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## *2x03 Flying Blind*

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Wash was sulking on the bridge, nursing the wounds his most recent fight with Zoe had inflicted. Despite the lateness of the hour he was fully dressed in a green jumpsuit and one of his loud Hawaiian shirts but his face didn't quite match his cheerful attire.

"The shoes will be rescued," he said aloud in an angry voice and moved his right hand forward, revealing the plastic tyrannosaurus rex he was holding in it.

"I think you'll turn and betray me!" his stegosaurus replied in a slightly higher voice. "But, of course, I will lay aside my fears and trust you willingly and foolishly until then."

He made the tyrannosaurus rex laugh darkly. "Fear not, my friend, for I, too, am a connoisseur of fine shoes and will split the goods with you fifty-fifty!"

The stegosaurus reared back, appalled. "Never! I will never share my fine leather shoes with the likes of you!"

"Then, you shall die!" The T-Rex growled, lunging at stegosaurus and biting at his head, making very gruesome sounding eating noises. "Mwahahaha."

"Oh, god, no! Take my life, you beast! You'll never find the shoes! Oh, dear god, oh! Aaaaugh!!" The stegosaurus wailed loudly as he died, the noise masking the quiet sound of approaching bare feet.

"Your dinosaurs are anachronistic," River said quietly into the cabin.

Wash's back went rigid and he quickly set his dinosaurs down, swiveling the pilot's chair around to face her. His eyes were wide and he had a semi-surprised expression on his face. It was clear he couldn't decide whether or not he wanted to be angry or embarrassed. "What?" he finally managed, opting for a third choice: confused.

River glided forward easily and gestured to the two now-prone dinosaurs. Her expression was eager yet serious. "The tyrannosaurus rex was indigenous to the Upper Maastrichtian period at the end of the Cretaceous era;" she explained, her eyes bright and excited as she stood the two plastic toys back up, "the stegosaurus is from the Jurassic period." She looked to Wash again, studying his face intently. "Your dinosaurs are incongruent by over 100 million years."

Wash's shoulders relaxed, drooping slightly and he smiled at her, relieved. Wacky River was always fun, especially when she was spouting harmless gibberish. "Well, I'm glad you're here to tell me these things," he replied, still smiling. "All the same, I don't think I'll let it on to them," he added, swiveling his chair back towards his dinosaurs. "I'm not sure their relationship is stable enough to survive such a drastic age difference."

River laughed and stepped away from his console, leaning forward to stretch her face up towards the stars visible through the windscreen. "I like it here; it's quiet."

Wash leaned back in his chair, relaxing a little. River was surprisingly easy to talk to when she wasn't pretending her brother wasn't her brother or that she was the ship. "Yeah. I come out here when I need a little 'me' time."

River drifted to the co-pilot chair and easily settled into it; the seat conforming to her body. Her eyes remained fixed on the stars as she pulled her knees to her chest under her dress and hugged them. "It must be exhilarating to fly, moving so fast through the 'Verse it's as though you aren't moving at all." Her tone was breathless.

Wash looked away from her and out to the black and he sighed. "There's nothing quite like it," he agreed softly.

River's tone remained eager. "How did you learn? Did they give you bennies and fly you into the war with songs and kisses from ladies fair?"

Wash laughed softly and shook his head. "No. I went to flight school. Had to, really, to get certified. Learned a lot of useful tricks there, too." He grinned. "Though not necessarily all from my teachers."

River was studying him now. "You were best in your class," she stated.

Wash looked back at his console, getting a little tense. "No, actually. I wasn't." The coordinates hadn't changed but he studied them over anyway. "There was this guy, called himself Mr. Universe, he came in first, every time."

"But you were the best," River insisted.

Wash looked over at her, his face a little incredulous. "You know," he said plainly, "it's considered creepy when you do that. But you're right. Mr. Universe cheated his way to the top and when I challenged him, he let me in on his little hacking secret." He leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "I didn't really contest it because he had some great contacts and basically told me if I played along he'd help me out in the future. Which, he did, after we graduated."

River was staring intently at him. "I don't know how to fly. I think I knew once, but I've forgotten what I learned."

Wash turned to look back at her. "Well, you're only what, sixteen? You've got time. It's really not that hard, anyway, not if you've got a feel for ships. The rote memorization is the hardest part." He tilted his head and grinned. "Well, that and the bit about not joy riding with the instructor's ship".

"Teach me," River quickly said and dropped her feet off the seat and straightened her spine. Her hand reached out for the co-pilot yoke but she didn't touch it yet.

Wash laughed a little uncertainly. "I'm not a teacher," he started but trailed off seeing her eager face. With the exception of how she had seemed before deciding that her brother was a double-crossing secret spy, he hadn't seen River so sane for so long in quite a while. What could it hurt for her to pick up a few flight skills? Inevitably she'd probably hijack the ship someday during one of her crazy-spells and knowing how to actually fly Serenity probably couldn't hurt in that scenario. "Well, okay, just a little," he conceded. "Close the door. I don't need Mal finding out about this."

River quickly obeyed before sliding eagerly back into the chair and Wash had to smile at her interest. "Okay, well, right now we're in autopilot," he explained. "So, there isn't much to it. Take offs and landings are the hard part." He reached up and flipped off a switch with one hand and put his other hand on the yoke. There was a faint hum as the autopilot shut off but the ship shifted over without a tremor.

"Okay, first, take the yoke in your hand, like I'm doing," he said as he gripped it with both hands in the flight school regulated nine-and-three position. He glanced over as he watched River do the same, an exact mimic. "Good," he encouraged. "Now, I'm going to let go on my end and you just hold her steady."

River nodded enthusiastically. Her grip was tight on the yoke, her eyes intent, focused on the moment, as she stared at the controls.

Wash let up on the controls and his yoke bobbed forward slightly as he did. Serenity didn't shiver though and he looked over to River. She was holding Serenity as if she was a trained pilot. It took Wash a moment to realize she'd changed course slightly. "River, what are you doing?" He laughed nervously. "You're a natural -- but steady. You have to hold it steady."

"We're six degrees off course."

Wash's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Yeah, we are. It's a natural drag; happens whenever you pass anything too big in space. What we do, though, is just let it go until we're a lot closer to the planet. It saves fuel if we do one corrective burn instead of six. Gives you a gentler sweep too. Graceful," he added, with a grin.

River nodded, filing the information away in her brain and returning to holding the yoke steady.

"You're doing well, though," he said, encouragingly. "Really well."

"It helps to learn young," River whispered under her breath.

Wash chuckled softly, just catching her words, and nodded. "That it does," he agreed. "I may not have started as early as some folk, but I still ended up the best damn pilot in the academy," he added, almost to himself. He sat back, watching the stars, and found his mind drifting off as he remembered Mr. Universe. That was not his real name, obviously

– Wash had never found out what it was – but he had discovered the man’s big secret: he had been hacking into the grades so he’d be the top of the class even though he didn’t know how to fly at all.

They had made a deal then, that in return for Wash not turning him in, Mr. Universe would owe him one. Normally, that wouldn’t count much for Wash, but he had been pragmatic enough to realize that someone with Mr. Universe’s unique hacking skills could prove useful in the future. In a job like he currently had now, getting some friendly pointers from the center of the information universe probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.

“You just keep flying, River,” Wash stated. “I’ll be right here, making a little call.”



The following morning, after checking their coordinates, Wash cheerfully bounded into the kitchen. The smell of breakfast assaulted him on entry and he stopped and took a deep whiff of it. It was the same processed oatmeal and oily smelling coffee that they almost always had for breakfast but he was in a particularly good mood, so he found the scent enjoyable and inviting this morning.

“Wash, you been getting into Kaylee’s hooch again?” Mal asked as he took in his overly cheerful pilot. “You’re glowin’ like she do.”

“Aww, Cap’n, that’s sweet,” Kaylee called from where she was scooping some oatmeal up into a bowl for herself. She grinned brightly at Wash.

“I’ve just had a really good night, that’s all,” Wash stated as he looked over the crew assembled in the kitchen.

From where she sat at the far end of the table Zoe was able to give him a flat glare. “Weren’t me you had that good time with, husband,” she duly noted.

“That’s true, sweetheart,” he crooned rather suggestively. “In fact, I was having a grand old time with another man last night,” he followed with a lecherous nod and then waggled his eyebrows. His tone was a little coarse, clearly brought on by their fight the previous night.

Jayne walked into the kitchen in time to catch the end of Wash’s sentence. He paused in the doorway between the galley and the crew quarters and his face took on a disturbed expression. “Kaylee gave y’them boy numbers then?”

“There he goes, getting all jealous and crass-like, and in front of my wife this time,” Wash grinned.

Mal's eyebrows rose in consternation as he stared at the two men, before he closed his eyes and shook his head. "Well, now that that image is permanently burned into my brain, I think I'll go eat my gun."

"Might be messy, sir," Zoe casually intoned but kept her eyes on Wash.

"I'll lay out a tarp," Mal stated before leaning back in his chair, eyes on his pilot. "So what's this all about, Wash?"

