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2x02 Heart and Sole

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"Shoes? We're haulin' *shoes*, Cap?" Jayne asked in disbelief as he looked up from the crate he had just cracked open.

"Yes, Jayne, shoes. You got a problem with that?"

"Ain't got a problem, Mal, just wonderin' what woman out on the Rim is gonna be lookin' to wear shoes like these." He opened a box inside the crate and prodded at a strappy pair of faux leather ladies high heels, while Book peered over his shoulder in amusement.

"Those are fine pieces of quality footwear, Jayne. Any woman'd be proud to tuck her feet into 'em!" Mal grinned broadly, clearly enjoying Jayne's befuddlement.

"Yeah, if she wants to get her fool neck snapped when she breaks a heel and goes pitchin' over a cliff," Jayne retorted as he slapped the lid back on the box.

"Jayne, ain't you got no idea what these are?" Kaylee enthused, as she brushed past the two men and scurried up to the side of one the large crates, running her hand lovingly over the logo imprinted on the lid.

"Course I do," Jayne said gruffly. "Shoes."

Kaylee looked over her shoulder at him. "Shoes? *Shoes?*" She clucked her tongue and turned back to the crate. "These ain't just shoes, Jayne. These are Francesco Chans! Real live-"

"They ain't alive, little Kaylee, and they ain't real," Mal interjected.

"-fake Francesco Chans, straight from the cobbler! You know how much the real ones of these here shoes'd fetch back in the Core?" Kaylee pressed on, her eyes wide and engaging.

"Eighty credits a pair," Inara answered with a soft smile, descending the stairs from her shuttle in her customary graceful fashion.

Jayne's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "*How* much?"

"Eighty credits," Inara repeated, drawing up beside Mal, a shawl draped artfully over her crooked elbows. "Maybe more, if they're a special design or use more leather. They're quite the designer item."

"You tryin' to tell me," Jayne rumbled, pointing to the crate Kaylee was stroking with loving fingers, "that there's womenfolk crazy enough to wanna pay eighty credits for some dead cow skin and a heel could punch holes in sheet metal, what didn't take more'n five or ten credits t'make?"

"If you want to think of it that way, yes," Inara replied.

Jayne gave Mal a baffled look. "We're in the wrong gorram business, Mal."

"Not today we ain't," Mal answered cheerfully as the mercenary moved to open and inventory the other crates. "Today we're respectable shoe merchants, come to peddle our wares to the fine people of Pastiche. Shepherd's gonna be visiting a local Padre when we land. What about you, Inara?" He asked, eyes hardening slightly. "You got business you'll be handlin' while we're dirtside?" It was an innocent enough question with a two-ton weight of meaning behind it.

Inara shifted uncomfortably; he pretended not to notice. "Now that I know where we're going, perhaps," she affirmed.

"I'm surprised," Mal smirked. "I've been to Pastiche and it ain't hardly more'n'a dung heap out among these parts, though some of their folk think they're a bit more civilized. If they're into buying fancy shoes maybe they've decided to upgrade their...female companionship, too."

Inara felt her hackles rise, but was determined to remain calm. She and Mal had been avoiding each other ever since their last argument over Simon, which basically meant she had been staying in her shuttle. "I've heard the Guild is planning on expanding outwards, further into the Border planets. I thought I might check up on that with the Guild Book Keeper and see if any progress has been made."

"Chat with old friends and the like."

"And the like." Inara's tone gave her away and Mal took the opportunity to rib her a little.

"You mean life in a Companion Training House ain't all pajama parties and pillow fights? 'Nara, you just gone crushed every young man's dream." He gave her a rakish smile, and she thought perhaps this was some kind of peace offering. Why he'd be offering one now was a mystery, unless he'd actually been paying attention to what she was telling him.

Really paying attention.

A small smile flickered on her lips. "It's a lot of politics, Mal," she explained. "You make friends and you make enemies, just like in government. It can be very treacherous, especially if you're on track to become Guild Mistress or House Priestess."

"And here I thought companionship was all fancy shindigs and lyin' on your back."

A flicker of hurt crossed Inara's face, but she quickly smoothed it away. "I could say the same for you, Mal," she retorted, adjusting her shawl as she turned to head for the common room. "Simon's had to reserve you a permanent bed in the infirmary. Obviously when they had the training on how to avoid getting shot, you were unavailable to attend. In fact, you were probably busy getting shot!"

"It ain't my fault folk tend to shoot at me," the captain griped.

"Of course it's your fault, Mal," she replied coolly as she reached the top of the steps and kept right on walking. "You make people want to kill you."

"If I'm not here when you're finished with your crime, don't bother to leave a light on. It'll just mean I'm not coming back." She vanished back into her shuttle in a flourish of silken robes and perfume.

"That weren't a nice thing for you to do, Cap'n," Kaylee reproached softly after the Companion had disappeared. "Why do you always gotta insult her?"

"Insulting? Who's insulting?" Mal fumed, eyes still fixed to the place where Inara had disappeared. "Was I insulting just then, Jayne?"

"Didn't sound it t'me," the big mercenary answered. He'd tugged the top off one another of the crates and was now holding up a pair of strappy, stiletto-heel sandals, appraising them like a jeweler.

"See?" Mal said, turning away from the steps and ignoring Kaylee's eye roll. "I was just statin' fact."

"You all but called her a whore!" the mechanic protested.

"Little Kaylee, there ain't nothin' new in that."

"Naw, and that ain't right neither. You oughta show 'Nara more respect, else she's really gonna leave. And I don't care what you say, Cap'n, you'd miss her, same as everyone else." Kaylee fixed him with a straightforward, challenging stare.

Mal gritted his teeth. "Ain't none of my business what Inara do or don't do, dong ma? Ain't none of your business neither. She's a grown woman; she does what she does 'cause she wants to. End of story." Kaylee looked ready to argue, but Mal cut her off before she could continue. "Little Witch, whatcha doin'?"

All eyes turned to the back of the cargo bay, where River had quietly appeared. Nobody had heard or seen her come in, but River could move like a mouse when she wanted to. At present she was circling one of the crates, trailing one hand along the edge of the lid as she took delicate dancer's steps around the circumference, her bare feet making no noise on the bay's cold metal floor. "Considering," she said in response to Mal's question.

"Considerin' what?" Jayne broke in, snickering. "You don't even wear shoes near half the time. What y'got interest in these for?" He dangled the black stilettos a moment longer before he set them back down.

River stopped walking and just stared at him for a second, making the mercenary shift uncomfortably. The girl had a stare like a laser beam. After a moment she looked away again, apparently losing interest in Jayne and going back to her perusal of the crate. "Cow skin and rubber," she mused aloud. "Dye, paint, and gratuitous crystal baubles. They are impractical, uncomfortable, and ill-suited to extensive wear."

With a sigh, she stretched herself out on her stomach atop one of the unopened containers, pressing her cheek against the lid and gave the crate a possessive hug.

"Yet I desire them," she said, giving the crate a squeeze. "Many of them. Pairs and pairs. I believe I may be ill."

Kaylee giggled. "You ain't sick, River," she said, grinning. "You're a girl!"

"Same difference, in my opinion," Jayne muttered, and just managed to duck out of the way of the heeled boot Kaylee chucked at his head.



"Inara! It's so lovely to hear from you again!" The woman on the screen smiled, though there was no warmth in the action. "A Wave? Normally all I hear from you are data packet updates."

Inara smiled icily in return. "It's been too long, Janael. I do wish I'd kept in touch better, but I've been so frighteningly busy."

"Too busy to keep contact with old friends? Why, there must be more business out there on the Rim than I'd thought." The blonde woman's smile was anything but friendly; it looked almost predatory. "But I've been known to be wrong on occasion, haven't I, Inara?"

Inara ignored Janael's dig and changed the topic midstream instead. "Miri told me the Guild is expanding its training operations deeper into the Border worlds. I need the names of those I'd speak to about possibly joining one. I was also wondering if Miri is still on Pastiche getting the new trainees settled in."

"So, you're tired of living out in the black, are you?" Janael smirked. "I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did."

Inara scowled as Janael flipped through the pages, paying no attention to the screen. "I'm quite happy out here, thank you. Change is the medium through which we grow," she quoted, schooling her face into a mask of impartiality.

Janael snorted, eyes averted, still looking through her book. "Oh Inara, you can't fool me. You know that Companions can't lie to each other. We're too perceptive. Isn't that half of why you left House Madrassa in the first place?" She started typing on her screen, referring every few seconds to the book Inara knew was in her lap.

"My reasons for leaving are personal and none of your concern," Inara replied coolly. "All I need from you right now are names."

The blonde scowled at Inara from the monitor. "Why don't you just ask your mother?" she snapped. "Seems to me she should be able to get you anything you want. Not that that's anything new. It's her birthday soon, isn't it? A good daughter would remember things like that."

Inara felt her jaw muscle twitch at the mention of her mother. "Careful, Janael -- envy will make you haggard and gray by the age of thirty if you keep up like this."

Janael's eyes narrowed for a moment before she turned away and began typing offscreen. "Do you want these contacts or not? I may be required to talk to you, but who's to say that piece of *go se* you travel in didn't just -- *oops!* -- go out of range?"

Inara closed her eyes and swallowed her pride. "Please, Janael, I need those names."

"Sending now, Inara," the other woman muttered icily.

"Thank you," she acknowledged.

"You're very welcome, Inara Serra. Let Buddha guide your path, and let no man tempt you from it." Janael spat out the words, then waited impatiently for Inara to close the farewell.

"And to you also, Janael Harweth. Let Buddha always lead you to your destiny, and let no man tear you from it." The traditional parting address was over, but Inara didn't close the channel.

"Yes?" Janael sniped after a moment, making a frustrated motion towards the monitor. "And?"

