a hug, but decided she was not going to be reasonable. And he didn’t want to fight. He departed without any further words and Kaylee sat down in her hammock. She leaned into it and softly began to cry.

Up on the Bridge Malcom Reynolds finished double checking everything was set for the long haul to their next destination and that the programs would carry them while he slept. He noted a wave coming in and that it was being directed directly to Inara’s shuttle. He frowned, as if thinking, ‘who could be calling her at this hour.’ And then he reminded himself, he had no claims on Inara and could make no demands. He also had to remind himself, ‘this hour’ didn’t mean anything out in space. Funny how you forget that sometimes. Thinking on it further, about Inara, not the hour it was, he thought it would probably be best if she worked because the rent she gave for the shuttle was the minimum income to keep Serenity flying.

Malcom closed down the helm, putting things on sleep mode, and stood up, feeling a bit old. He decided it wasn’t old but rather it was a pain in his back from lifting and the pain in his side from a recent sparring match which had required stitches which was making him move slowly. That, and a bit of hunger. He paused to knock on Zoe’s door, lightly in case she was sleeping. When she didn’t respond, he shifted the door to his quarters open and began the climb down.

The engine concealed his mechanics sobbing. Zoe’s door kept her mourning silent. Jayne’s closed door kept everyone from hearing anything Jayne might be up to at this time of night, whether it was snoring or whatever. Malcom paused as he looked down the corridor, wanting to go and talk to Inara, but holding back. She was taking a call, after all.

When Wong Jing’s wave woke up Inara’s monitor, causing the screen to flash so she knew she had a call, she had a number of reactions, which reminded her of her borderline ambivalence to her profession as a Companion. She could hear Malcom saying “whore” in her head and had to suppress it. Most the time, the disparaging label wouldn’t bother her, but if it came from someone she loved, that bothered her. On one hand, she was grateful that she was still desired, on the other, she would just as happily give it all up if only that someone would ask her. She was pretty sure Malcom wanted to ask her, but he wouldn’t either from fear that doing so would invite her to starve and struggle as he did, as his crew often did, or perhaps because of some hidden esteem issues. She knew him to be man enough to overcome esteem issues, but she also knew he was prideful enough not to ask her to starve with him.

Inara closed her eyes for a moment and settled her thoughts. When she opened them, she was prepared to listen to Wong Jing’s solicitation. She pushed play.

“Hello, Inara. It has been a long time. I know I’m too far out from the core worlds to make it profitable for you to visit, but I would truly like to see you again. Seeing your name in the news-feeds has me missing you. Even if you aren’t able to visit, I would like you to send me a wave, just so I can see and hear for myself that you are indeed well.”

And that was it. Inara responded. “You’re very kind to think of me. I am well. And yes, I’m afraid that you’re a bit far from the core worlds for me to visit at this time. Thank you, though, for the offer. And, I will look you up if I am ever in your area.” She

pressed send and it was away. It would take perhaps an hour or two to get to him, considering their distance and the relay station the signal would have to bounce off.

Inara meditated for a while. She assumed everyone was asleep, or she would have sought out company. She definitely would have gone to comfort Kaylee had she known she was in distress. Kaylee was like a sister to her. Inara's eyes became heavy and it seemed like they were only closed for a minute when another wave from Wong Jing arrived.

"It's me, again, Inara. If I understand it correctly, you're still flying with the Serenity crew? If you would visit with me, I can arrange some work for the crew. Ningxia Hui is two days out from my colony and I know some people there that would like to ship some fresh produce to a mining camp about six days out in exchange for some of their metals. It's hard to get ships out this way, especially freighters, because the profit margin is rather thin. If this is agreeable, perhaps I could see you soon? Let me know. I can compensate you for the extra trouble and will even pay Serenity if the job doesn't pan out. Inara, I really want to see you. This posting here doesn't afford me the opportunity to socialize with people I would consider peers. Even if it's just several days of talking, I want to see you. If my posting paid more, I would ask you to stay full time, but, I know you can do better, so, I will only ask for a moment. Please, come."

Inara rolled her eyes. Wong had shared enough time with her that he should know it wasn't about the money. Still, the opportunity for work, for both her and Serenity, was too hard to pass up.



"It's an awful long way to go just to talk to someone," Malcom said.