Wash grinned, but didn't say anything until everyone was seated at the table. Clearing his throat theatrically, he waited until he had their attention. Even River looked up from where she'd settled on a chair in the lounge in the back of the galley, where she was ignoring the food in favor of a catch of yarn and two shiny silver needles. She appeared to be knitting some sort of very ugly...thing.

"I got a job lined up for us."

Mal and Zoe exchanged glances. "You lined us up a job?" Mal asked, his tone just bordering on incredulous.

Wash nodded eagerly. "Yes, with an old buddy of mine named Mr. Universe. He traffics in information of the highest quality. He's got some important cargo he needs right away. He says if we can do it for him, we'll get an upfront advance, plus a bonus on the back end. I'm thinking four figures, Mal."

Mal's expression stayed impassive. "Mr. Universe?" he questioned. He kept his eyes on Wash. "Ain't that the guy who was top of your class in flight school?"

An expression of disbelief rippled across Wash's face. "How did you—" he started and then trailed off. His eyes shifted from Mal and focused on Zoe. His cheerful demeanor had vanished. "You told him that?" After a beat of non-reaction from Zoe that Wash took for acknowledgement, he cried, dismayed, "You never tell me what the captain tells you!"

Mal quickly countered. "Unless it's an order."

"Unless it's an order!" Wash shouted.

"Hey!" Jayne yelled, silencing them both. "I'm partial to the four figures bit," he added in a quieter voice.

"Jayne's got a point, Cap'n," Kaylee commented softly. She had patiently sat through the whole proceeding and was only now voicing her opinion during the lull.

“Day you say that, Kaylee, ain’t a day I’m eager to see,” Mal replied. “Be that as it may though, four figures ain’t somethin’ to scoff about. Presumin’, of course, that these four figures we’re talkin’ ‘bout are credits and not plastic dinosaurs.”

“I’m talking credits, Mal,” Wash stated in his serious voice.

“I’m in,” Jayne eagerly announced. “What we gonna be doin’?”

“Depends on whether Mal’s interested or not. I told Mr. Universe he needed to talk with the Captain first.”

After a few seconds of contemplation, Mal nodded reluctantly. “Sounds like it could be worth lookin’ into. Certainly couldn’t hurt to have a few more contacts out in the ‘verse.”

“Information is a rare commodity out of the world,” Book agreed as he easily glided into the room from the direction of the stairwell that descended into the passenger quarters. He nodded beatifically to those already assembled in the galley. “There’s a new job, then? I find that when the crew is working steadily, they’re less cranky.”

Mal put his hands out flat on the table. “Mornin’, Shepherd. You make out well with them church going folk back on Pastiche?”

“I think I gave them a few sermons to remember.”

“Good to know they’ll be able t’confess their sins after partaking of them new whores,” he noted plainly and then got to his feet, returning to business. “Wash, let’s go talk to this Mr. Universe. I ain’t making no guarantees. Zoe, you want in on this?”

“As always, sir,” she agreed.

Wash looked at his bowl of uneaten oatmeal forlornly and then, deciding it really wasn’t such a tragic loss, abandoned it to follow Zoe and the Captain.



“Now, isn’t it something, having the mighty Malcolm Reynolds calling on me?” Mr. Universe grinned through the monitor at the three members of Serenity’s crew gathered in the cockpit. “Been seeing your name cropping up over and over again on the Cortex,” he stated and waved a hand, gesturing to something out of his view. “You’re getting very, very popular, Mal. Quite the reputation.”

Mal shifted a little, uncomfortable with the whole conversation so far and decided to ignore the preamble. “My pilot says you got a job for us?”

Mr. Universe bit his lower lip and grinned impishly. “Heard right, Mal. Who’s the lady?” he added, shifting his eyes to Zoe.

“Pilot’s wife,” she answered coolly.

“Ooh, Zoe,” Mr. Universe whistled. “Washburn mentioned you but didn’t say how very pretty, pretty you were.” He sized her up and nodded, approvingly. “I think you’ll do.” He turned back to Mal, his gaze more serious. “Got some upgrades on Athens that need to be here with me. Very sensitive equipment and very,” he wrinkled his nose in delight as he said it, “illegal. Not exactly Alliance approved.”

Mal crossed his arms. “Don’t much care what it is I’m haulin’ just so long as it pays well.”

“Understood, Mal,” he said in a sly voice. “I like your attitude. There’s lots of folk out there who’d kill for this haul; I pay very well. Bit partial to your pilot though—I know he’s good at keeping secrets and I owe him one for something from back when. Know Washburn’s a good enough pilot not to crash my delicate electronics, too. Isn’t that right?” he questioned, eyes twinkling at Wash through the monitor. “I’m transmitting some information now.”

Mal stepped over to the dash console and brought up the new transferred files, nodding once. “Looks doable. We can get your stuff to you within the week.”

Mr. Universe grinned. “So, we’re in business?”

“Looks that way,” Mal agreed, sealing the deal.

Wash slipped easily into the pilot seat. “I’ll lay in a course, then?”

“Do it,” Mal nodded to Mr. Universe and turned the communications channel off. “Good work, Wash. I’ll go inform the crew we got ourselves a job. Let me know when we’re getting close to Athens.”

Mal’s footsteps echoed softly as he padded down the stairwell, leaving Wash alone on the bridge with Zoe. It only took a moment before her fingers were creeping through his hair. “You did good, husband,” she softly murmured, her voice bordering on apologetic.

Wash tilted his head back a bit and half closed his eyes as he looked up at her. “You sayin’ that ‘cause you mean it, or ‘cause you know Mal’s okay with it all now?”

Zoe leaned over the back of the chair and let her arms hang loosely around Wash’s neck. She pressed her lips softly to his brow. “Thinkin’ maybe I need to be apologizing for last night,” she quietly mused.

Wash’s lips curved into a smile at her voice purring in his ear. “I like apologies. Does this mean I get my shoes back?” he hopefully asked.

Zoe shook her head. “Don’t press your luck. ‘Sides, you know I ain’t got ‘em t’give back to you anyway. Packed ‘em in with the rest, before we unloaded on Pastiche.” Her hands came off his chest as she circled the chair around until he was facing her. She pulled at the front of his flight suit, dragging him to his feet. “But maybe after a little bit of make-up sex I’ll forgive you for stealin’ from the cargo.”

Wash tried to resist for several long seconds before his face gave in and he relented. Zoe was pretty impossible to resist when she was being coy. “Sex, huh? Well, I suppose,” he teased as was pulled to his feet and let her lead him out of the cockpit. “If I must.”



The pick up was unusually easy. Athens was a fairly well respected border world that had only minimal Alliance presence. As a result they were able to land without any problems. Their contact was a stocky short man named Hector. Mal had dealt with him before.

The cargo itself was packed carefully in wooden crates and, with the help of Hector’s men, didn’t take long to load.

“It isn’t safe, you know,” River stated aloud from where she was walking along on the catwalk.

Mal looked over his shoulder at her before returning his flat expression back to the people working in his cargo hold. “What ain’t?” he questioned.

“Indigestion,” she replied. Her eyes darted a little and then she stared down at her bare feet; she’d lost her knitting somewhere along the way. “It’ll upset her stomach.” She shook her head, causing her hair to ripple as she did.

“You check the expiration dates on those protein packs, now, you hear?” Mal warned as he turned again to face her. “They’ll upset your stomach easily enough if you go’n’eat a bad one.”

“Not me,” River protested. “He’s inside – underneath -- tearing her apart.” Her eyes widened and a hand went up into her hair. “You brought them on, made her swallow them, but Laocoon forgot to warn you . . . beware the Cyclops.”

Mal stared at her for several seconds. “I thought you was on the mend.”

“One day you listen and you trust,” she said in a loud, accusing voice. “And the next it’s changed, different. It isn’t logical!”

Zoe had stopped where she was working down below. “Problem, sir?” she called up, looking between Mal and River.

“No,” Mal answered back and then turned to the girl. “What are you yammerin’ about?”

“He’s hurting her,” she whispered.

Mal leaned forward and then gestured to the men below. “You talkin’ ‘bout Hector’n’his men?” He glanced over at he noticed Zoe coming up the stairwell. “They’re on our side, girl. Dealt with them plenty of times before.”

“Lambs to the slaughter,” River muttered. “You lead, they always follow.”

Zoe pressed her lips together, concerned at River’s words. “Sir, Hector says they’re about done loading. You want I should hold them for something?” She looked back to River pointedly.

“No, shiny,” Mal answered, his gaze shifting back to River. “Your brother got you on another new drug regimen? ‘Cause whereas you was acting fine yesterday, you sure do seem a mite off today.”

“You need to listen!” River retorted. “Because you can’t always trust and distrust and keep switching back! You’re not the conductor!”

Zoe’s brow furrowed. “Maybe she’s on to something, sir?” she questioned reluctantly. “Girl does have a way of knowing things.”

“Well, I can’t read minds, so if she can’t explain in terms I can understand there ain’t a gorrain thing I can do about it, can I? This look like her premonitioning or just her acting all sorts of crazified again?” he questioned. “We ain’t got time for games, Zoe. This here merchandise needs to be delivered in a timely manner.”

“Understood, sir,” Zoe agreed. “Just makin’ a suggestion.”