Inara sat up a little straighter. "I need you to connect me to my mother."

It took a second, but then Janael's face split in a broad grin. "Decided you're going to play the good daughter after all, hmm?"

Before Inara could formulate a response the display flickered, changing to the standard Cortex stand-by screen as the wave went through. Inara folded her hands firmly in her lap, refusing to toy with her fingers. That had been a bad habit drilled out of her years ago, but it was never far away whenever she had to talk to her mother. And she did have to talk to her; Janael was right about that. A good daughter would call her mother to wish her a happy birthday.

Inara hated being a good daughter.

When the stand-by screen winked out, Inara flinched. It was reflex -- a gut reaction. It was also incredibly undignified, and the absolute antithesis to the woman looking back at her through the screen. Epoline Serra was poised, sculptured, and utterly radiant. Her coloring was fairer than her daughter's, her beauty more delicate than exotic. But she was beautiful - and she knew it.

"Inara, darling, how wonderful to see you!" her mother murmured, her tight smile belying her words.

"Hello, Mother," Inara acknowledged.

"It is a rare occasion when my daughter condescends to talk with me in person. Are you well?"

Inara sighed. "I'm fine, Mother."

Epoline raked an appraising eye over her through the Cortex link before meeting her eyes again. "Yes, I can see that," the older woman affirmed with a brilliant smile. "Though it would be nice if the next time you call me you at least took the time to brush your hair. We don't all live in the black, you know!"

Inara's hand twitched and she almost reached up to feel her hair, but stopped herself before she made any big movements. "You're looking well, Mother." By some stroke of luck she was able to say it without grinding her teeth.

"Oh, you know how it is in the Core: parties and rendezvous and soirees galore. Never a moment to look less than stunning!"

Inara chose to ignore the implied slight. "I was calling to wish you a happy birthday." She dared a smile. "I imagine you'll be hosting one of your traditional parties?"

If it was at all possible, Epoline went from radiant to breathtaking in the span of a heartbeat. "All the ladies from the House are coming, and everyone is bringing a guest! Everyone will be there -- absolutely everyone."

Yes, Inara thought, keeping a smile plastered on her face. They always are, aren't they? All the important people in your life.

So where is my invitation, Mother?

"Well I'm sure you're busy planning, Mother, so I'll leave you to your business," she opined, hoping her mother would graciously accept her exit and not try to drag the conversation out.

"You aren't upset I didn't invite you, are you?" her mother asked shrewdly. Her tone was meant to be conciliatory, but Inara could hear the satisfaction in it. Her mother was a wonderful actress, but Inara had had years to study her; years of being a pawn in her little games and power-plays. "Only with you so far out on the Rim, and the party coming so quickly... and, well... Honestly -- *who* would you invite to a party in the Core?"

Inara had a brief moment of rapture as she imagined what it would be like to go to her mother's birthday party with Malcolm Reynolds on her arm. It was his favorite kind of mayhem, crashing parties in the Core. Of course, that would be contingent on getting him to speak to her long enough to ask him. So perhaps it was best she hadn't been invited after all.

"It's fine, Mother," she said with a deliberate smile. "I'm busy here anyway. I just wanted to wish you well."

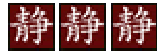
"Thank you, Inara." Her mother inclined her head regally, smiling slightly. "Your eyes look very lovely today."

It made Inara sick, how happy that one little compliment made her.

"Thank you, Mother." She paused before adding, "I love you."

Epoline blew her a kiss through the Cortex, twiddled her fingers in a wave, and then the connection was broken.

It didn't escape Inara's notice that her mother hadn't replied.



"Aw, come on, honey. Please? For me?" Wash wiggled his eyebrows at his wife. He held a pair of finely crafted black leather stilettos in his hand, the satin ribbons used to tie them to a woman's calf hanging down. "You don't even have to wear a dress with 'em!"

Zoe stood up slowly and turned around. She had finished removing her boots, and stared at her husband, hands on her hips. "Did you hit your head while me and the captain were gone? Because you don't seem t'be hearing the resounding 'No' I'm sayin'."

Wash pouted, flopping back onto their bed. "No, baby, there was no head hitting." He propped himself up on his elbows, looking at her. "Is it really such a crime for a man to want to see his beautiful wife in something worthy of her?"

She shook her head, a hint of amusement on her face. She unbuttoned her red shirt, untucked it and tossed it on the floor. She still wore a loose fitting white undershirt. "Core knockoffs are hardly my style, sweetcakes."

Her husband leered. "But those legs," he groaned, "would look so very, very nice in these heels."

Zoe raised an eyebrow, a smirk growing on her face. "I like the way you say that husband." She winked. "Say it again."

"Those legs," Wash repeated, his voice low and growling, "would look very nice in these heels." He ran his eyes up and down her figure, the shoes temporarily forgotten. "Of course, they'd also look very, very nice wrapped around my waist."

Zoe's smirk grew to a full-on smile. She took several steps forward, stopping at the edge of the bed. "You really think so?"

Wash swallowed hard. "Oh, yes, baby, I think very much so." He leaned back and watched with growing excitement as Zoe crawled onto the bed, straddling him.

"I think we need to test that, Mr. Washburn."

Wash nodded vigorously. "Yes, we do Mrs. Washburn. Lots and lots of testing just to make sure. I've been known to be wrong, on the occasion."

"This don't mean I'm wearin' those shoes," Zoe purred as she bent to kiss him.

Wash let her have her way. "I'll concede, right now, since you're being all coy with the lips on my ears and everything," he breathed heatedly. "But I'm not joking when I say I want to see you in these shoes *bao bei*. I don't steal from the captain for just anyone, you know." He stroked her legs as she moved closer to him.

"And that's another thing," she protested. "Can't be goin' around pilferin' our cargo, honey. Captain's rules."

Wash slapped her on the rump lovingly. "Can we please not talk about Mal right now? We're testing, remember? Legs around my waist."

"You're gonna have to put them back when we're done, lover."

"Worrying about the shoes later, please."

Zoe gave him a skeptical glare that meant he wasn't going to win this argument, but she didn't say anything since the legs-around-Wash's-waist testing was a little more pressing at the moment.



Inara was fuming as she linked up to the Cortex. She needed to talk to Miri – needed to make arrangements to leave Serenity and get away from it's hun dan of a captain, before she did something she would really regret...like burst into tears in front of him. He had already made her cry once – not that he had known it – and she had vowed it wouldn't happen again.

He didn't know her and he didn't understand her, anymore than she knew and understood him. Men like Mal Reynolds were outside her purview and she had been a fool to think it could ever be otherwise. From the moment she had first laid eyes on him, she had found him intriguing; unlike any one else she had ever met because there was no subterfuge about him. He presented himself the way he was and couldn't understand that Inara was doing the same for him.

She was a Companion – she had never pretended to be otherwise. Was it wrong to give people what they needed? Being a Companion wasn't just a job, it was a way of life – one that she'd been part of since the day of her birth. She had never questioned that she would one day be a Companion; had never allowed herself to wonder if she could be anything else.

Tapping in the proper connection sequence on the Wave monitor, Inara saw herself reflected and distorted and blurry against the empty view screen. It held her gaze longer than she intended. As a little girl, she had been taught that a Companion was a mirror reflecting back only what others wanted to see - but as she gazed at her reflection she wondered if that's really who she was. Being on Serenity had taught her many things about herself but in the teaching it seemed to Inara that she was losing the identity she had crafted since childhood.

Mal accused her of lying to him, when she never had. Perhaps she hadn't told him about Simon, but failing to tell somebody something was not lying no matter how much Mal said it was so. He had never told her anything about himself; had not offered one iota of information about his past to her – so why was she a liar when he was not? Was she a liar?

Malcolm Reynolds was the only one in the 'Verse, besides her mother, who had the ability to make her doubt herself. She'd be glad to put him behind her. Which just went to prove she could lie to herself as well as she could to anyone else.

"Inara?"

The Companion looked up to find another woman smiling at her from her display panel. Apparently her wave had gone through without her noticing. "Miri, I'm sorry," she apologized with a self-conscious smile. "I was thinking."

The other woman raised an eyebrow. "Important things, I hope?" she questioned with a knowing grin. "After all, a lady wouldn't like to think she'd been kept waiting because her associate was wondering if they'd left the iron on."

Inara felt her smile grow. She had known Miri Janus since they were children together on Sihnon. Unlike most Companions, Miri didn't come from wealth: she'd been a scholarship student, chosen by the Guild because of her strengths in music, language, art, as well as a plethora of other highly desirable skills.

Her unique background had made Miri somewhat of an outsider among the other girls, but Inara had found her a refreshing change from the legion of well bred, high class drones that usually populated Sihnon's Training Houses.

"No such thing, Miri, I promise," she assured the other woman. "I was just trying to decide how best to inform the captain that he'll be losing the rent on this shuttle in a short while and that I'll be needing my security deposit back."

Miri's other eyebrow rose to join the first. "You're leaving Serenity then?"

Inara nodded. "I think it best," she sighed. "Things are changing." *Nandi. Me.* "I'm changing." *It's time to move on.*

"But I thought you loved it out there!" Miri replied. "The last time we spoke you seemed very happy."

I was, Inara thought sadly. Instead she managed a tight smile. "Although I do enjoy chatting, I actually did have a reason to Wave you, Miri," she said, turning the course of the conversation. "We're going to be landing in Pastiche later this afternoon and I was wondering if you have time for a visit with an old friend. I wanted to talk with you about the Guild expansion. From the list Janael sent me, it appears things are moving forward rather quickly."

Miri laughed softly. "Work doesn't stop just because you're out in the black, 'Nara."

Inara inclined her head in acknowledgment of that statement. "Are you seeing success?"