Inara didn't frown or roll her eyes, just nodded, not wanting to start a fight. At least he said 'talk' instead of whoring. "My client says there is a moon nearby that needs to hire a freighter. It would be profitable enough to fill up on fuel and what I know about Ningxia Hui is that it's practically a paradise. We can buy fresh foods really cheap," Inara said. "Maybe have some quality down time. We really could use that kind of rest."

"Did I hear the mention of fresh foods?" Kaylee asked.

"Good morning, Kaylee," Inara said.

"Good morning, Inara. Fresh foods?" Kaylee asked again.

"What kind of job?" Zoe asked. She was at the table, nursing her coffee, only half heartedly listening.

"There's a mining colony that needs a delivery of fresh produce and they have promised an exchange of ore for food," Inara said. "I really don't know all the details, but my client says if the job doesn't pan out, he will pay Serenity for making the trip."

"Trip?" Jayne asked, scratching himself as he pushed into the kitchen and made for the coffee pot. He looked crossly at Zoe when he found the pot was empty. "You didn't make enough for everyone?"

"You're not my husband," Zoe said, not bothering to look up from her coffee.

"Just common courtesy to fix a whole pot," Jayne mumbled.

"Did fix a whole pot," Zoe shot back. "You just didn't get up in time to share it."

"Back to the trip," Jayne said, preparing to make more coffee. "We going somewhere? Perhaps towards pay?"

“It’s work, Mal,” Inara said. “Hauling food and ore may not be glamorous, but it’ll pay.”

“Ore?” Jayne asked and a cheerful smile flashed across his face. “Like gold?”

“Don’t know what kind of ore, but I imagine if this mine was producing gold, they wouldn’t be having trouble hiring ships,” Malcom said.

“Captain, if we have a vote, I’m all for the fresh food part of the trip,” Kaylee said.

“Ningxia Hui is a long way off the beaten path,” Malcom said, musing.

“Thought we like a long way off the beaten path,” Jayne said.

“We do,” Malcom said. “Just trying to think if we have enough fuel to make it. And you’re sure your client will compensate us if the job doesn’t pan out?”

“He has always kept his word with me,” Inara said.

Malcom Reynolds glanced at his crew. The only ones not up to breakfast yet were the Doctor and his sister and he pretty much knew how they would vote, if he were leaving it up to a vote. They were all for ‘off the beaten path.’ Kaylee looked hopeful and excited, like a kid expecting Christmas. Zoe finished her coffee and pushed away from the table. After washing her cup and setting it to dry, Zoe returned to her room. She needed more time and more work, Malcom decided. And perhaps a walk in the country wouldn’t hurt.

“Tell your client we’ll get you there, Inara,” Mal said. “It’s about a three week push from here, but we’re on our way.”

Malcom and Inara headed in different directions.

“I hope its gold,” Jayne called after Malcom who was headed for the Bridge of Serenity.

“You can’t eat gold,” Kaylee said.

“No, but I can buy you lunch with it,” Jayne said.

CHAPTER TWO

The New Province of Ningxia Hui boasted a population of roughly two million people. It was not the furthest planet from the core, but one of the most popular, distant worlds, due to its richness in biological resources. No one that lived on Ningxia Hui went hungry. A person could get lost, if they wanted, and live off the land, and not see another soul for years, but most folks that came to Ningxia Hui, preferred the company of others, which explained why the capital city was so densely populated when it didn't have to be. After the initial terraforming projects, plant life just seemed to take to the place, and now, after three hundred years of flourishing vegetation, from wheat to forests, there were plans to repopulate species that once thrived in rain forests on old Earth, species which were now extinct. Extinct except for frozen embryos and genetic materials that earlier generations had had the foresight to collect, knowing that the bio diversity of Earth was on the decline. And even if the species were "brought" back from extinction, they would never be the same species. They would adapt to their new environments and would go off on new genetic tangents, but it was hoped that the new diversity would only increase the stability and pleasantness of nature on Ningxia Hui.