Mal rubbed a finger against his cheek. “You checked all the cargo and the worker’s files?” he questioned briefly.

“Did, sir. It all checked out clear.”

“Then we ain’t havin’ this conversation.” He turned back to River. “Now, I ain’t doin’ this t’be mean, girl, but go be crazy elsewhere.”

“Run and play,” River gritted out, her face furious. “You won’t listen.”

“Doc!” Mal’s incensed voice rang out into the cargo hold, carrying easily upstairs. He didn’t have time to deal with River going crazy right now. Within a few seconds scurrying feet were echoing down towards.

“Captain? River? What’s wrong?” Simon asked, looking back and forth between the two of them.

Mal rubbed his face, keeping his eyes on the merchandise. “She’s acting mostly-crazy again,” he simply stated without looking over. “You messin’ with her drugs some more?”

Simon took River’s hand. “No,” he answered, as he studied her face intently. “*Mei-mei*, what’s wrong?”

She twisted until she pulled from his grip. “Ebb and tide,” she whispered. “He’s coming and going and he doesn’t even notice. It’s not right.”

Mal pointed at her. “See? That’s the whole mostly-crazy bit.”

“Right,” Simon agreed. He looked out over the cargo and then returned his gaze to Mal. “I think the strangers are frightening her.” He tugged her hand and pulled her closer. “C’mon, let’s leave the captain alone to do his work. Those men aren’t going to bother you.” His eyes returned to Mal’s. “Are they?”

“They’re good men, Simon. I trust ‘em aboard *Serenity* and you should, too.”

Simon nodded at that, but River looked at Mal sadly as she was led towards the passenger quarters. Mal ignored her as the last of the cargo was loaded and Jayne closed the cargo bay doors. Once they were sealed, he grabbed the intercom. “Wash, take us out of the world.”

There was a moment of silence before Wash replied. “I’m on it.” Around them *Serenity* shivered as she began to power up. “Everything went smoothly?”

Mal let his lips curve into a smile too and nodded to himself. He could stroke Wash’s ego on the occasion, if the need arose. “Yes, indeed it did, Wash. Nice when that happens.”

“I’m on the side of agreement, there, sir. And, we should be at our rendezvous point a couple of days.”

“Shiny. Let me know when we’re close.” Mal shut the communication off, hung the intercom up and then turned to head up the stairs, humming lightly to himself.

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“Back so soon?” Wash asked without looking up from his flight pattern. He was sitting comfortably in his chair, one hand on the yoke, the other hovering over some switches on the right hand side.

River padded into the room softly and nodded even though from his vantage point Wash couldn’t see it. Her fingers were fidgeting slightly. “Need to make the stars drop away,” she said softly.

“Well, close the door if you’re staying and sit down then,” Wash said. His tone was a little resigned but he wasn’t upset. As River slid the door shut behind her, he added, “Bit late for you to still be up though, isn’t it?”

River stepped away from the door and crossed to the co-pilot’s chair. “Hours on the clock are just numbers. Sun isn’t down or up out here,” she answered.

“Well, that is a true statement,” Wash agreed and shifted so both his hands were on the yoke. “But we do go by a standard time in here.” He glanced to her. “I guess lateness of the house is required though, isn’t it? Mal would have a fit if he knew I was letting you fly the ship, even if just for a few moments. Hence, best to do it when he’s snoring.” He reached over after a second and switched the autopilot controls off.

River studied him for a moment and then raised her hands to the co-pilot yoke. “You take risks sometimes, but you would feel silly if anyone knew.” She reached out and caressed Serenity’s yoke, before gripping it firmly. “His trust is tidal. Only goes so far and then it turns, recedes, fades away and leaves the shore shivering.” River’s touch was gentler on the yoke now, her eyes no longer so consumed by the instruments. Now, her gaze lifted up to the stars at times, and her expression was far more peaceful.

Wash released the ship to her and leaned back into his chair, curious. “Who only trusts you tidally?”

River tilted her head self-deprecatingly. “Mal.”

“Well, you have been known to almost get us all killed on the occasion. But there was that thing with him wanting to kill your brother. He trusted you then,” he pointed out.

“You trust me in here, not him.”

Wash took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I know what it’s like to need to fly as well as what it’s like to be denied it,” he quietly stated. “If someone tried to take Serenity from me, or told me I couldn’t fly anymore, I think I’d wither up and blow away.” He drifted into silence for a moment as he stared at the star field. “Anyway, we’re in space. Not much for you to crash us into, way out here.”

River kept her tone flat. “She can crash in space.”

Wash stared at her for several long seconds before he put his hands back on his yoke for reasons of self-preservation. “See, that’s the sort of creepy comment that makes me second-guess my own sanity.”

River just smiled.



The following morning found the crew sharing breakfast again. Book had eaten earlier and was reading his Bible in the lounge at the back of the kitchen. The rest of the crew, sans River and Simon, were eating breakfast, except for Kaylee who seemed to have a mild look of concern on her face.

Despite her agitation she seemed to want to keep her quandary from Mal. Slipping into a chair next to Jayne, Kaylee turned her face towards him, away from Mal, and whispered. "Did you take my shoes?"

Jayne stared at her uncomprehendingly. "No? What shoes?" he replied, confused.

Kaylee sighed frustrated and tried to catch Wash's eye without attracting Mal's notice. Wash was paying attention to a story Mal was telling, however, and she had no luck.

Exasperated she got to her feet to fix herself a plate of food for breakfast and by the time she had done so Simon and River had come up from below decks. "Mornin', Simon!" Kaylee called cheerfully and gave him a little wave.

"Good morning," Simon said politely, moving into the kitchen to fix something to eat for himself and his sister. River fiddled about with the coffee maker. Looking up, Simon said, "River, I don't think coffee is such a good idea. You haven't been sleeping."

"Maybe they changed her so she doesn't need as much sleep," River said evasively, but she moved away from the coffeepot and made herself a cup of watery milk with just a dash of milk powder in it.

Simon frowned. "You weren't in bed when I went to check on you last night. I don't know if it's safe for you to be wandering around like that. You could get hurt." He glanced around at the crew. "She isn't bothering anyone, is she?"

"When ain't she?" Jayne asked without bothering to look up from his food.

Turning in his chair Wash addressed the two. "Actually, she was keeping me company on the bridge last night. She can be quite charming when she's not plotting our deaths."

Mal arched an eyebrow at this revelation. "Ain't sure that sits too well with me," he stated, studying the girl. "Bridge can be a dangerous place."

Wash forced a laugh. "Not any more dangerous than the kitchen."

River settled down in a chair at the table, tucking her legs up under her. "Ebb," she said, looking at Mal. "But the moon can draw the tide in." Glancing mischievously at Jayne, she added, "No plots. But maybe you're already dead and I can make you think you're still alive."

Speaking over Jayne's violent inquiries to Simon as to whether or not that was possible, Mal said, "All the same, you get in his way or muck around with my ship, we're gonna have words, *dong ma*?" He pointed his chopsticks at River for emphasis.

"River, maybe you should stay in your quarters at night," Simon suggested reluctantly, reacting to the tension. "If you're having trouble sleeping, I can give you something."

"Am I ten years old today or what?" Wash blurted out, silencing the rest of the crew. He straightened a moment, surprised at how quickly and easily he got all eyes on him "I mean, I think I can handle one small girl."

Jayne snorted. "Y'might be thinkin' different if she'd got you with a butcher knife."

"She does have her lapses on the occasion," Kaylee agreed softly, like it wasn't something she wanted to concede.

"Let's not forget her almost gettin' Simon offed," Jayne added with a nod.

"Okay, guys, she's sort of sitting right here, you know." Wash nervously laughed, wondering what exactly he was getting himself into. "Really, though, it's not a big deal." His eyes traveled to River and he smiled at her. "I think that it does her good, seeing the stars and all, and I really don't mind the company."

River gave Wash a secret, friendly smile as she stirred her thin cup of milk, wrinkling her nose at the protein gruel Simon put in front of her. "Does her good too," she agreed, lowering a leg and pressing the heel of her foot against the cold metal of Serenity's floor.

Simon looked at Wash rather gratefully. "I appreciate it. I...she just can't stay in her room all the time, and sometimes I..." He found himself stammering excuses under Mal's steady gaze.

"Well, who would want to stay in that little room all day, anyway?" Wash stated quickly and met everyone's eyes to make his point. "We all get cabin fever and we've got free rein on the ship. Just imagine how it must be, getting cooped up in the passenger quarters all the time!"

Kaylee nodded, thoughtfully. "She does seem to like the openness of the cargo bay, when we're all in there." Her eyes found River and she smiled at her. "'Course, she's right here. Suppose we could ask her, huh?"

"'She' doesn't answer because you don't ask, and when you do, you listen with ears at best." River was beginning to grow a little upset, and she lowered her head so her hair covered most of her face.

Mal's voice was quiet but firm. "You ain't been confined to your quarters in a long time, River, and long as you don't get in anyone's way, what you do is your business, same as the rest of the crew." He glanced at Jayne. "That clear?"