"There's a fair bit of untapped potential out there," the other Companion shrugged. "We'll see how it goes. The Guild is pressing forward."

"Are there plans yet for a Guild House, or just the Training Houses?" Inara asked.

"Just the Training Houses for now; help the girls get their feet wet and give everyone some breathing room."

"Do you know if any of the Training Houses are searching for teachers? I've been in the black too long. I think it would do me well to stay grounded for a while."

"I'm sure we can always make room for the daughter of Epoline Serra. Have you spoken to her yet? It's her birthday today, you recall."

Long years of practice were all that kept Inara from flinching. "Yes, I know. And I have."

Miri must have noticed her tone, because she gave her a reproachful look. "She's your mother."

"She's not my mother, Mi-Mi," Inara clarified. "I just happen to share her bloodline."

"I think you're being unfair, 'Nara."

"I don't really want to discuss this," Inara held up her hands to stop the argument before it even started. "I'm more interested in finding out about the new Training Houses -- I don't want any favors, Miri," she asserted. "I can go where I'm needed, but I won't force myself on anyone either."

"You wouldn't be forcing, Inara," Miri relented, letting the matter drop. "So, when can I expect to see you?"

"No later than four," Inara responded, smiling with genuine affection at her friend. "It will be so good to see you again. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, 'Nara," Miri responded. "I'm dying to hear about all your adventures, face to face. Will you bring your captain with you?"

"He's not my captain, Miri," Inara replied calmly, even though her stomach was doing flips. "Besides, he's got a job to do."

"That's too bad," the other woman grinned. "From the little you've let escape in your Waves, he sounds very...interesting."

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The mayor of Nickelcreek was the kind of man who oiled his moustache into ridiculous little points and thought the style improved his looks. He was round and pink, and reminded Mal of a suckling pig. All he needed was an apple in his mouth to complete the look.

He was wearing a flashy maroon suit and kept mopping his forehead with a wrinkled white handkerchief. He was clearly a man who suffered from a serious case of vanity that was no doubt going to waste on a dried up Border world like Pastiche.

"Mornin'!" Mal greeted with a cheerful smile as the man's face appeared on the Cortex screen. "I'm Malcolm Reynolds."

The mayor nodded tersely. "Mayor Hubert Heckle."

Long years in the black had taught Mal not to laugh at a man's name. The memory of the black eye he got the first time he snickered at Jayne's name was enough to convince him of that. Still, that didn't mean it wasn't hard to keep a straight face when a man had a name like Hubert Heckle. "Got a shipment of shoes for y'all," he informed the man, proud that he hadn't cracked even a hair of a smile.

"Francesco Chans?"

Mal nodded. "Yep," he affirmed without flinching. "The genuine article."

"They better be," the little man threatened. "We won't accept imitations here, sir. We've got standards."

Mal kept the smile plastered on his face. "Wouldn't dream of it, sir," was all he said. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Of course, I expect to be allowed to inspect the merchandise," Heckle replied and straightened himself up until his thick, fat neck pooled over his tightly buttoned, fancy-collared shirt.

Seriously, an apple. Right between his teeth. And some parsley shoved somewhere less virtuous. "That won't be a problem, sir. We've got a few crates for you. I'll just have my crew unload them when we arrive and then we'll talk about transferring the payment."

Heckle's previously pleased expression vanished abruptly and he looked at Mal like he'd sprouted a second head. "The seller is with you, is he not? I wish to exchange funds with him directly."

Mal blinked. "Mr. Heckle-"

"Mayor Heckle."

"Mayor Heckle," he corrected, withholding several other, less savory expletives, "this is my ship and my job, therefore payment will be handled through me."

Heckle straightened up, mustache twitching. "You listen here, young man! I know the types of cons gentlemen such as yourself like to pull on places like Nickelcreek, and I'm telling you now I won't stand for it. We've got standards," he repeated, as if it were the town motto, "and I intend to see to it that those standards are upheld.

"I don't know if you're aware, but we were recently chosen as the host of a new Companion training house." The man's chest swelled with pride, and his pink face got even pinker. "An honor like that is a rare one out here on the Border, and I intend to see to it that the fine folk who work and take their ease there are provided with every imaginable comfort while in the vicinity of this town. So not only will I inspect the merchandise, but I will speak with the seller directly. And I tell you this right now -- I will also know if you're attempting to hornswoggle me. And I don't hold with hornswogglers."

Mal felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. "*Hornswogglers*, huh?"

Heckle jerked a terse nod. "Hornswogglers."

The two men stared each other down. Mal wanted nothing more than to tell Heckle where he could shove his standards. Instead, he steeled himself and grated out, "Fine. You want to meet the seller? You'll meet the seller."

"Why isn't he with you right now?" Heckle asked suspiciously.

"He's sleeping." Mal replied tersely. "You know what these Core folks are like. Don't you worry, I'll shake him awake for when we land and make sure he knows you're wanting to speak with him."

"Excellent." The mayor clapped his hands together, ostensibly bringing an end to the conversation. "Have your crew unload the cargo into the dockyard's warehouse. I trust you'll have the seller ready to meet me in time for dinner?"

Mal managed a tight smile. "With bells on."

"Marvelous. I'll send my rickshaw to pick him up. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm a very busy man, Captain." With an infuriating little head bob, the mayor reached out a hand and closed the connection.

Mal watched the screen blink off, fingers flexing at his side. "Arrogant, *hun dan* son of a whore," he snarled under his breath, before turning from the monitor. "Now where in hell am I gonna find me a prissified Core shoe guru at this time of day?"

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"Captain, this is ridiculous. You can't really expect me to do this on such short notice!" Simon protested hotly, looking up from where he was seated next to Kaylee.

"You did it just fine with no promptin' when we was on Canton," Mal countered, ignoring everyone else present at the moment. Past differences aside, he couldn't afford to let Simon back out of this.

"Need I remind you how that went?" Simon countered. "I hope not, because personally, I've been trying to forget." Simon tried studiously to ignore him and resumed watching the game of dominoes Kaylee and River were playing.

"Doc, you're a member of this crew," Mal continued, "That means if I need to use you to swindle swineish mayors out of their hard earned dollars, I'll use you. *Dong ma?* Right now, I need to use you so you'd best be complyin'."

"And why, dare I ask, do you expect me to do anything to help you?" the doctor demanded, his voice laced with anger. "Or have you forgotten that you tried to kill me barely a week ago?"

Wash looked up from where he was sprawled out on one of the gaming sofas, an amused expression on his face. In one hand he had a bottle of Kaylee's hooch and a half-drained cup in the other. "It's always hard to forget when the captain starts threatening to kill members of his crew!" he sarcastically called.

Mal frowned and chose to ignore Wash. "Fair enough -- but here's the thing. This is our first job with Fanty and Mingo, and if we blow it, it's also our last job for 'em. Not only that, we don't make good and they'll send their boys to collect what we owe 'em. When them boys come to collect, they take our money, our merchandise, and our kneecaps -- including those of anyone who didn't want to help because they was still pissed at me for something I've done put behind me already. Hell, if I didn't make my crew work when they was pissed at me, we'd never get anything done."

"That's true," Jayne snorted in agreement. Mal glared at him and he shut up.

Simon looked to be waging some kind of internal war. When his face finally crumpled in a look of defeat, Mal knew he'd won. "But I don't know anything about shoes!" the doctor complained.

"I can guarantee you, neither does this guy. Just act all prissy like you're good at and pretend like you do. He'll eat it up. You didn't know nothin' about mud neither, did you? Besides, I'll be sending Jayne with you."

"Why d'I gotta go with him?" Jayne complained and thumbed at Simon. The mercenary was slouching back against the table, his legs sprawled out into the room. "I ain't a Core pretty boy. Why can't ya send Wash?"

"You implyin' I'm a pretty boy, Jayne?" Wash asked, fluttering his lashes.

"If the shoe fits," the mercenary muttered.

"That is quite possibly the worst pun I've ever heard," Wash deadpanned, before breaking into a victorious smile. "I commend you!" he crowed and raised his glass.

"Wash ain't Core, Jayne," Zoe remarked with trademark calm as she stepped away from the stairwell.

"Wouldn't be your husband if I was, right lamby toes?" he grinned at her.

"Don't matter none. Big mouth like his, he can put it on," Jayne retorted grumpily.

"Look, y'all shut up," Mal snapped before the argument could deteriorate into a sniping match. "Jayne, you gotta go cuz you're the biggest one here. I ain't sendin' you to be a shoe merchant -- I'm sending you to be a bodyguard."

Simon visibly paled at this and Kaylee looked up from her game with River, concerned. "You think he'll need a bodyguard?"

"No, I don't. Nickelcreek ain't exactly ribbons and ponies, but it's safe enough. What it is, though, is Border -- and you're supposed to be coming from deep Core. Man like that's liable to get nervous, heading out into the black. Bound to bring along some hired muscle, just to impress the buyers 'n keep the locals in line." He nodded to Jayne. "Bingo."

Jayne made a face. "Aw, hell, Mal --"

"Quit yer bellyachin', cuz it's already been decided," Mal cut him off. "Simon, I want you to wear the most ridiculous, poney Core get up y'got. I don't want this fella havin' any doubt you're from Osiris, *dong ma?* Jayne, get your whoring shirt on."

"So, what am I supposed to do?" Jayne grumbled. "Hulk around and look big?"

"That's the idea. Keep the doctor out of trouble."

"So, he won't be required to actually talk?" Simon asked, hopefully.

"Nope."

"Good. For a moment I was worried."

"That s'posed to be an insult, Doc?" Jayne questioned, quirking an eyebrow.

"It was but I understand if the logic defied you," Simon countered.

"Okay, you two, that's enough," Mal silenced the men, running his hands distractedly through his hair. "You're worse'n a pair of old women, I swear. Simon, all you gotta do is convince him we're legit, then get him to fork over the payment we already got arranged. How's the leg?" he questioned.