There were groups opposed to this "re-emergence" program. People who believed that the plants had done quite well without a large bio-diversity present. Only tiny, artificial flying machines helped to pollinate the wild plants, supplementing the humans who did it by hand and brush. Communion with nature, the new cycle of life, was how they referred to it. There were animals introduced, like fish, and rabbits and miniature pigs, and a variety of birds, and whatever pets escaped the cities and villages to be forage in the wild, but most of the fertilizers were dead plants and human waste, because human waste was just as good a pig poop when making fertilizers. Adding too many animals at this juncture could only complicate the mix and thereby endanger the simple life they had created. An easier life than could be found on any other planet outside the Core Planets, provided you wanted the "simple" life.

One of the reasons plants, and the humans that ate the plants, did so well was that there was a reasonable distribution of minerals in the soil. Unfortunately, there were no metals concentrated enough to mine. There would be no smelting of ores or refining of metals on this moon, so the 'simple' life meant working with wood and plants to make creature comforts. All the products on this planet were made plants, from clothing to paper, to biodegradable polymers that made the bodies of the artificial insects. But to keep the good food coming, the simple life meant most people had to spend time walking with a paint brush going from flower to flower, pollinating, and collecting and redistributing the seeds from the fruit one ate. One with nature. The people, at least the apparent voting public, wanted Ningxia Hui to grow and prosper. They wanted more traffic and a better economy than simple subsistence. Shipping fresh produce wasn't an option due to the distance and time it took to get produce to a reasonable market, so the biggest source of off world income came from the Alliance Food and Natural Medicine processing centers. There were two major manufacturing labs, run by the Alliance, employing mostly locals for the manual labor jobs to produce food supplements. It wasn't cost effective to have the entire process automated, since there were no planet side factories to make parts. All machined parts and 'hard' materials came from off world,

provided by Alliance. Every six months an Alliance Cruiser would come with supplies to sustain the operation and collect the supplements to redistribute as they saw appropriate.

It was rare to see the signs of a non Alliance spaceship this far out from the core worlds, but as Ely Torok looked up to identify the sound of a ship breaking the sound barrier, as opposed to thunder from another passing storm. He became hopeful. He was eager to be back in space and on his way and though he could wait another month for the next Alliance ship, he would just assume be on his way this moment. The ‘simple’ life just didn’t hold enough excitement for him. That, and he had a time limit. Any off worlder had a time limit: on this planet, it was roughly a year and half. The gravity here was sufficiently less than standard, and so anyone who stayed longer would like have lost too much bone and muscle mass to tolerate standard Gs. There were remedies, but even those were problematic, and expensive, and time consuming. He could have extended his stay by living in the city, on the antigravity grid, but he had found it too busy with too many people, and so he had withdrew to the wilderness.

Ely untied his hammock from the tree, placed a dozen coconuts inside it and tied it shut. The hammock, a small backpack with a few personal sundries, a paintbrush, and a cutlass were his only possessions. By the time he had walked the length of the beach and climbed the path towards the clearing that was the city’s only space port, the ship had already landed. Four of the crew were heading away on a small hover craft. One would have imagined that the locals would have greeted the small ship with a parade, seeing how rarely non Alliance ship’s dropped, but no one seemed interested. The little bamboo hut that was the front for “customs and immigration,” the only official building in sight of the clearing that was the space pad, held a sign that said “out to lunch” in Mandarin. They had been “out to lunch” for several years.

Ely recognized the ship as a Kei, a Japanese word for Firefly. He was surprised that the four had rode off leaving the ramp down, but he figured they were either trusting souls, or there was more crew on board. Probably more crew, he decided. It was a big ship. The closer he got to the ship, the better he could see the recent upgrades. New Ion engines, for starters. That must have cost a pretty penny. A new heat shield along the bottom, easily spotted as the heat shield along the neck had more scorch marks and charring stains than the lower. A ship rarely outlasted the lifetime of a heat shield. That suggested the ship had seen combat. He looked closer for evidence of it having been fired upon, wondering if he should just wait out the remaining month and risk traveling with the Alliance. The last thing he needed was to get involved with space pirates. As he completed a circuit around the ship, he had to hold his hands up to keep the sun out of his eyes as he looked towards the flight deck, or bridge, of the ship. People said it looked like an insect, but he always thought it looked like a dinosaur, its head towering above.

“Nǐ hǎo,” came the cheerful greeting of a woman sitting on a lounge chair, just at the foot of the ramp. She held an umbrella to the sun, and smiled pleasantly, as if she were just enjoying the day and the sun and the fresh air.