River grew a little calmer at that, and Simon took advantage to get her to eat just a little of her breakfast. Still, her face was troubled, just as it had been when she had come in and pleaded with Wash to let her fly the ship the night before.

Jayne grunted and got to his feet, taking his plate and cup with him. "Clear as mud," he muttered under his breath, putting his dishes into the sink and brushing past Inara who was just entering the kitchen.

While everyone else was distracted by the big mercenary's stomping out, Kaylee leaned over and whispers to Wash. "Have you seen my shoes?" When Wash shook his head no, she sighed forlornly.

"Don't suppose we'll be reaching any suitable civilizations today, Mal?" Inara asked as she made herself a cup of tea.

Mal replied, voice neutral. "Not today."

"Where are we headed this time, then?"

Wash turned in his chair and smiled at Inara. "Little moon known unofficially as Logos," he stated and then winced. "But it's not really the sort of place for you to, you know -- do any of that thing you do. And we aren't going to be there more than a few hours."

Inara tossed her hair over her shoulder, her eyes still fixed on Mal. Her expression seemed a little hurt. "I suppose I have you to thank for that?"

"Um, actually, my fault. We're doing a job for an acquaintance of mine," Wash stated, sheepishly.

"I see," she replied softly, noting the mulish set of Mal's shoulders. With a sigh, she let the matter drop. She and Mal hadn't argued for over twenty-four hours now. She found she rather liked it.

"Why such a short layover?"

Mal shrugged. "Got a wave from Badger, says he's got something else for us. He didn't say where but it ain't on Logos, so we move out soon as we unload."

"You'll let me know when we've got our new destination charted?"

"You'll be th'first t'know."

“Thank you,” Inara replied as she turned and departed gracefully back up the stairs and out towards her shuttle, tea in hand.

“Now, back to the business at hand” Mal said, “I’m not sure I like the idea of River running free on the bridge.” His gaze slid from the girl in to Wash “If anything goes wrong, I’m blamin’ you, not the girl”

River slammed her cup down, overturning it on the table. “Can’t stand it...weedy shore with dead things on it...you’ll be glad and you’ll flow generous, but when it’s gone, it’s cold...”

Simon helped her stand up. “River, I think maybe you should lie down for a while.”

“Tide pools,” River whispered fiercely. “Where everybody stops to stare.”

Mal shook his head, moving to rinse his plate. “Seems like everybody on this ship’s getting cabin fever or who knows what. Maybe after this job y’all just need to run around for a while.”

Wash’s eyes widened. “Are you implying we should go on shore leave?” he asked, his voice dripping with surprise. He turned to Zoe. “Honey, did you hear that? Captain thinks we ought to take shore leave! It’s a miracle -- means I’ve just lost the bet with Jayne.” His brows furrowed. “Unless you’re insane -- bets are forfeit if you’re insane.” He addressed Zoe critically. “I think he’s gone insane.”

Zoe barely suppressed a smile. “I’m sure he’ll get better soon,” she replied dryly.

“You’re probably right,” Wash sighed dramatically. “Either that or we’ll all die before this mission finishes, thus thwarting our shore leave plans further. Personally, I’m hoping for the former.”

River shook Simon’s hand off her arm and smiled at Wash sadly as she left the room. “You always hope.”

Wash watched her leave and sighed, “Well, someone on this boat’s got to.”

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Kaylee found River tucked away in a corner of the cargo bay, knitting away on her hideously colored blob of yarn. Her face was absorbed and intent. “Hey, River.” Kaylee squatted down on her heels. “Whatcha knittin’?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she muttered. “It isn’t right.” River didn’t look up from her needles as she worked.

Kaylee twisted her head to look at the uneven stitching, then shrugged. “Hey, did you see my shoes anywhere?”

“Saw them on your feet yesterday,” River replied sadly. “You think I can’t be trusted and might do crazy things? Sabotage the ship and send us all to our fiery deaths... No use at all.”

“River, no.” Kaylee laid a hand on River’s arm. “It ain’t like that at all, sweetie. Just wondered if you’d seen ‘em or borrowed ‘em.” She ducked her head to whisper. “I was afraid the cap’n might’ve took ‘em. Didn’t know if he found out.”

“When he stops trusting, you’ll know,” River said flatly. She lifted her head to look at Kaylee, and then wiggled her bare toes. “I walk on my feet.” She shrugged. “Have two pair, four shoes, each named and happy, lined like baby ducks in a row in the closet, out of sight,” she chimed. “They wouldn’t like more: it’d be odd.” She looked up at Kaylee.

Kaylee nodded sadly, mulling through her words. “Didn’t figure you knew, but I’d hoped maybe the cap’n’d said something t’you. He do trust you, y’know, leastways more than he trusts most folk.”

“Everyone on this ship,” River said evenly and with no trace of emotion, “tells lies.”



After dinner that night, Mal stood at the head of the table, arms crossed as he gazed at his crew. “Got a wave from Heckle today. Claims we hornswoggled him.” He gazed around at them, waiting for their reactions.

Simon's brow furrowed. “He found out they were knock-offs?”

“That boy tell him?” Jayne chimed in. “He best not’ve, after I wore that gorram shirt for him. I’ll go back there and kick his sissy--”

“Weren’t about that,” Mal interrupted. “Says the shipment was missing four or five pair. Now as I recall, they was counted proper when we loaded ‘em on Serenity. Only thing I can think of is someone might’ve took ‘em. Anyone got any ideas about that?”

Kaylee was fidgeting, her eyes wide and innocent. “But you told us we couldn’t have any.”

“I surely did. And because someone didn’t listen, I had to sit there while Heckle gave me a hell of an earful and the I had to transfer back some of his credits – credits we need, to keep us all fed and this boat in the air. If’n we didn’t have this here job already lined up and partially paid for, returning that money would have been a hardship.” He let his gaze drift around the table. “Not accusin’ anybody, nor am I some gorram fed who’s gonna go huntin’ through people’s bunks. Just like to find out what happened. Jayne?”

“What?” The mercenary looked up from his dinner for the first time, puzzled, then angry. “What, you think I’m some kinda cross-dressin’ *guai dan*? I go on one date with a guy and now you think I’m gonna be struttin’ around in high heels?”

“Nobody thinks that either,” Mal said, his lips twitching. He looked at Kaylee and River meaningfully. “And since my girls ain’t said anything, I reckon there’s nothing more to be said. Must’ve miscounted in the beginning. Just to be real clear, however, that nothin’ like this is gonna happen again, or I will be forced to take action. *Dong le ma?*” His voice had grown very stern -- the tone of a captain who didn’t mean to be crossed.

“Yes, sir,” Kaylee whispered, amid echoes of the same sentiment from the others, hoping her guilt didn’t show on her face. She felt awful. It hadn’t seemed so bad taking the shoes at the time, but now it was just like when she’d stolen some coin from her mama’s purse for candy as a little girl. To make matters worse, her shoes were missing — had he found them and taken them to teach her a lesson? “You c’n trust us,” she said, a little too loudly. “Promise.”

“He can,” River said, looking speculatively around the table. “But will he?”



Several hours later, in what amounted to nighttime on the ship, Wash sat in the cockpit and waited for River. He had expected her to show up the minute everyone else had settled for the night and was slightly worried that she hadn’t -- especially considering the session they’d had at the table that morning. He felt bad about some of what had been said and had wanted to hopefully make it up to her. They were less than 10 hours out from Logos and he thought she’d enjoy being in the cabin when he landed.

Checking the coordinates and making sure Serenity was on course, he decided to look for her, creeping quietly through the crew quarters until he reached the stairwell that led to the lower deck.

River wasn’t in her room and she wasn’t with Simon, that much he could tell through the crack left open in Simon’s door, and the cargo bay seemed empty. That didn’t mean it was – there were a lot of places a girl her size could hide, but he could sense almost immediately she wasn’t in there.

“Please don’t tell me you melted into the ship again,” he muttered to himself as he turned around to leave, half suspecting she was sitting in the pilot chair flying the ship without him while he wandered the ship, looking for her.

When he reached the catwalk between the two shuttles something made him pause. The door to shuttle two was open and that intrigued him. Looking around suspiciously he headed towards it and stepped inside the darkened room. “River?” he called quietly.

He found her curled up in the shuttle's pilot seat. When she heard his voice, she pressed herself further into the chair. "Wasn't stealing, not a thief. Didn't touch." There was a hint of panic in her voice, as if she could already hear the lecture Mal would deliver if she did something to one of his shuttles.

"No, didn't figure you were, actually," Wash commented as he stepped further into the shuttle. There was a weak amount of light coming from the cabin where the starlight pooled onto the floor and he made his way to it, letting his hand trail along the wall of the shuttle lovingly as he approached. "I kept waiting, but you never showed."

"Too complicated," she whispered, her eyes still nervously fixed on him. "Can feel them watching, wondering, worrying. I know what's right, but I can't do it when they watch." She bit her lip turning to face the field of stars herself. "Just wanted to see, even if I can't touch."

Wash nodded a bit, understanding all too well what she meant, for once. "You know, the view's better from the cockpit"

River sat up straighter, leaning towards him. "Promise not to suspect. I promise to be innocent if you promise to trust," she whispered. "If it fails, if it falls, you can't tell him I did it, can't make me responsible, I can't be responsible...."