Simon instinctively put his hand over where he'd been shot. "It's better, actually," he noted. "Not perfect but better."

"Good," Mal stated bluntly.

"There is a flaw in your plan, Captain," River interjected from where she was sitting, behind him.

"What would that be, Little Witch?" Mal asked, glancing over his shoulder at her and found her still intently concentrating on her game with Kaylee.

"This isn't legitimate, and Simon can't lie." It was disconcerting that she could hold a conversation with him while simultaneously trouncing Kaylee at dominoes.

Mal turned his attention back to the doctor. "That true, Doc?"

Simon was blushing faintly. "Well... I'll admit I have a little difficulty..."

"His ears go pink and he stammers," River supplied.

"Thank you, *mei-mei*," Simon said wearily.

"How come you didn't do none of that when you first come on board with Crazy?" Jayne asked, genuinely perplexed. "You were lyin' real good back then, least about what was in that box."

"First, I'd appreciate it if you'd not refer to my sister as '*Crazy*,'" Simon said irritably. "Secondly, that was acting, not lying. There's a difference."

"Well there you go then," Mal said, clapping the doctor on the back. "Consider this your chance to tread the boards in grand fashion, Doc. Your acting debut!"

Simon looked around the common room, saw the expectant smiles on every face but Jayne's, and sighed. "Fine," he mumbled, crossing his arms over his stomach. "But if my vest gets ruined, you owe me a new one."



The Training House and its outer-buildings had obviously been built by a Border world architect who thought he understood Companionhood but had clearly never been to a real Guild Hall. All the buildings looked like a very respectable brothels, including the large hall, which Inara assumed was the training center.

The deep red clapboard structures were tucked into a small canyon to protect it from some of the desert elements, but the buildings were already starting to look slightly weathered - and they weren't even finished yet. The main house had large windows and a farmer's porch decked out in ornate, classical gilt molding that offset the burgundy of the weatherboard.

It was, perhaps, the tackiest thing she'd ever seen. The Guild must be desperate for expansion if they were willing to train the novices in a place like this. In fact, the only aspect of the Training House that seemed familiar were the white robed novices, walking in giggling groups between the buildings.

"Inara!"

Turning, Inara smiled broadly as Miri emerged from the training house to wrap her in a perfumed hug. "Hello, Mi-Mi," Inara said, embracing the other woman in return. Miri was slightly taller than her, angular yet striking. She had what Inara's mother would call delicate features, though Inara knew from personal experience that Miri was far from fragile.

"Let me look at you," Miri breathed, holding her at arm's length. The other Companion was wearing a stunning green and gold silk gown that fluttered in the dry desert breeze. "I didn't think it was possible, Inara, but I believe you're even more radiant now than when you left Sihnon."

Inara gave the other woman a broad smile. "Nothing compared to you, Mi-Mi. Life in the Core has done you well."

Miri did incline her head in pleased acknowledgment. "Life in the Core has been boring, that's what it's been," she said, hooking her arm through Inara's to guide the other Companion into the building. "Unlike you, out there in the wild black empty, fending for yourself against the worst kind of adversity."

Inara laughed, leaning against the other woman's arm. "I've had help, Mi-Mi," she reminded the other woman. "It's not as if I've been all alone, with just my wits and a pen knife."

"It can't be much better than that, if you're willing to give it up to be planetside again."

Inara sighed, resting her temple on the curve of her friend's shoulder. "It's... complicated," she said. "I just need some breathing room."

Miri patted her hand sympathetically. "Lucky for you, we've got that in spades."

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When Wash went to find Kaylee in the engine room, he expected he might find River as well. The two girls spent a lot of their free time together, and since Kaylee was in love with Serenity's engine in a way that sometimes bordered on disturbing, they spent most of that time in the engine room.

What he hadn't expected to find was a fashion show.

Kaylee and River were dressed in what looked like a pair of Inara's dresses. Their eyes were shadowed and outlined and highlighted until they smoldered. Kaylee's normally rosy complexion was virtually glowing with the addition of some bronzer on her cheeks and a warm shimmer of tinted lip gloss. River's normally unruly hair had been brushed until it gleamed and hung down her back like a black silk curtain. The only makeup she wore besides what was around her eyes was a touch of clear gloss on her lips.

"I'm sorry," Wash said as he paused in the doorway, blinking and rubbing at his eyes with one hand as if they were a mirage, in the other he held an empty bottle. "Am I supposed to pay an entry fee?"

The two girls exchanged glances and grinned at him. "What do y'think, Wash?" Kaylee asked, turning a circle, arms held out to the sides in regal fashion. Her dress was apple green and hugged her curves. "How do I look?"

"And me?" River asked eagerly, spinning around ballerina style. Unlike Kaylee's gown, River's dress was pale violet, with white rosebuds embroidered on the bodice and a long, flowing skirt that curled around her legs as she spun.

"Sorry, what?" Wash asked, blinking back and forth between them. "I was distracted by all the pretty."

Kaylee and River both laughed again. "We're playing dress up," River proclaimed.

"Inara let us borrow some of her clothes 'fore she left," Kaylee explained, beaming. "Said we could pick any ones we wanted. Said we needed somethin' pretty to go with our new shoes."

"They never let me play dress-up anymore," Wash pouted.

Both girls giggled at that and tugged up the hems of their dresses, each extending a foot to show off their shoes. Wash recognized Kaylee's fake Francesco Chans as ones he'd considered appropriating for Zoe to wear before settling on the patent leather pumps.

"Aww, you little thieves, you!" he cooed, reaching out to pinch their cheeks. "How'd you manage to talk our big, bad captain into letting you each have a pair? Zoe said he wouldn't let us have any."

Kaylee winked at him. "'Cause we didn't tell 'im," she announced proudly.

River nodded solemnly. "What the captain does not know won't hurt him."

"So you just... went around Mal?" Wash asked earnestly.

Kaylee shrugged. "Sure," she replied, as River began pirouetting around the engine. Wash wondered how she could do that in heels. "Not like it's anything special. Just a pair o' shoes."

"Two pairs," River corrected, doing a high kick to the side.

"Two pairs," Kaylee admitted.

"Each."

"River!" Kaylee shushed her friend, blushing deeply and darting her eyes in Wash's direction.

"Oh, fear not, my little thieving friends," Wash said, holding up his hands and winking at them. "I promise I won't tell."

"Wash likes shoes," River stated plainly, mid-*pliée*. "He likes the way they make Zoe's legs look."

Wash grinned broadly. "Yes, yes I do. Who wouldn't? These are damn fine shoes, too. Really nice! I'm not looking forward to putting them back." He shrugged. "But Zoe said I had to; can't have the captain's wrath on me any more than usual." He gave an exasperated sigh.

Kaylee sobered at that. "You won't tell him, will you Wash?"

Wash put his hand over his heart. "I swear by the grave of my sainted Aunt Betsy."

"You don't have an Aunt Betsy," River said matter-of-factly.

"Eh. Semantics." Wash made a flippant hand gesture. "But you two should be a bit more discreet about your pilfered cargo, at least until the deal's been made and we're off this craggy moon." He turned to go, but then remembered why he'd come. "Oh, hey Kaylee?" He waved the empty bottle he'd been holding in his hand expressively. The younger girl merely grinned at him and waved him towards her homemade still.



"Earl Grey or green?"

"Green, please."

Miri smiled and nodded, gracefully filling Inara's teacup with fragrant green tea. "I don't know why I ask," she mused, taking a seat across from her friend and raising her own teacup. "Whenever you have a choice, you always choose green tea."

Inara grinned, lifted her cup delicately and took a sip. "It's proper protocol to ask. Besides, you never know. I haven't seen you in ages: things might have changed."

"Not with you, Inara. You're as steady as a rock."

Inara sighed, gazing down into her tea. "I'm glad one of us thinks so," she murmured, idly swirling the liquid until it came dangerously close to overflowing. That was how she felt -- a swirling vortex barely constrained by a porcelain shell. She wondered when her

thoughts had become so apocalyptic. Was it after she'd met Mal? She had an unpleasant feeling they'd actually begun before she'd ever set foot on Serenity.

"Deep thoughts?"

Inara looked up from her tea to find Miri smiling at her, one elegant eyebrow raised in amusement. Smiling, slightly embarrassed, Inara nodded. "I was just thinking about why I left all this in the first place," she explained, setting her teacup down in an attempt to stave off further distraction.

"And?"

"And I'm wondering if I really want to come back to it."

Miri leaned forward, setting down her own tea, and reached across the low table to take Inara's hands between her own. "You belong here, Inara," she said, giving her friend's hands an encouraging squeeze. "You always have. It's in your blood. Your mother would agree with me, if she were here to say it"

Inara sighed heavily at the mention of her mother. "But that's just it, Miri," she explained. "She is here. Epoline Serra is everywhere I go. Sometimes it's like I can even see her in the mirror."

"She is one of the most celebrated Companions of all time, Inara. Surely you take pride in that." The other Companion sounded vaguely scandalized; but then, Miri had always been devoted to Epoline. It was one of the few things Inara could find fault with in her friend, though truthfully she couldn't blame the other woman; everyone idolized Epoline.

Almost everyone.

"I do," Inara concurred quickly, but then let out a deep sigh. She was sighing far too much and knew it was unbecoming of her. "I truly do. But she left deep footsteps for me to follow, down very structured paths, and I'm not sure I'm willing to fill those footsteps or follow those paths." Or still call her my mother, she thought ruefully.

Miri sat back. "Is this about becoming Guild Mistress?"

Inara didn't answer. Her silence said more than enough.