He returned the greetings and approached cautiously. She certainly didn’t fit the bill of a space pirate, but he had learned that looks could be deceiving.

“Mighty fine day, isn’t it?” she asked.

“I suppose,” Ely said, remaining neutral.

“Suppose?” she asked. “You have a different perspective?”

“Well, the weather here runs pretty constant from day to day,” Ely explained. “No seasons to really differentiate one day from another. I prefer variations. Hot summers, the changing colors of falls, freezing winters. Perpetual spring is wearying.”

“So, can I assume you’re looking for passage?” she asked.

“I am, actually,” Ely said.

“Do you have a destination in mind?” she asked.

“A preference would be a busy spaceport,” Ely said. “But I would settle for anywhere but here.”

“Oh,” she cooed. “I thought everyone loved this planet.”

“Life is fairly simple here,” Ely agreed. “And though I could find work to keep me busy, or just live off the land, I prefer a job more suited to my talents.”

“I understand,” she said. “I think. Not much metal here. Everything made from wood or plants. Doesn’t leave much room for building complex machines. Are you a mechanic?”

“No,” Ely said.

“Well,” she nodded, deciding to let him have his privacy, and going right to the crux of the conversation, “Can you afford to pay?”

“Uh?” Ely asked, noticing an uncharacteristic patch job on the nose. He shivered. His first thought was a Reaver harpoon firing through the hull and directly into the Bridge. He discounted that because if that had happened, this ship probably wouldn’t still be flying.

“For passage? Can you pay?” she asked.

“Oh!” Ely said, giving her his attention again. “Yes, absolutely. Don’t let my clothing fool you. It’s made locally from hemp. Very comfortable, but other than color schemes, it’s pretty much uniform here. Yes, I can pay. I can even pay more than the standard rates, cash, coin, or stone, and I doubt you could name an unfair price. Like I said, I just want to be on my way.”

“Stone?” she asked.

Ely sat the bundled hammock carrying the coconuts down, swung his pack around, and opened a concealed pocket in his pack. He produced a small pouch and offered to pour the contents in her hands. The small jewels sparked in the noonday sun.

“Oh, my,” she said, setting her umbrella down and leaning forward to examine the tiny treasures in direct sun light. “Are they real or manufactured?”

“They’re real,” Ely assured her. “And not stolen. Never know what kind of currency you might need, so I always keep some spares.”

“Oh, yeah,” she nodded, enthusiastically. She returned them to him, careful not to drop any.

Ely returned them to his pouch, save one, and put the largest of the stones back in her hand.

“Oh, no, I can’t accept this,” she said. “You’ll pay the Captain.”

“This is for you,” Ely said.

“Oh, no, no, no, really, I can’t,” she went on.

“Please, my pack is too heavy as it is, and, well, I haven’t done anything good in quite a while, so, allow me this chance to be generous,” Ely said. And, as if an after thought had occurred to him, he quickly added, “Oh, and, it’s not a bribe. If you haven’t

room for me on the flight, I can walk away, but you do have a big hold, and I don't require much space or attention."

"If you don't care about the destination, your passage is as good as booked," she said, standing, and offering her hand. "My name is Kaylee and this here is Serenity."

Ely bowed, not taking her hand. A small frown of disappointment flashed as she withdrew her hand, but she brought her smile back full force, as if compensating for a momentary power failure. He turned to follow where her eyes were tracking. The mule was returning with the four occupants, and a number of boxes that contained fresh produce. Ely was already moving out of the way, but Kaylee took his arm and expedited his movement. The mule barely slowed as it slid into home. A moment after it parked, a man and woman proceeded down the ramp to meet the stranger. "Secure the mule, Jayne, and get the produce in refrigerator boxes," Malcom said without looking over his shoulder. The man named Jayne mumbled, "Damn, local yocals. Never seen so many tree hugging hippies in one place before in my life."

Malcom stepped off the ramp and looked to the stranger and then to his mechanic.

"Captain, this here is a passenger," Kaylee said. "Sir, this is Malcom Reynolds. And Captain, this is..."

"Ely Torok, Captain," Ely said. "I have ID if you require it."

"I'm not so formal," Malcom said. "Where are you headed and can you pay is the only formality I need to be knowing."

"He can pay," Kaylee said.

"Up front?" Mal asked.