"The captain would much rather kill me for screwing up than you, trust me." His eyes twinkled in the dim light and he gave her a smile. "C'mon, I trust you." He reached out, offering his hand and smiled when she took it and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. "It's cold in here."

River nodded, trailing one hand along the railing when they reached the catwalk. "I told him she was hurting. Felt the rumbling, crying....He didn't listen though."

"I don't think he meant to hurt your feelings, though," Wash offered. "He isn't like that."

River shrugged, smiling sadly as she stepped into the cockpit and stared out at the stars. "Do you ever wonder if you'll fall out, into them?" She asked, changing the subject.

Wash was silent for a while, reflecting upon the question. He wondered when River had started to make sense to him. "More often than I'd care to admit, actually." He tore his eyes from the black beyond them and checked their flight pattern again as he slid into his seat. "Figure there are worse ways to go though and that that'd be a suitable, noble way for a pilot." He cast her a wry grin.

She ducked her head shyly, beginning to speak more quickly. "If I slid through the glass, then I'd be everywhere all at once, and they couldn't see or ask what I was doing. I could really fly."

Wash pressed his lips together thoughtfully at that. “Do you know the story of Daedalus and Icarus?”

River nodded. “The father made the son wings of wax to fly away from Crete, but flying was too joyous for Icarus. He flew too close to the sun and his wings melted.”

“That’s right,” Wash agreed. “He fell to his death and drowned in the sea.” His thumbs ran over the yoke softly, petting. “I’ve built you some wings, River, but don’t fly too near the sun.” He glanced over to her. “You’re not Icarus.”

River met his gaze easily. “No. You’re Icarus.”

Wash studied her face in the starlight for several seconds and then shook his head. “Not today, River,” he answered. “Not today.”

A moment of silence passed between them before Wash smiled. “You wanna fly, then?”

River nodded eagerly, pulling away from the story and grasping the yoke firmly in her hands. “Release her?”

Wash did, easily. There was no preamble, no question. He knew the heart of someone who needed and wanted to fly. He flipped the switches that shut off the autopilot and gave Serenity over to her, keeping his eyes on the girl, watching her delight. He almost wished Simon could see her now.

River gave a little, joyous sigh. Holding the controls perfectly steady and guided the ship forward. Her face was pale and intent, her long hair now tucked back behind her ears so that it wouldn’t obscure her vision. Perhaps, though, she wasn’t relying as much on vision. A humming cat’s cradle of thought and understanding passed between the two of them and River fingered each strand of them, using them to make Serenity’s flight a thing of beauty. Her toes curled in pleasure. “How long until he accidentally finds out?” she wondered, after a time.

“Until who finds out what?” came a deep, sonorous voice from behind them.

Wash nearly jumped out of his skin as he leapt to his feet and turned around. To her credit River didn’t let the ship even shimmer. “Book!” he shouted, far, far louder than he had intended, relief thick in his throat. A hand went up into his hair and clutched. “*Tiao san kong jian hou zi*, we forgot to close the door!” He nervously laughed and gestured to River. “This isn’t what it looks like!” he quickly defended.

Book smiled and straightened his spine as he entered the cabin more fully. “Oh?”

“It’s not!” Wash continued. “I’m not teaching her to fly! Because that’s not what it looks like I’m doing, is it? Because I’m not!”

“Then she hijacked the ship,” River said sadly. “You can rest the blame on someone else’s shoulders and then they’ll lock me in quarters, put up screens to watch, give Simon a magnifying glass so nothing escapes.”

Book moved forward, resting a hand on the back of River's seat. “No one is saying you’re a hijacker, River.”

Wash took his hand out of his hair and let it flop softly at his side. “Okay, I am teaching her to fly.” He couldn’t lie, not to a preacher and not when it would be betraying River’s fragile trust. He moved past the two of them and slid the cabin door shut so they wouldn’t have another unexpected visitor. “Just don’t let Mal know, all right?” he pressed. “He’ll kill me, you know, really kill me and then you’d have to have that on your conscious. Plus, after I’m dead you’d have no one left to fly the ship, so you’d probably all crash and die.”

“Oh, I'm accustomed to keeping secrets,” Book assured him, smiling. “Besides, I don't think we need another conversation like that one at breakfast. Hard to hear the still, small voice when there’s that much upset in a room.”

River glanced up at him over her shoulder. “Like the still before a storm?” she said curiously.

“Like the still before a storm,” Book replied with a nod.



Wash wondered how the hell he had gotten into this situation with River and Book in his cockpit in the middle of the night. It was rather surreal. His eyes traveled down to the navigation chart he had laid out on the control panel and he checked their course. Then his eyes furrowed. “Hey, slow down a little, River,” he stated and raised his hand to take back the yoke.

“Can't,” River said serenely, but there was a touch of excitement in her voice. “It’s starting.”

Before the resonance of her voice had quite fallen away there were a series of clunking sounds; doors snapping shut and locking. The ship began to veer, though River’s hands on the yoke were steady. “She’s calling you now...needs your help,” River whispered.

“What?” Wash’s hands flew over the controls. “River, this isn’t funny.” He flipped several switches and when that failed to produce the desired effect he swore. “*Sheng fei xing kong long!* This is not good! The controls are completely shut down.” He smacked his navigational display, which had gone completely black. “We’re flying blind.”

Wash rotated in his seat and began another sequence of button pressing and switch flipping, before he grabbed the yoke and tried to push it forward. “*Chou tan pei luo tuo*

*da bian!* The main drive has been locked and shut down! My controls are fused!” After a beat, he added, “We are so humped!” He turned in his chair to look at Book. “Go get the others,” he demanded hotly then returned his attention to River. “Get up, my controls aren’t working.”

Book was at the door, struggling to open it. “It’s locked,” he called. He quickly opened the side panel beside the door and started the manual override sequence.

Both of Wash’s hands went into his hair as he reassessed the situation, leaving River in charge of the co-pilot controls. “*Jin zuo bian lou ru tou!* We’re locked on course and she’s flying way too fast.” He looked back to River and leaned over the co-pilot chair to study the read outs; his weren’t displaying anymore. “Where the hell are we headed?” he demanded but he was mostly talking to himself.

“*Sideris ad terram,*” River murmured, rising to her feet and peering out into the black. “They’ve taken the stars.”

“That’s nice,” Wash muttered, pressing through buttons on the co-pilot panel quickly. “The crazy talk is completely comforting right now, really.” Wash put his hands on the throttle and eased her back, shedding speed hard and manually. The ship screamed in protest at the rough handling. “I know, baby, I’m sorry,” he crooned and tried again to shut off the override to no avail.

“Core containment failure imminent,” a cool, impersonal voice announced and then repeated in Chinese. River’s head darted around interestedly at that, her mind suddenly forming hypotheses.

“*Wo de ma!*” Wash hissed, his eyes widening at the announcement.

“Core containment failure in ten, nine, eight…” River let it count down to three, then she placed her hands on the throttle over Wash’s and pushed forward into full burn.

“What’re you—” he started to say, in surprise. The ship surged at the new speed and the warning silenced abruptly.

“Trust,” River whispered as Wash pulled his hands out from under hers and she resumed flying dedicatedly, making certain the ship didn’t slow again.

Wash’s shoulders drooped as he realized what had just happened. “We’ve been hotwired into the core containment field!” he shouted and pushed off from the co-pilot chair and returned to his pilot’s chair. “Son of a bitch, why do things always have to be so complicated!” he cried. “If we drop below our current speed we’re going to activate the core failure, which will definitely cause us to explode.”

Book shifted where he was standing behind them. “How long can we last at this speed?” he questioned intensely.

Wash shook his head. “Not long enough. Well, if the fuel doesn’t run out she’ll shake apart in an hour or two if she’s not very carefully monitored, which I can’t do if I’m locked out!” He slammed his fist down onto the non-responding console. “ ‘Course that won’t make a lick of a difference seeing as how we’ll have crashed into the dark side of the moon by then at this speed.”

“She’s poisoned. A Cyclops stuck a thorn in her belly and it upsets her stomach,” River announced.

Wash pushed his chair out of the way and looked at her. Sometimes what she said made no sense but lately, he understood her. “Belly,” he echoed and crawled under the console. “River, how long do we got until then?” he asked as he worked the panel off the bottom of the console. “I’m not sure if I can override it from here — not if Serenity’s been hotwired from outside, underneath somewhere.”

Before answering Wash, River performed an experiment wherein she tested to see how much she could slow down before triggering the core containment alarm. Once she was set at the optimal pace, she replied, “Twenty-nine minutes, thirty-eight seconds.”

Book was still trying to get the manual over ride on the doors to unlock. “The door is still jammed, what can I do?”

“Get on the comm. and tell them we’ve got an emergency and not much time to find a miracle!” Wash shouted from beneath the console. Sparks exploded as he pulled wires out with abandon. “And tell them to get the EV suits prepped.”

“Dear God,” Book murmured, as he picked up the intercom and activated the ship-wide channel. “We have an emergency. The ship has been sabotaged and controls locked. We’ve got about twenty-eight minutes -- we need assistance!”