Miri nodded, and stood in one fluid motion. "There's no denying it's always been your birthright," she said, gliding away from the sitting nook to stand by the window and gaze out over the grounds. "Ever since Epoline Serra gave birth to a daughter, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that you would one day inherit administration of the Guild. The voting would just be window dressing." Inara could sense a hint of something in the other woman's voice. It sounded a bit like envy.

"It was never something I asked for, Mi-Mi," she explained softly.

"Nonetheless, that's how it stands." Miri gazed back at her, face a blank mask. "You have supporters, you know."

Inara looked up sharply. "What?"

"People who would endorse you for the position," Miri clarified. "Even when you left, the voices in support of you never wavered. A few have faded out as time passed, but only because they've all been gradually replaced with new faces, and fresh voices. But your favorable rating is still remarkable. If you were to put your name forward to become Mistress, I can say with some certainty you'd win."

"Against whom?" Inara asked, half laughing, because it was just ridiculous to imagine herself in that position. "Empty air? My mother? You said it yourself, Miri. I've been fending for myself out in the black. I've consorted with thieves. I'm hardly a pillar of virtue." In her head she heard Mal's voice: Can a Companion be a pillar of virtue?

"That means nothing," Miri said with a dismissive toss of her hand. "You know how it works, Inara. It's all about blood and reputation, and when worse comes to worst, blood trumps reputation every time." She laughed. "How else do you explain the men and women we consort with? Rich fools and imbeciles, the lot of them. But they have the power because of their name. A name has more weight on the scale of human dynamics than any number of deeds. It's the way the 'verse works." Again, her tone was bitter; almost biting. Perhaps spending so much time in the Core hadn't been good for her after all.

Inara shook her head. "I don't know why we're discussing this, Mi-Mi," she said, standing and walking away from the sitting area, turning her back to Miri and the window. She needed to move around, clear her head. "I don't want the position and I never have. My mother's welcome to it, and then the cards can fall as they will." She rubbed her temples. "That's why I left in the first place. I couldn't stand the politics." That was at least partially true; it had been one reason.

A moment passed, and then she felt comforting arms wrap around her waist from behind. "I'm sorry," Miri said near her ear, and Inara closed her eyes, letting herself lean back against her friend. "I just thought you should know."

"I know," Inara murmured, as Miri combed soothing fingers through her hair. "Thank you."

"It isn't as bad as you may think," the other Companion assured her. "These Border World Houses are still fairly low key. You could come here and stay relatively off the radar."

"Let me think about it, Miri."

"Take all the time you need, *mei-mei*."

Inara managed a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. In front of her she could see the desert through the floor-to-ceiling window. A tumbleweed went spiraling across the sand, echoing her turbulent thoughts. She was looking for a new beginning, but she couldn't shake the feeling that all the loose ends from her past were coalescing right here, in this moment in time. It made her want to run away again, cowardly though it seemed.

But where was she supposed to run? Back to Serenity? How could she do that, when Malcolm Reynolds was the largest loose end of them all?



Heckle held one blue stiletto up, examining it closely. The rhinestones on the strap sparkled in the light that filtered through the four-paned windows, throwing rainbows across the room. "I still don't know. They don't look right to me." His eyes narrowed, looking to Simon. "Something about this smells fishy."

Simon glanced at Jayne, but the mercenary kept his mouth shut. Mal had said not to talk, and he wasn't going to be blamed for this job going south because he couldn't hold up his end of the deal. Besides, it was fun watching Simon sweat.

The doctor swallowed and turned back to Heckle. "And what fault, precisely, have you to find?" he asked in his snootiest Core voice. Jayne thought it fit him real well. "I assure you, these are one hundred percent legitimate. Mr. Chan would be most offended to hear that his merchandise had been questioned by," he paused, seeming to choose his words carefully, "a man of your station."

Jayne could barely keep himself from laughing. He knew exactly what Simon wanted to say; he clearly disliked the oily little man as much as Jayne did. Simon shot him a death glare, but he just smirked back. Just because Simon got to play the boss didn't mean he actually was. Jayne glanced over to make sure Heckle was still engrossed in the shoe, and mouthed '*chain of command*' to Simon.

Simon narrowed his eyes and a slow smile spread across his face. It broadened, and Jayne felt a little nervous. He wasn't sure what Simon had planned, but he knew he couldn't do much to stop him, not if he wanted to get paid.

Heckle carefully placed the shoe back in the box. "My son's been to the Core and back; he'll be able to give me his opinion. You'll meet him at dinner. I won't be able to attend, unfortunately - prior engagement - but you should get along well, assuming you're really from Osiris like you say," the mayor added, suspicions returning. Then, with a brighter look, "But I certainly don't wish to upset Mr. Chan by questioning his products. I'm sure he'd be pleased to know I was on the lookout for counterfeit merchandise, though." He smiled generously, obviously thinking his dutiful spirit would endear him to Mr. Chan's duly selected representatives.

It didn't.

Jayne watched as Simon smiled at the mayor. "Dinner sounds fabulous. It would be such a trial trying to find food in any of the local establishments around here. I prefer to not have to pick buckshot out of my filet mignon. I've met more than enough of these Border and Rim types to know they aren't my kind of people. Not *our* kind of people," he added with a wink to the mayor, who winked back in return. "This one has barely enough brains to make a decent body guard," the doctor noted, nodding towards Jayne.

Heckle laughed. "Don't I know it! I sent my boy out to the Core to get him a decent education, since there's nothing here." He glanced at Jayne, then lowered his voice so the mercenary could barely hear him. "Plus, he just, uh, doesn't fit in around Nickelcreek - he's too fancy and educated for the folks 'round here. People think he's stuck up. You should get along well."

Jayne snorted at that, and quickly covered it up with a cough as the two men turned to look at him. "Sorry, jus' got some," he coughed again, "dust in my mouth."

"It is a bit dry in here," Simon agreed smoothly. "Perhaps Sue could have a glass of water?" Jayne nodded vigorously, agreeing with Simon before it occurred to him that Simon had just called him Sue. The Doc was a dead man.



Inara spent the next hour exploring the grounds. Miri showed her the particular points of interest and then let her wander on her own, for which Inara was eternally grateful. She needed time alone with her thoughts.

She couldn't go back to Serenity, that was a given. Things between herself and Mal had become too strained. What did she feel for him? More importantly, what did he feel for her? She'd been trained to control her emotions, but Mal had no such background. He hid them well enough, but they were there nonetheless, shifting beneath the surface like tectonic plates. It didn't take a Reader to know what he was feeling at any given moment; all she had to do was look into his eyes. Inara tried to avoid his eyes now and had done so ever since Nandi. There was too much written there for her to read and she couldn't deny being afraid that she'd look into his eyes and find... nothing. Somehow, seeing apathy in Mal's eyes would be more painful than seeing anger.

When had that happened? When had she begun to let herself feel anything but professionalism towards this vagabond captain? He was an insufferable hothead, and rude on top of that. He'd been a Browncoat; she'd supported Unification. He spent his life on the wrong side of the law; she was the picture of respectability. Or she had been once, before she'd gotten tangled up in his band of misfits. All in all, her entire life had been turned on its ear when she'd agreed to rent his shuttle, and honestly, did the benefits really outweigh the costs?

There was friendship, and freedom, and late night girl talks with Kaylee.

But there was also suspicion, and confusion, and screaming matches that left her tired and shaky. What right did Mal have to question her actions anyway? What right did he have to try and play the knight in shining armor, especially when he didn't even see her as a princess? She was nothing to him: a painted lady; a whore.

She'd been born to be a Companion; her mother would never have allowed anything else. Inara had never thought she could *be* anything else. She had always been proud of what she was, but when Mal called her a whore she hardly took it as an insult anymore. One of the core tenets of Companionhood was that a Companion wasn't a whore, and should never suffer herself to be called one. But she took it from him and didn't mind; she'd ceased minding long ago. It was almost an endearment between them. What did it say about him, that he could toss aside her beliefs so easily?

What did it say about her?

She'd grown up surrounded by women, knowing who she was. A simple act of rebellion had brought her to Serenity; in a little over a year under the stewardship of an irascible captain, she was questioning everything she'd ever learned. It was terrifying.

She found Miri at Buddha's altar, lighting a stick of incense under the statue's watchful eye. It was a tranquil scene; a haven of serenity.

"*Mei-mei?*" Miri asked upon catching sight of Inara hovering in the doorway. "Do you need something?"

Inara managed a shaky smile, and this time it touched her eyes. "I think I want to come home," she whispered.

Miri gazed at her for a moment, then smiled in return. "You already are."



"Oh, I love the theatre on the Core. We used to go every other weekend when I was on Sihnon." Edwin, Mayor Heckle's son, spoke with his hands, his food forgotten on his plate. "The dancers were always so expressive, moving, speaking with their bodies." He smiled at Simon.

Simon smiled back. "Sihnon always has the best dancers in the Core. But Osiris -- Osiris will always be home."

Jayne grunted, bringing Simon's attention back to the big man. He was eating and obviously angry. "Do you need something, Sue? Butter? More vegetables?" The doctor smirked, enjoying Jayne's discomfort more than he should.

"No, boss, I'm just fine," the mercenary said, barely keeping the annoyance out of his voice. Simon only smiled wider.

"Reid, it's so nice to meet someone else who knows where I'm coming from," Edwin interjected, grinning at Simon.

It took the doctor a half second too long to answer to the name he'd chosen and he felt Jayne kick him under the table. "Oh, yes! I've been out here on the Border far too long, surrounded by criminals and brutes, and not a bit of civilization in sight."

"Sue," Edwin asked, smiling broadly at the mercenary when the larger man snorted, "are you alright?"

"I'm fine, kid," Jayne answered, looking slightly uncomfortable. "Just need to get some fresh air. Y'don't mind, do ya, boss?" He nearly growled the last word, directing the end of his comment at Simon. Without waiting for an answer, he pushed away from the table and stalked out to the porch.