"Yes," Ely said. "Do you have a currency preference?"

"Cash would be nice," Mal said.

"I can pay," Ely said.

"Four hundred?" Mal asked.

"Captain?!" Kaylee said, as shocked as she sounded.

"I can pay that, Captain," Ely said, without batting an eye.

"And where are you headed?" the lady behind Malcom asked.

"I would like to go to New Henan, if I have a choice," Ely said.

"Well, we're going in the other direction. Guess you'll have to stay," Malcom said.

"Actually, any spaceport will do, Captain," Ely said. "Just want to be moving on. I'll compensate you for your fuel loss on my weight, if that's the problem. And I have a ration bar that ought to hold me out if you're worried about your food supplies. I would require a supply of potable water, though."

"You seem awfully anxious to get out of here," the woman behind Malcom said.

"Zoe's right," Malcom said. "You agreed to 400 pretty quick. I have had enough trouble with law and Alliance. Don't need any new hassles."

"I am not wanted by local law enforcement and Alliance wants nothing to do with me, I assure you. I'm capable of paying your asking price because I'm independently wealthy," Ely said. "If you can suffer my company long enough to drop me off at the next busiest spaceport, I'll pay what you asked."

"Captain, he's looking for a job," Kaylee said.

"Oh?" Malcom said. "I thought you were independently wealthy?"

"I am," Ely assured him. "What I don't have is a job. I like to be useful."

“I am sure there is usefulness here for you,” Zoe said.

“I’m sure there’s a lonely tree that needs hugging somewhere,” Jayne offered as he passed carrying a box of produce.

“Minimal existence,” Ely agreed. “If you consider pollinating plants useful, because the locals can’t agree to introduce bees into the biosphere, then very useful. Folks don’t go hungry here, even kids, so even having money here is not a great benefit unless you want to buy and trade in metals, leathers, or plastics. I’m not saying I’m above the work or the life style. I just require something more mentally stimulating to hold my attention.”

“And what’s that?” Jayne asked. Jayne leaned against the side of the ship, staring down the ramp. His right hand toyed with the snap holding his weapon in his holster. He freed the snap, secured it, and popped it off again.

Another girl made her presence known, spying at him from inside the ship, partially hiding behind the bulkhead.

“Do all potential passengers get the third degree?” Ely asked.

“Only those that look like they’re hiding something,” Jayne said.

“Just lately,” Malcom said. “We’ve had a bit of a rough time and are perhaps being a bit more cautious than usual. Truth be said, I could use the four hundred to fill my tanks. I have a chance at a possible contract if I can go pick up some cargo and haul it back here, but the potential new clients won’t front the job, so I have to find a way to make it happen.”

“It’s quite likely they don’t have the capital, specifically coin or cash, to give it to you,” Ely said. “The only paying job is the food processing factories, and the Alliance pays with credit, which the employees save up and use to purchase items via mail order, which is delivered by Alliance. Well fed, but poor people.”

“So I gathered,” Malcom said. “Consequently, I have a short time-table to get this trade back and still be awarded the contract. If you were able to help move cargo, I could see to it that you get a partial refund and we could drop you off at the next convenient port after I’ve seen to this affair.”

“I am agreeable to that,” Ely said.

“One extra man cuts down on my percentage,” Jayne protested.

“I didn’t offer him a percentage, Jayne,” Malcom said. “I offered him transport. Now, I want to get my boat in the air and be at the rendezvous point to pick up the Ambassador, and on time, this time. Zoe, set him up in ten.”

“Book’s old room?” Zoe asked.

Malcom turned to her as Ely picked up his hammock. “Did someone convert it to a shrine and not tell me?”

“No, Sir,” Zoe said. She nodded in the direction of travel to Ely. “Come along.”

Malcom stopped Ely, one hand on his arm, and a hand out to receive cash. Ely set down his hammock, again, and fished a roll of cash out of his pack, unfolded it, counted out four hundred, and put the remaining amount back. He noticed Jayne’s sudden interest and realized they were all pretty much staring. “Captain, if you need more, please ask. You won’t have to kill me for it.”

“Well, hell, I could use some, if you’re just given it away,” Jayne said.

“You’re safe on my boat,” Malcom said. “But, what exactly is it you do so well that you’re independently wealthy?”

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