Simon had roused from his sleep at the first core containment announcement and leapt from his bed when he heard Book’s voice over the intercom. His first instinct was to check on River, but finding her missing, he turned and started up the stairs towards the crew quarters.

He ran into Inara, still in her dressing gown, along the way. “What’s going on?” she questioned. Her poise seemed lost along with her more formal attire.

“Guess we’re in trouble, again,” he replied uncertainly. “And River’s not in her room. I hope she’s with Wash.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Inara reassured as they reached the crew quarters. “Go see if you can find out what’s going on, then come back and help me.” Inara was already at Mal’s

cabin door, trying to manually override the locks. Simon moved to the cockpit door. He tried, futilely, to open it before he began pounding on it.

Book appeared in the window and stared at him. He then turned and grabbed the intercom, to relay information.

“She’s on full lock down, from the outside!” Wash called, busy unplugging and plugging wires into the console from under it. He was hoping to hit upon a lucky cross feed that would override whatever it was that had locked them out but that was Kaylee’s expertise, not his. “Crew quarters are sealed,” he snarled as he came up from beneath the console. He looked at River and his expression softened: she was doing a remarkably better job at remaining calm than he was.

“Good job, River, keep it up,” he stated affirmatively, feeling a calm resolve settle over him. Panicking wouldn’t help anyone. He needed to stay calm. Book was holding the intercom, waiting to relay whatever Wash told him to Simon, who was peering through the small window.

“Tell him River is safe with us,” Wash instructed, “and Serenity has been hotwired from the outside. I’m attempting to override the connection from inside the cockpit but we’ll need some assistance from the exterior. There should be an access panel in the storage locker below this area,” Wash noted and gestured to the ladder that led down between the two pilot consoles. “I believe if we can get it open I might have a better chance at rerouting the power.” He flexed his hands, nervously. “But I need Kaylee on the hull, now. I can only do so much from in here.”



Mal paced furiously inside his quarters. He was like an angry, caged lion, and desperately needed to get out. As soon as he had realized he was locked in his quarters, he’d pulled the tapestry on his wall down and started to unscrew the bolts there, thinking he could crawl out the venting.

When he heard Inara and Simon in the corridors, he abandoned that and climbed his ladder, banging on the door. Inara didn’t know how to override the locks manually, so he had to shout instructions through the steel hull.

When the lock on his door finally pinged open, he was up and out almost before she realized the doors had unlocked. Simon was coming back down the hallway. “What the hell is going on?”

Inara quickly began unlocking Kaylee’s bunk, while Simon explained the situation to Mal.

“Hijacked,” he panted. “Book is locked on the bridge with Wash and River. Wash thinks something has been hotwired on the hull.”

“I heard,” Mal snarled and stalked to Kaylee’s bunk. He nudged Inara aside and quickly unlocked the rest of the crew quarters.

The mechanic clamored out quickly, dressed only in a silky pink camisole. “We got big problems,” she announced, wide-eyed.

Mal stalked away, towards the cargo bay, gesturing her to follow. “Gonna need you on the line to tell me what to do, little Kaylee,” he called.

“Ain’t got no time,” Kaylee replied frightened as she hurried to follow. “Can’t figure it out if I can’t see it.”

Mal stopped and rounded on her. “We’re flying way too fast and too erratic for me to let you go out there. Too dangerous.”

Kaylee put her hands on her hips and scowled. “So you’d rather crash us all into a moon instead of trustin’ me to know to hang on tight?”

Jayne and Zoe, freed from their quarters, quickly caught up to them. “We ain’t really got time to be arguin’ this, Sir,” Zoe noted pointedly.

Mal scowled. “All right,” he conceded. “We go suit up; I’m comin’ with you. Jayne, prep the suits. Zoe, we need a tether.”

Jayne and Zoe both nodded and took off.

“What should we do?” Inara asked, looking anxiously at Mal.

Mal studied her and Simon and then shook his head. “Hold on tight -- things are gonna get bumpy.”



Wash was already at the bottom of the storage hold, flipping on the runner lights as he moved towards a small grate bolted into the wall. “Don’t suppose you brought a screwdriver?” he called up to Book, deadpan.

“Afraid not,” Book replied upon reaching the locker beside Wash, the intercom wire stretched out behind him. “Mal and Kaylee are on their way.” He then pulled a thin coin out of his pocket. “Try this.”

“Heads we live, tails we lose?” Wash asked, incredulously, as he frantically started working at the bolts.

The ship was beginning to noticeably shake and River's frightened voice drifted down to them.

"You're doing fine, River!" Wash hollered up at her as he removed the last bolt. In another situation he never would have managed to loosen them but the adrenaline coursing through his body made the screws yield easily.

Shucking his Hawaiian shirt, he hoisted himself up and crawled into the narrow opening. "Could use a little prayer right now, Shepherd," Wash intoned as he started ruthlessly pulling out wires.

"I'm one step ahead of you," Book replied and leaned forward. "Be careful in there. We don't want to end up cutting the wrong line and exploding," he noted calmly.

"Well," Wash replied in a tensed voice, "that'd be one way to solve our problem." He started crossing wires and banged his head hard when the ship jerked suddenly, causing sparks to shoot out in shower across his face. "Damn! If I could just sub-route the feed I could at least slow us down! If we're very lucky, we'll stop."

Wash moved to another section. "Aha!" he called in an angry voice. "So, that's how you want to play!" A huge section of wires were hanging in his face. He dragged one thick green wire from the first area he'd worked in all the way over to where he was now. "Time?" he called up to River.

"Nineteen minutes, sixteen seconds," River answered in a high, quavering voice. "Don't want to die like this, it's not like slipping into the stars."

"Enough with the creepy!" Wash shouted heatedly. "Okay, Book, I need you to get back on the line with Kaylee. You're going to relay to her what I see, and have her tell me what to do."

Book wasted no time. "Kaylee?"

"Read y'loud and clear, Shepherd!" she called sounding entirely too cheerful considering the situation. "Cap'n and I are just about ready t'hit the airlock soon as Jayne's finished tethering us."

"Good," Book answered. His eyes were trained on the bottom of Wash's legs. "Wash is indisposed beneath the flight consoles right now. He's asked me to relay for him."

"We're all ears, Shepherd," Mal answered. "You just start telling us what t'do."

"Okay," Wash called up, voice muffled. "The nav. sys. has been completely bypassed into the auxiliary feeds. I figure this was done somewhere on the undercarriage, possibly by the port thrust."

Some frantic, fearful part of him wanted to just start pulling all wires out, tearing them free until one of them finally did something. “It’s definitely on the port side, near the bottom. Tell Kaylee she’s going to have to disengage the wiring there. It’s completely locked down with what looks like a Type Six Heilos transformer.”

“Got it,” Book called back and relayed the information through to Kaylee.

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Mal led the way, walking slowly but steadily along Serenity’s hull, hunching from time-to-time to maintain his balance as the ship shook and tried to throw them. Kaylee was right behind him, clinging to the tether that ran from his EV suit to hers. The cheerfulness she had exhibited before had left her voice.

“Just a bit further, Cap’n,” she called nervously, gripping her tool bag tighter with her free hand. Far behind them Jayne stood at the airlock hatch, holding the tether as steady as possible at the anchor well, watching the pair as they progressed.

“There!” Kaylee announced and pointed.

Mal looked back at her and then followed her finger along its trajectory. “We need the tenth panel to the left – that’s where we’ll be able to override the throttle controls.”

It didn’t take long for Mal to remove the plating and it was obvious from the mess of wires hanging underneath that someone had definitely been in there. Crouching beside him, Kaylee groaned. “Okay, Book, I see the problem. It’s on the port thrust, like Wash said. I’m on it, but it’s a real mess and we’re shakin’ like a wet dog out here,” she called. “It’s gonna take some time.”

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“Tell her we got less than thirteen minutes,” Wash called heatedly.

“I believe she can hear you,” Book replied. “I’ve increased the gain so just tell her what you see.”

“Right,” Wash muttered. “Okay, Kaylee?”

“Yeah, Wash?” she asked. Her voice had a light layer of static over it but much of the fear in it had subsided. “You seein’ the override on the auxiliary feeds?” she questioned.

“See ‘em and can’t do nothing about them,” Wash called back. “I’ve shut off the power to the navigational system though, so if you can break the overrides, it shouldn’t ‘cause the feed to loop and blow out.”

“Smart thinkin’, Wash,” Kaylee cheered. “I’m gonna go in and start disengaging these wires, then.” She paused a bit. “Cap’n, need you t’move over there, if you can.”

Mal shuffled past Kaylee, until he was on the other side of the paneling. Jayne released more slack on the tether. Kneeling beside Kaylee, Mal instinctively pulled the mess of wires out, so they could see them better.

“These darned gloves,” Kaylee moaned, adjusting her grip on the tool she was working with and releasing a wire. “Ain’t used to these EV suits.” She smiled apologetically up at Mal.

He forced a smile back at her. “Just do your best.”

Wash’s tinny voice filtered through to them. “Whatever you just did caused a huge power surge on my end.”

“Is that good or bad?” Kaylee questioned.