Inara and Miri were walking, arms linked, through the ceremonial garden behind the Training House. Tall fences blocked out most of the wind, though the plants that sprouted up from the ground were all desert varieties, hardy and dry. Paper lanterns cast a warm, honey-gold glow over both women.

"There will be a panel, you understand," Miri murmured. "You left quite abruptly last time. They'll want to make sure you won't do the same again."

Inara sighed. "Yes, I know. I can handle it."

"I can convene it as early as tomorrow, if you'd like," Miri offered. "I'll be leaving for Sihnon soon, but I can arrange this for you before I go."

"Tomorrow?" Inara stopped walking. "I'll have to say a proper farewell to Serenity's crew. It's the least I owe them. Especially Kaylee." She smiled sadly as she imagined the hurt look that would no doubt suffuse the cheerful engineer's face. "They've been good to me. I'll miss them."

"Even the captain?"

"Yes," Inara conceded. "He can be difficult, but he's personable in an obstinate, pigheaded kind of way." An amused smile touched her lips, and she didn't bother to fight it. She was tired of fighting, and now she didn't have to anymore. "Stubborn as an ox, really. Sometimes I think he keeps his ship in the sky through sheer force of will."

"He sounds intriguing."

Inara resisted the urge to snort. "That's one way of putting it."

"Have you ever serviced him?"

This time when Inara looked at her friend, she was in time to see Miri glance away quickly. "What are you implying?" she asked. Something about this situation didn't feel right all of a sudden.

"Nothing, Inara. I was simply asking a question." Miri gave her an indulgent smile. "You just seem to radiate an affection towards him that made me wonder."

"Wonder what exactly?" Inara didn't like the direction this conversation was headed.

"Just...wonder."

"I don't think I like what you're insinuating."

"*Mei-mei*, I'm not insinuating anything. But there's no denying, money is thinner the further you get from the Core. Perhaps, instead of rent, you and your captain worked out some kind of arrangement..." The other Companion let the sentence trail off, as if expecting Inara to fill in the rest.

For a moment, all Inara could do was blink at her friend in bewildered disbelief. "Miri, I know the Guild law better than anyone," she protested. "When it comes to matters of personal financial responsibility, it is strictly forbidden for a Companion to --"

"This is the black, Inara. The rules aren't as clear out here as they are on Sihnon."

Inara pulled away from her friend, shocked. "Rules are rules," Inara said, off-put by Miri's placid stare. "On Sihnon, on Athens -- *anywhere* -- it doesn't matter. An offense of that nature..." She trailed off, frankly floored that Miri would even suggest it. "Trading sex for services? That's the work of a...a..."

"No need to get emotional, *mei-mei*," Miri soothed. Only it wasn't soothing. It was...*slick*, like oil.

Inara slit her eyes. It was funny, really; she'd known Miri most of her life, but looking at the other woman now, she almost couldn't recognize her. "I've done nothing wrong.""

"Of course you haven't," the other woman agreed lightly.

"What's going on here, Miri?" she demanded.

"I just want you to be prepared, Inara," Miri explained. "I'll have to ask you these questions tomorrow, especially since you would be instructing novices. The leadership will want to be assured that you haven't compromised yourself or the Guild."

"I would never do such a thing."

Miri's smile did nothing to soften her feline features. "Of course you wouldn't."

"What are you playing at?" Inara snapped.

"I don't play, Inara."

"No, you never have, have you? Even when we were children, you were always the prim one."

"Not prim, Inara. Poised." A flicker of steel in her gaze was the only indication that she was losing patience. "I couldn't run and hide behind my mother's skirts if I misbehaved."

Inara stared. "That's what this is about," she murmured after a moment, dumbfounded. "You're jealous."

This time the flicker of steel turned to a flame in Miri's eyes. "Oh, don't be so self-absorbed, Inara," the other woman sneered. "Why would I be jealous of you? What is there to be jealous of? A hand-me-down shuttle on a flying garbage heap? I have more dignity than that."

Inara shook her head, staring at her friend as if she'd never seen her before. "*Ai ya*, I see it now," she murmured, shaking her head faintly. "All this time, Miri --all these *years* -- you had me believing you were my friend and it couldn't have been further from the truth! I remember when you came to the training house; my mother knew right away you had potential. That alone should have been my first clue. It must have been like Christmas come early when you discovered your roommate was Epoline's daughter. Drop the name 'Serra' in the appropriate ears and you could get anything you wanted."

Miri straightened her back until she stood ramrod straight, face resettling itself into icy calm. "You want me to feel guilty for using you? For advancing myself through you? Why should I feel any guilt about that? If you weren't going to use the cards fate had dealt you, then I was going to make sure they didn't go to waste."

"So all this time, our friendship has just been a game." It wasn't a question. "I was just a pawn."

"You were the queen," Miri corrected. "You helped me take the board. When you weren't there, your name was all I needed. In fact, I've never properly thanked you for leaving. Everyone was so confused when you left; they all came to me, asking the same question over and over again: 'Why did she go?' Surely *I* would be able to answer such a simple question; after all, we'd been attached at the hip since we were children!" She affected a sad face. "But I didn't have any answers for them. *A mystery*, I told them. *All for the best*, I said. I knew enough to reach for your power."

"And that's what this is all about, isn't it, Miri? Power. That's all you want."

"Power is the only thing *worth* wanting, but you don't believe that, do you? All your life, all you've ever wanted is for someone to love you," Miri sneered. "That's why it was so easy to use you - because you're so desperate. Your mother sees it, and it makes her sick that you're so weak."

"My mother," Inara repeated, smiling coldly. "Let me tell you about my mother. She knows exactly where to draw the line between emotion and professionalism. She makes her clients believe -- fervently believe -- that she cares about them. Perhaps she does; I don't know. But they believe, and that's all that matters. I don't think she knows that behind her façade, there's nothing there but an empty heart."

Coming to a stop a hand's breadth from Miri, Inara gazed up into the taller woman's face. "I'll never be my mother," she said, voice level, "and believe me when I say I'm grateful for that. There's such a thing as feeling too much; but there is also such a thing as not feeling enough. That's where you fall.

"You've spent your entire life manipulating those around you. And for what? A title? Power? As if they were the only things in life that mattered." Her face softened with pity. "You used to have a heart, Miri, but you've sold out for personal gain. There's a name for people like you."

Miri shrugged, "Is this the part where you slap me and call me a whore, Inara?"

"No, Miri. This is where I say goodbye. I'd like to say I'll miss you, but I don't really think I will. After all, there's nothing there to miss." Turning on her heel, she began to walk away.

"You're throwing away your life, Inara. You don't deserve to be Epoline's heir!" Miri called after her. "She loves me like a daughter!"

"That woman doesn't know how to love a daughter, Miri," Inara muttered without looking back. "Believe me. *I know.*"



Simon and Edwin found Jayne on the porch, smoking a cigar. He turned and glared as they exited the house. "What do you two want?"

Simon returned the glare holding up the box of samples. "We're discussing the goods, and wanted to make sure you hadn't wandered off, Sue. You tend to get yourself in trouble."

Jayne sputtered, "I get myself in trouble? Didn't you get kidnapped once? Weren't that a good day," he added, looking almost wistful.

Simon bit back a smart retort, remembering Edwin was still there. "Pay no attention to him." He sat in one of the wrought iron chairs, pointedly looking away from Jayne. "Like I said, not very bright. Doesn't know that insulting one's employer is a good way to *not get paid.*" He deliberately emphasized the last part and vowed to tell Mal exactly what he thought about getting shanghaied into one of the captain's idiot schemes with Jayne of all people.

The mercenary mumbled something Simon was sure was obscene. Ignoring him, the doctor smiled at Edwin. "I think we should talk more about the shoes and less about my trained man-ape, don't you?"

Edwin glanced over at the larger man. "Oh, I don't know," he mused, voice low and a grin on his face. "I think it might be fun to talk about him."

Simon looked from Edwin to Jayne and back again. The mercenary was leaning against one of the porch's white columns, staring at the town and chewing on his cigar and ignoring them.

"Nooo...", the doctor said, drawing out the phrase and watching Edwin's face. "No, I... don't think so. He's... infuriating. Idiotic, to be sure. Ridiculous. Rude. Uncouth." He ticked off the characteristics on his fingers. "Foul-mouthed and occasionally smelly."

Edwin raised an eyebrow. "If you say so," he murmured. "I think he's rather handsome."

To say Simon was floored would have been an understatement. Kaylee would have called him buffaloed. "Really?" he managed, after much internal debate.

Edwin laughed. "I could probably stare at him all day." After a moment, he turned a twinkling smile at Simon and winked. "Now, about these Francesco Chans."

He picked up one of the shoes, the same blue stiletto his father had examined earlier. He sniffed it and flicked it with his finger. Then he picked up a black pump and examined it. He knocked on the sole, holding it to his ear like a conch shell.

Simon tried not to look nervous. He'd have done a better job if Jayne's leg hadn't been bouncing up and down in the corner of his eye like an anxiety-ridden jackhammer. The mercenary had slung himself down in a chair when he saw what Edwin was doing, and now he was watching the scene with hard blue eyes.

Edwin set the shoe down with a sigh. "Not bad," he said appreciatively. "You two are good."

"What do you mean?" Simon asked, feeling his heart sink into his stomach.

Edwin smiled at him. "I mean these are some of the higher quality knock-offs I've seen."

He heard Jayne swear.

"Listen," Edwin said, leaning in. "I'm not stupid. You're not a fashion designer, and he's not your bodyguard. These aren't Francesco Chans, and this isn't on the up and up." Simon's face fell, and Jayne looked murderous. "But I don't particularly care."