“I’m thinking it’s good,” Wash called back.



“Eight minutes,” River interjected nervously.

“*Jue kong long de ying*,” Wash muttered and crossed two wires, plugging them back into opposite sides of the panel. “Okay, I’m reconnecting the feed loop. Hopefully all this power is gonna flow right back into the navigation consoles.”

“The screen above the panel just lit up,” Book called, sounding hopeful.

“*Shang di xie*,” Wash breathed in relief. “We’re gonna try to slow down again. Hang on a minute.” Worming his way out of the crawl-space he dropped back into the storage locker and hurried up the ladder to see if the power had been completely restored. “It’s looking good on this end,” he called.

Kaylee spoke again. “There’s a whole mess of stuff here that I don’t know does what. Soon as we land, we’re gonna have t’do a complete overhaul of this section to see that it’s all safe.”

River slowed the ship, and then began drawing them up when the core containment announcement didn’t sound.

“She yields,” River murmured softly, so that only Wash could hear her. The pilot grinned at her as she regained control of the ship.

Wash let out a strangled whoop of delight. “Whatever you did, Kaylee, we’ve got control on the bridge again. If you think we can land her with what’s left, then let’s do it. This is going to be a hell of a lot easier to deal with when we’re on land.” With a grin he slid into his chair. “I’ll take her,” he whispered to River and started flipping switches again. The controls responded easily to his touch now. He gripped the yoke tightly in relief. “I’m slowing her down. You and Mal shouldn’t have a problem getting back aboard.”

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Kaylee let out a little laugh and looked at Mal with deep relief evident on her face. “Good job, little Kaylee. Good job.”

“Weren’t all me, cap’n,” she responded, glancing down at the hull and holding the plate steady as Mal reattached it.

“No, but you kept your calm and between you and Wash you worked it out. Saved us all, I reckon. I’m proud of you.”

Kaylee smiled at that, before looking up at him through the face shield. Suddenly, she couldn’t stand the guilt anymore. “Cap’n, me and River – we was the ones took those shoes – and I lost ‘em, anyway. I’m sorry I lied to you.”

She was surprised when the Captain smiled back at her. “It was only a few pair of shoes. Figure you deserve more’n that, after what you did out here. Just – don’t do it again, *dong ma?* Now, let’s get you back inside.”

“Yes sir!” Kaylee grinned.

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“Suppose it’s safe to unlock the bridge door now,” Book mused.

Flipping open the manual override he stepped to the side as Simon rushed into the room and hurried over to River. “Are you okay, *mei-mei?*”

River gave him a small, reassuring smile, patting the co-pilot console fondly. “She’s better now. They’ve fixed her.”

“I was so worried,” Simon breathed and dropped to his knees on the floor beside her. “What was that? How did it happen?”

Footsteps echoed down the hall towards the cockpit and within a few moments Mal and Kaylee appeared, still in their environmental suits. Jayne and Zoe walked in immediately behind them, followed closely by Inara.

“Someone want to explain what the gorram hell just happened?” Mal demanded. He looked at Wash rather than River, but every slight shift of her figure was registered.

Wash smiled at them brilliantly. “Just another feat of death-defying hijinx in space.”

Mal scowled at him. “Don’t got time for games, Wash.”

“Clearly someone on Athens thought to hotwire us on a one way path to hell.” Wash answered, growing a little more serious

“I can’t believe it,” Kaylee moaned. She had lost her helmet somewhere along the way and looked dwarfed in the space suit. “Serenity didn’t tell me nothin’ when we left. That ain’t right.”

Wash nodded, looking unsettled. “None of our scans picked up any problems before we left. There’s no way we could have known about it ahead of time.”

Mal raised a hand and waved it, cutting him off. “Are we safe?”

Wash nodded. “ I think so. We’ll have to work some stuff out later but I think I can land her.”

“Her stomach is still sore but it won’t kill her,” River agreed softly, sliding to her feet. “I’m going to bed now.”

Mal stepped aside to let River by, frowning in consternation when she murmured at him. “Low tide still, held her, held, would have held time still, low tide, shivering on the sand, and they all come to see the tide pools.”

“I’ll . . . I’ll make sure she gets to her room all right,” Simon offered. He turned to catch up with River and accompanied her out of sight.

Inara was helping Kaylee out of her environmental suit; she was itching to get under the pilot console to see what Wash had done on his end. As soon as she was free, she scurried under Wash’s legs and looked at the panels he’d removed and groaned. “Whoever done it knew what they was doing.”

Mal nodded. “What was she rigged to do, though? They tryin’ to take these goods off of us?”

Jayne gave a massive yawn. “If we’re all done playing save-each-other’s-asses-in-the-middle-of-the-gorram-night, then I’m out of here.” He turned to lurch back to his bunk, pausing to ogle Kaylee in her pretty camisole as she pulled out from under the console.

Kaylee pushed past them and hurried down into the storage lockers. “You tore them,” she wailed when she saw the mess of there. Her voice, though muffled, was still pretty audible.

Wash shifted uncomfortably. “It pained me to do it as much as it pained her.”

Wash looked at Mal again, before smiling weakly at Zoe. “She was jury-rigged to eventually fly into Logos,” he stated. “Or explode if we tried to slow down. I’m guessing whoever did it didn’t care about the merchandise—they wanted us dead.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Of course, this is all guesswork. Maybe some mysterious, potentially homicidal friends of ours just wanted to test our reflexes.”

“*Hui di xiong de zhu!*” Mal cursed. “Can see folks wantin’ to steal the goods, sure. Expensive lot, probably worth a pretty penny, but why the hell’s anyone gonna want t’see us meet a fiery demise when it’d take the cargo out with us?” Mal paused to think about that. “Not like there’s any profit to that.”

“These screws’re stripped!” Kaylee exclaimed from below. “You get down here, Wash, or I swear I’ll come up there and—”

Wash winced a little but grinned too. He addressed Mal. “I don’t know why they’d want us to go all explodey, Mal. Why don’t you call Hector and have a little chat with him about that?” He moved towards the ladder. “I was a very bad boy to Serenity and I’ve got a mechanic who isn’t going to let me sleep until I apologize good and well.”

Mal nodded. “Something seems real off ‘bout all this,” he noted darkly.

Before Mal could elaborate Zoe called down the ladder. “Kaylee? Think you’d best be puttin’ some proper clothes on ‘fore I send my husband down there with you.”

“You think I’m naked?” Kaylee demanded hotly, moving to the bottom rung and looking up at Zoe. “She’s got wires hangin’ all over, panels off, and there ain’t no way I’m gonna get this all fixed without some new wiring that someone refused to buy her.” She clambered up the ladder, glaring. Her pretty camisole was now covered in grease. “And it was lacy, too” she said, gesturing to the ruin of her garb accusingly.

Mal sighed, snapping out of his reverie; he needed to take things one step at a time. “Get you some new wires on Persephone,” he promised, trying to placate her.

She folded her arms over her chest. “And my camisole?”

Wash raised a hand, sheepishly. “I’ll buy you a new camisole, Kaylee.”

“Better,” she muttered, pushing past as she headed off to find a jumpsuit for herself. “Since I lost my shoes.”



Mr. Universe stepped into Serenity's cargo bay, fingers steepled in front of him as he appraised an unhappy-looking Mal. Wash, Jayne and Zoe were standing beside the cargo. Mr. Universe wore a smile but his eyes seemed slightly troubled. "I'm very, very impressed with your accomplishment, Mal," he said easily. "Of course, you've got a great pilot," he added and a hand reached out, gesturing to Wash. "We went to school together, you know."

Mal's face was stern and hard. "I know." He was not in the mood for Mr. Universe's flamboyancy. "You find out who those men were and you tell me. Just about cost me my ship and the nine lives on it. That don't sit too well with me, nor does the notion they got a mole. That concerns me and it should concern you."

Mr. Universe nodded, thoughtfully. "Believe me, I'll find out who it was. You can run but you can't hide from the wave," he grinned. "That's my motto — or it would be if I ever stuck to a motto."

Wash muttered under his breath, to Mal. "He's been like this ever since I knew him."

Mal kept his expression hard and kept his attention on Mr. Universe. "We work for you again, we get paid in advance."

This caused Mr. Universe to laugh. "You want compensation for your troubles, Mal?" He looked Mal over carefully. "Greedy, greedy. It doesn't suit you." He gave Zoe and Jayne a quick once-over and then winked at Zoe. "I'll throw in a bonus, if you want."

"Bonus don't necessarily make up for bein' called greedy when all I want is to make sure there's no such trouble in the future, for myself and other folk." Mal retorted angrily.

"Greedy probably wasn't what he meant," Wash interjected hurriedly. "Probably... more — smart, hard-headed business man, right?"

Mal turned back to the matter at hand, allowing Wash's chatter to pacify him. "You sure none of them names on Hector's crew ring a bell with you?"

The younger man shook his head. "I've been dealing with Hector for years. I know he's trustworthy. I don't think it was me they were after. But I will find out who did this and then you'll see the power being the eyes and the ears of the 'Verse can bring." He gestured broadly. "With just a few key strokes I can crash their bank account, put out a flag on the Cortex for their ident cards, perhaps slip in an outstanding felony on a few track records." He grinned. "All I need is a name, Mal, and I'll get it all taken care of."