"Huh?" Jayne straightened up in his seat. "What do ya mean?"

"My father is an idiot. As you saw," he nodded to Simon, "he has no idea what 'refinement' means, and he doesn't understand me at all."

"So...you're gonna lie to him?" Jayne asked the obvious question, and for once Simon was grateful, since he wasn't sure he could speak at the moment.

Edwin looked at Jayne. "Well, maybe. Pulling the wool over my father's eyes would entertain me, but that's not really enough."

"We'll do anything," Simon was quick to promise.

Edwin smiled at Simon, and then looked back to Jayne. "There's a party I've been invited to tonight. It would be an unforgivable faux pas if I were to show up without a date." He raised a meaningful eyebrow.

Jayne stared at him for a minute. "So?"

Simon tried not to laugh.

"So, I need a date," Edwin re-iterated.

"Yeah, I heard ya. I ain't deaf. Get yerself a whore."

"I'm afraid all we have are female whores around here."

Jayne looked at the younger man in confusion.

"Simon?" Edwin asked after a moment.

"Hmm?" Simon didn't trust himself with real words just now. If he opened his mouth, he was going to bust out laughing.

"You really weren't lying when you said this one was slow, were you?"

"Oh, he'll get it eventually," Simon assured the mayor's son. "Just watch his eyes. You'll know he gets it when-"

Jayne's eyes suddenly grew wide. His mouth worked involuntarily, but no sound came out.

"When that happens, actually," Simon finished, grinning.

"NO RUTTIN' WAY!" the mercenary howled, leaping up from his chair and backing away until the porch railing pressed against his backside.

Simon gave him a stern glare. "Jayne, I do believe he's asking you out." He couldn't resist a wicked smile at the mercenary's expense. "You're not going to refuse our host, are you?"

"Hell yes I am! No ruttin' way!" he repeated and put his hands out as though Edwin would suddenly jump on him.

Edwin looked over at Simon, ignoring the mercenary's tirade. "Jayne, is it? That's hardly better than Sue." Turning back to Jayne, he asked, "So, what do you say?"

"You deaf, boy? I said no ruttin' way!"

"I'll make it worth your while."

"Ah, hell, I don't even wanna hear --"

"For one thing, I won't turn you in to my father," Edwin continued, cutting him off. "He tends to get a bit... snippy when people try to 'hornswoggle' him."

Jayne closed his mouth with a snap.

Edwin smiled. "Good boy."

Simon had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

"Second, I'll see to it you get paid," the other young man continued, lounging comfortably in his chair. "You do want to get paid, don't you?"

Jayne's eyes sparkled with greed, and Simon knew the other man was hooked. Jayne was a man of principle, after all, provided it was spelled 'principal' and was spoken in the monetary sense.

"So if I don't go, we don't get paid?" the mercenary asked.

Edwin nodded.

Jayne visibly fought with himself. Simon almost felt sorry for the larger man, being forced to choose between two of his greatest loves: money and his masculinity.

"*Ta ma de!*" Jayne finally exploded, glaring at both men. "No. No ruttin' way! I ain't doin' it!" But his resolve was visibly weakening.

Simon shrugged and leaned back in his chair. The battle was already won; he could tell from the dollar signs dancing in the mercenary's eyes. "Then you can explain to Mal why we're not getting paid," he said, crossing his hands behind his head. "It's all the same to me."

Jayne glared at him, before turning his baleful gaze to Edwin. "I ain't kissin' ya or holdin' your hand or nothin' like that, *dong ma?*"

"Just showing up with you will cause enough of a stir, I'm sure," Edwin replied. "Although I might insist we link arms one or twice." His eyes sparkled.

With a growl, the mercenary stabbed a finger in Simon's direction. "You tell a ruttin' soul and I swear I'll gut you with a toothpick."



She moved through the grounds as quickly as she could, wanting only to return to Serenity. She'd been a fool -- there was nothing for her here, only the things she'd given up position and comfort to run away from. This wasn't her world anymore.

"Miss?" A pretty blonde head was hanging out of a window from one of the buildings that had already been completed. "Miss Serra?" There was awe in the girl's tone.

"Yes?" Inara lifted her head, trying to swallow the emotions that had been rising up painfully within her.

The girl's head disappeared. "It is her," she said, in a muffled voice, and then, before Inara could quite process what was going on, a flock of young girls in the simple white shifts of novices rushed out of the building and crowded around her.

"I'm Sayla, and this is Aaralyn," the blonde said, indicating the redhead beside her. "You're really Inara Serra, from Sihnon?" Aaralyn was shyly fingering the richness of Inara's gown.

"Yes, I am." She turned to look at Aaralyn. "Where it isn't considered manners to touch people without permission," she said, her tone gently correcting.

"Sorry," the girl mouthed, blushing and smiling at the same time, reminding Inara a little bit of Kaylee.

"We have examples of your calligraphy for training," Sayla said, undauntedly excited. "They say you were the most gifted, and would have been a scribe or artist in the House if-"

Inara smiled. "I took great joy in calligraphy during my training, and still do." Remembering those days, sitting in a row of young girls like these, her whole body intent on the brush-strokes, soothed Inara's agitation. "Do you study the dulcimer as well?"

"Yes, miss," Aaralyn said with a slight wrinkling of her nose. "But the music master doesn't even seem to listen, just keeps saying, 'You're playing it, not-'"

"Feeling it," Inara concluded, her heart contracting. *Nandi*.

"Are you really coming here to teach us?" Sayla demanded. "To stay here?"

"I..." Inara swallowed. "I don't know," she whispered, confused by the sudden transition in her feelings. These girls had made her remember the things she'd forgotten, the things that she loved about being a Companion: how it gave young girls years to explore their talents and polish themselves into beautiful women. She smiled at the girls almost tenderly. "We'll see."



Simon was in the mess when Mal entered. He must have been there for quite some time, judging by the empty plates in the sink and the book that was open on the doctor's knee. The captain hadn't heard them return, so he could only assume Jayne wasn't back yet. He didn't know what to think about that.

"So," he ventured, moving deeper into the room. "How'd it go?"

Simon only smirked. "I think Jayne can tell you better." He turned a page in his book and went back to reading.

Mal frowned, rummaging through the cupboards before emerging with a fruity-oaty bar. "Um, speaking of, where is Jayne? Did you get him killed? I know he's a big dumb animal, but we ain't got another merc lined up, and he's kinda useful."

Simon looked up and grinned as the captain took a seat at the table. "No. He's not dead. Though he might wish he was when everyone finds out where he's been."

"Okay, stop talking all cryptic like your sister and tell me what's going on."

"No can do, Captain. I made a promise, and I intend to keep it for oh," he looked at the time, "another five minutes or so."

Mal rolled his eyes. "Really, sometimes I wonder why I bother talking. Am I even the captain of my own ship?" He took a bite of his bar.

Jayne chose that moment to come stomping into the mess. He was wearing a bright purple shirt, his best whoring shirt clutched in his hand. He glared at Simon. "I don't want to hear a ruttin' word, Doc." He grabbed the bottle of Kaylee's moonshine Wash had left there earlier, popped the cork and took a long swig straight out of the bottle. He slammed it down, hand still wrapped around the neck, sucking in air like he was dying. "I'm serious Doc. You're a dead man."

Growling, he headed toward his bunk, nearly running into Kaylee and Book on the way. He stopped her, fishing bits of paper from his pocket. He shoved them at the little mechanic, muttering grumpily, "More boy numbers than you know what to do with. I'd give some to you, Shepherd, but y'ain't interested in that kinda thing."

Kaylee backed into the mess, hands clutched together, as she watched Jayne stomp down the hall towards his bunk. "Uh, can someone explain Mr. Grumpypants to me?" she asked, turning around to face Simon and Mal.

Simon was doubled over with silent mirth. He sucked in a breath, and let out a full peal of laughter. Both Mal and Kaylee looked at him as if he'd gone mad. "Simon? You all right over there?" Kaylee looked concerned.

He waved a hand, trying to catch his breath. "The mayor's son," he choked out. "Figured out we were trying to sell fakes."

"What?" Mal demanded, sitting up straighter.

Simon waved a hand in his direction as he regained his breath. "Don't worry, we sorted it out." He chuckled and wiped his streaming eyes. "See, Edwin - that's the son - had a party he had to go to."

"Yeah?" Mal said. "And?"

"And he needed a date."

Kaylee blinked. "So?"

"He took a real shine to Jayne." Simon smirked.

Mal blinked. He looked at Kaylee, who was just as confused, but giggling anyway. "You mean to tell me," the captain said slowly, "that to finish this job, Jayne went to a party? With a guy? As his date?"

Simon nodded. "And we got paid."

Mal blinked. "*Er zi de xiao diao gong niu!*"

"Aww, that's so sweet!" Kaylee cooed. "Jayne looked all handsome dressed up in that purpley shirt." She paused, thinking. "Well, he looked special at least."

"He certainly got enough numbers," Mal smirked, glancing at the bits of paper his mechanic was now clutching. "Not that they'll do you much good, little Kaylee."

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Zoe climbed down to the bunk she shared with Wash, making very little sound. She stepped off the bottom rung and looked over at her husband, who was tucked cozily in bed. "Wash? What the hell are you doing?"

Eyes wide, he tried futilely to hide the shoe he'd been rubbing lovingly against his cheek. "What? I'm not doing anything."

"Baby, you were molesting that shoe. The shoe that does not belong to you." Zoe took a few steps toward the bed, where her husband had just recently been fondling a black kitten heel.

Wash held it close to his chest. "I was not. And Mal won't miss them anyway. It's just one pair. Besides, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," he said, trying the tactic Kaylee and River had told him.

Zoe put her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

Wash stood his ground, holding the shoe close to his body. "Mine." He stroked it with one finger and gave her a playful grin.

She extended a hand, her face completely serious. "Give it to me, Hoban Washburn."

He tried to hold out, but after just a moment of Zoe's eyes on him, he sighed, the mirth fading out of his eyes and handed it over. "The left shoe is by the ladder," he muttered.

She shook her head and walked back to the ladder, dropping the shoe next to its mate. She sighed and headed back toward the bed, untucking her shirt on the way.

"Sometimes your kinks make me wonder, honey," Zoe chuckled as she tugged her shirt off over her head.

"It's just one pair of shoes, Zo'."

"Two pairs, counting that other pair you took. You put them back like I told you to?" His silence was all the answer she needed. "Wash, you can't go stealin' cargo. I told you that."

"They're shoes, Zoe!"

"I don't care if they're earthworms. We don't take cargo. Mal's rules."

Wash crossed his arms as she sat on the end of the bed. "Why is it a problem if I want to keep a pair for my lovely wife to wear?"

Zoe leaned down to unlace her boots. "Can't run in heels, Wash, and if you can't run you can't fight."

"So, you're just going to kill my fantasy, just like that? Real great, Zo'." His tone had turned flat and for once he wasn't joking.

Zoe finished unlacing her right boot and set it neatly to the side before starting on the left. "It's not like that, and you know it. I have a job to do aboard this ship. When the captain tells me to do something, I don't ask questions. Mal says don't take cargo, so we don't take cargo." She didn't look up at him, but continued to untie the cords.

"Right. Just blindly follow Mal to the ends of 'verse, no matter who it hurts." Wash shook his head, his lips tight. "Sounds like a damn good plan to me."

She sat up stiffly. "You suggestin' I shouldn't follow the orders of my captain, baby?" she asked.

"Are you going to tell me that you'd have been okay having killed Simon knowing what we know now? Just because you had Mal's say-so? We can't always blindly follow the leader and you need to see that."

Zoe took a deep breath before turning around on the bed. Her eyes bore into his. "You're talking mutiny, *bao bei*. I don't think you want to be doing that."

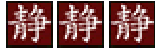
Wash rolled his eyes, and then focused again on his wife. His tone was slightly softer. "No, I'm not. I'm just saying sometimes you need to question your leaders. No one is infallible, not even the great Captain Malcolm Reynolds."

Her jaw tensed. "You 'bout done? 'Cause this same argument is gettin' a mite tiresome."

"I guess I'm done. I'll just sit back from now on, my mouth shut, watching you get rid of everything that bothers you: my shoes, Simon, whatever strikes your fancy."

Zoe stared at him. "Where's all this coming from, honey? You're not giving up, and I can't figure out why. You really want to win this that bad?"

He yanked on his boots and marched to the ladder. When he got there, he paused and looked over his shoulder at her. "Simon could have died, Zoe, and you don't even seem to care. You know I'm right. Deep down, you know I'm right." He swung an arm up, and climbed out.



The knock at Inara's door was soft, but it was a knock nonetheless. That in itself wasn't surprising. What was surprising was who it was that was doing the knocking.

"Mal!" Inara felt a surprised smile cross her face. "You're knocking now? When did this begin?"

Mal did his best to avoid looking like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but Inara wasn't buying it. "I just... I figured you might not be here," he explained. "I thought maybe you'd just sent back your shuttle."

Inara raised an amused eyebrow. "So you decided to knock on the off chance I might not be here to hear it?" She smiled, truly amused. "Have you been privy to any trees falling in the forest recently?"

Mal chuckled and ran a self-conscious hand through his hair. "Yeah, well..." He let the sentence trail off with a noncommittal shrug, and Inara didn't pursue the topic. She knew what he was thinking anyway. It was one thing to come barging into her shuttle when he knew she was there. It was another thing entirely to come barging into her shuttle and finding her gone instead.

"Would you like to come in?" Inara stepped aside so he could enter. She tried not to focus on all the implications bundled up in the column of space between them as he stepped into the shuttle. "Would you like some tea?" she asked, moving towards her sitting area.

"No, thank you kindly," Mal declined.

"How did the job go?" she asked, fixing herself a cup. Smiling up at him from under her lashes, she continued, "You don't look the worse for wear, so I imagine no one got shot."

Mal grinned. He had an infectious smile. It made her want to smile as well, when it didn't make her want to slap him. "I think it went fine enough, but you'll have to find out from Simon and Jayne. They did the lion's share of the work."

"Simon and Jayne?" Inara raised her eyebrows in surprise as she sat, raising her teacup to take a dainty sip. "You mean they had to work together?"

"Yep."

"And they didn't kill each other?"

"Surprisingly enough, no. Though I 'spect it was touch and go there for a while, judgin' by what I heard."

They shared a soft laugh before companionable silence fell again. Inara filled the quiet with another sip of her tea. This was unusual. They'd spent the last week at each other's throats, and now they were smiling at each other. She wasn't sure how that was possible, but just now, she didn't want to question it.

"So," Mal ventured after a quiet minute or so, "how'd the visit go?"

Inara took the time to deliberately swallow her tea. "It went," she hedged. She didn't feel in the mood to rehash all of her emotional baggage with him; not now, when it was still so fresh. Probably not ever.

"That good or bad?" Mal pressed.

Inara looked uncertain. She'd uncovered her former friend as a long time enemy and realized Pastiche was perhaps not the place for her. Even though Miri was based in the Core, the little backwater planet might hold too many bad memories. But she'd met the girls, seen how eager they were to learn from her... In short, she'd come to some fairly hefty conclusions on some fairly major questions, which could only be a good thing.

She looked down into her teacup and recognized it as a prop, a way to occupy her hands so she wouldn't start wringing them in her lap. "I'm not sure."

"How come?"

"It's...complicated," she supplied, knowing it wouldn't be enough but unwilling to say more.

"Complicated?" Mal held his hands out to either side, like a set of scales. Bobbing the left one, he said, "Good time." Then, bobbing the right, "Bad time." He wobbled back and forth, as if trying to find balance. "Which one was it?"

Inara sighed. "Why do you want to know, Mal?" she asked wearily, setting down her teacup so she could rub her throbbing temples. "It doesn't affect you."

She'd obviously said the wrong thing. Their short-lived peace came to an end as Mal snapped, "It does if it means you're gonna be stayin' on my boat much longer."

"Why are you so eager to get rid of me, Mal?" she demanded. "What have I ever done to you but pay you rent on time and earn you respect in certain circles?"

"You lied to me."

She fought the urge to rub her temples again. "Mal, we've been over this. The debacle with Simon was regrettable-"

"Regrettable?" Mal cut her off, choking halfway between a laugh and a bellow. "Did you say *regrettable*? Inara, I nearly killed him! Do you understand that? He could've died, 'cause you never told me you knew him from before!"

"But I did!"

"Yeah, when I all but had the barrel in his mouth!"

"What do you want me to say, Mal?" She held her hands out to him, palms upward in a sign of repentance. "That I'm sorry? I am! You will never begin to understand how sorry I am!"

"No, I won't!" Mal answered hotly. "On account of you won't tell me! You won't tell me a gorrām thing, Inara, and how'm I s'posed to take that? You won't say why you didn't tell me 'bout Simon, you won't tell me why you came out here to the black in the first place. Hell, you won't even tell me if you had yourself a good time on Pastiche! I mean, what kind of *feng le hun dan* d'you think I am?"

"I'm not lying to you, Mal," Inara protested, though the argument sounded weak even to her own ears.

"But you ain't tellin' me the whole truth, woman, and that's near as bad!" Mal threw up his hands in frustration.

Silence fell between them, full of static and inertia, before Mal sighed. "I expect the truth from the people I got around me, Inara." His voice dropped like a lead weight in the silent room. "Captain's gotta have trust, or the whole gorrām ship's gonna fall down 'round his ears."

"It's...not that I don't want to tell you anything, Mal," she explained miserably. "It's just that...I can't."

He cocked his head. "Can't or won't?"

She forced herself to hold his eyes. "Can't."

Mal shook his head again. "Now see? That right there's another gorrām lie. You can tell me anything; all you gotta do is move your mouth to say the words. But what you're implyin' is you won't. And that don't set right with me."

"What do you want me to say, Mal?" Inara whispered, dropping her eyes to stare at the floor between them.

"Tell me one thing you ain't never told me before," he said softly. "One thing that'd make me trust you again. Then we'll talk."

The silence stretched on.

"Right," he said with a sharp nod. "Message received." He spun on his heel and marched towards her door.

"My mother hates me."

Mal stopped, but didn't turn around. Inara ended up talking to the back of his boots, unwilling to bring her eyes up to stare at his shoulders.

"She's a Companion, too," she continued, "and I was a mistake. Companion's don't have babies." She laughed bitterly. "It tends to scare clients away."

Mal wasn't laughing, and he still hadn't turned around. Inara schooled her features back into a mask. "It's not even that she hates me," she murmured, a rueful smile twisting her lips. "She doesn't hate me. But she doesn't love me either. My mother is a perfect Companion because she feels *nothing*. She's not like me, Mal -- I have a heart."

Inara's voice shook slightly at this, "I wish I could hate her, but I can't do that either. She's my mother, Mal. How can I do anything but love her?" She shook her head. "I frighten her, I think, because deep down she knows that a mother is supposed to care for her daughter, and if she can't even do that, maybe she's not as perfect as she pretends to be."

"Why are you tellin' me this?" Mal asked, turning his head just enough that when she looked up, she could see his profile over his shoulder.

Inara swallowed. "Because I can," she whispered.

He turned around. Inara found her gaze drawn inexorably to his eyes.

The captain smiled. "Well, all right then," he murmured. "Now I know."

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Transalation

er zi de xiao diao gong niu = son of a bull with a small penis