Jayne muttered, under his breath, "I'm glad he's on our side."

“I’ll be sure to give it to ya, as soon as I know,” Mal muttered darkly. “In the meantime, we’ve got your cargo and would really like to get it off our ship so we can leave.”

Wash smiled nervously at Mr. Universe and stepped forward. “He’s just a little grumpy – get’s like that when he nearly gets killed and his ship almost blows up, which happens a lot more often than the rest of us would like. Plus, we’ve got some repairs to do.”

“Understood,” Mr. Universe said. . “I did good, hiring you. You brought me my equipment -- in tact -- and some incredible drama. I’ll definitely use your services again.” He walked past Wash, running his fingers over the cargo affectionately, until he reached the smallest box. “And this,” he grinned happily, “is the most precious cargo of all.” Waving imperiously at Jayne, Mr. Universe gestured to the crate and watched with delight as the larger man pried it open.

Wash nodded. “Lovely. Well, it’s been great almost getting killed for your sake. We’ll have to do it again sometime soon.”

Mr. Universe grinned and looked up from the crate, focusing on Wash. “I’ve got my eye on you, now. Buy your wife something pretty with all that coin.”

Wash grinned at that. “Will do.”

“It’s only fitting,” Mr. Universe continued as he reached into the crate and pulled out a long, thin tube. “Since I’ve just bought something nice for mine.”

Wash did a double take. “Wait, you’re married?” He asked and then he stared at the item in Mr. Universe’s hand. “What the —”

“Not yet,” Mr. Universe chuckled. “But this could be considered a wedding present. The date is fast approaching.”

“Ain’t sure she’d like you showin’ that sort of thing off to common folk,” Zoe noted seriously and put her hands behind her back as she drew to attention.

Mal tried hard to maintain his serious expression, but found it cracking.

Mr. Universe looked at them all curiously and then stared at the item in his hand. His expression suddenly lit up and he laughed. “Oh, you’re all so very naughty!” he chided. “No, this is for my lovebot, Lenore.”

Wash shook his head. “I don’t see how this is saving face at all.”

Mr. Universe gave him a scolding glare. “It’s a spinal patch,” he replied and shook it. “It’s to increase her agility.” His grin widened “Though I’m hardly surprised you mistook it. You always were...kinkier...than I was.”

Wash straightened up, slightly indignant. “Hey, now, this is a conversation I’m suddenly very uncomfortable having.”

“Captain ain’t interested in hearing it, neither.” Mal crossed to the cargo and gestured to it. “So, why don’t we take this load of —” he reeled himself in, “very fine merchandise off my boat, so we can get on our way?”

Mr. Universe carefully packed the spinal patch back away. “Can do, Mal. And, don’t fret about what happened. Like I said, all I need is a name and I’ll take care of it.”

“Great,” Mal answered tersely. “Now, off you go. Jayne, Zoe – let’s get this stuff unloaded.”



“So, any ideas on who might’a wanted us dead?” Wash queried later, as he prepared for take-off. It hadn’t taken long to unload the cargo, and they had all breathed a sigh of relief when the cargo doors had shut.

Mal shook his head and crossed his arms. “Don’t rightly know but whoever it was, I figure they weren’t after Mr. Universe or none of that cargo.” He stared at Wash for a bit and then returned his gaze to Zoe. “Think we got another enemy out there, all to happy to see us get taken down.”

“Tends t’be the case, sir. Got a plan for what t’do about it?” she questioned.

Mal shook his head. “Would like t’hunt the *hundun* down and kill him myself, if I knew where to start, but we got a schedule to keep.” His eyes narrowed. “We check the ship over every time we take off now. Can’t risk that happenin’ again.”

“I’ll tell Kaylee, sir,” Zoe agreed.

Mal looked like he was about to say something else when River slipped onto the catwalk.

The girl was bare-foot, as usual, and she carried a box in her hands. She was wearing the one dress she had that fit her properly, the pink one.

“You need somethin’, darlin’?” Mal inquired.

River nodded. “Kaylee’s cross. She says there aren’t enough spare parts to fix her, so she had to take apart the shuttle.”

“We’re going to need that shuttle —” Wash began, but Mal cut him off.

“I’ll deal with Kaylee.” Mal turned and left the cargo bay, his captain face on. “Wash, get us prepared to take off.” He looked at Zoe. “Go make sure the shuttle is safe for lift off.”

Zoe nodded and started up the other stairwell.

River moved closer to Wash once they were alone together and they began walking towards the cockpit. “Here.” She thrust the box at him, her face wearing a kind of anxious anticipation.

Wash had gotten used to River carrying around strange things lately: knitting and broken pieces of Kaylee’s machinery and the like, so her giving the box to him came as a surprise. He took it hesitantly, not sure what he’d find inside. “What’s this?” he questioned and shook it ever so lightly as they ascended the stairs and came out on the crew quarters.

River smiled at him. “Full circle.”

“Huh?”

“Full circle,” she repeated. “You lost something, came here to sulk, taught me, I learned, and now you get....” She gave him a prompting look, like an impatient schoolmistress.

“Cookies?” he teased. He really had no idea what was in the box but he figured it’d make sense once he opened it. They reached the cockpit, and he started up the stairwell. Once he had sunk into his chair, he slipped the lid off and was quite perplexed, for a few moments, to see a beautiful pair of leather ladies sandals sitting inside. Then he laughed. “My shoes!” They weren’t exactly his but they were quite similar and obviously from the same heist. He took one out of the box, inhaling the heady aroma of leather as he did. “River, where did you get these?”

River looked evasive. “Now someone else has lost them.” She rubbed the toes of one foot against the ankle of the other. “But you should have them.”

Mal called along the corridor as he arrived in the cockpit. “Got Kaylee sorted out, but you better give us a gentle take off, Wash. We’re just pasted together with spit and love and I ain’t sure how far that’s gonna get us. We need to get to a proper port and buy some parts.”

“One gentle take off, coming right up, Captain!” Wash called, shoving the shoe back into the box and slapping the lid on it, before sliding it beneath the console. He put his hands on the yoke and looked over to River with a twinkle in his eyes. “Thank you,” he said softly.

When Mal entered the cockpit moments later, the two were still grinning at each other. “You and my pilot friends now, River?” he questioned lightly as he moved forward to pick up the intercom system.

“Some people trust,” she said, turning away from him, hiding her face again behind the ever-ready veil of hair. “Some people trust or don’t worry, don’t wait and watch to see what’s wrong, what’s next, there’s always something...”

“We all have our moments, River, but there ain’t a man or woman on this vessel I don’t trust.” He glanced to her briefly and then inclined his head. “Wouldn’t be on this boat if I didn’t.”

River's face lit up at that, and her pose shifted. For a moment there was no uncertainty to her and she looked like the heroine she had been, holding the ship steady as it had nearly shook apart.

Wash, glancing over his shoulder briefly as he took off, saw it clear as day and couldn’t help wanting to sustain whatever small burst of confidence she was feeling. “River was a big help when the bridge locked down, you know. Helped to...figure out what happened; kept me calm.”

Mal arched an eyebrow, looking between the girl and his pilot. “That so? Nice t’know you can put that big brain of yours to good use,” he commended. “Keep it up and pretty soon you’ll be gettin’ a cut of the profits, huh? Well, we keep bringin’ in hauls nice as this one, maybe that won’t be such a problem.” He crossed his arms and surveyed the sky beyond them with a sense of pride. “You did good, folks.” He looked at the two of them again. “You all did pretty gorram good.”

Smiling now, River was left somewhere in between heroine and ghost, she was left — a girl, and that was enough for her, and more than she got most days. So she leaned against Serenity and closed her eyes, feeling the hum as they burst through the ion clouds and returned to the peace of the black.



After everyone finally left the cockpit, Wash took his new shoes back out of their box to study. They were too small for Zoe but they were still exceptionally well made and maintained that heady real leather aroma he found so appealing. River had given them to him and he’d appreciated the gesture greatly and wanted to keep them, just to add to his strange menagerie of toys and bright clothes, but he knew they weren’t his to keep.

They were Kaylee’s shoes and she’d been fretting about them for a while now, fearing Mal would be upset with her if he found out she and River had taken shoes from their cargo. He wasn’t going to come between Mal and Kaylee. He also wasn’t going to let on to Kaylee that River had taken her shoes; the girl’s friendship was more important.

He caressed the supple leather heel one last time and smiled at them before he set them back into the box. He would slide them under the engine before he went to bed. Kaylee would find them in the morning.



Zoe was waiting for him when he finally slipped in beside her. He could tell from the expression on her face that something was bothering her. “What’s wrong?”

“Well,” she began, “we delivered the goods and got the money.”

“But,” he prodded. “I can tell when there’s a but involved.”

“But,” Zoe agreed, looking a bit pained, “Mal estimates the cost of repairs will eat up a lot of what we made.”

“*Tan xin ji*,” he moaned softly and rolled onto his back, staring hard up at the ceiling. “It would figure.”

“It was a good contact though,” she coaxed and put a hand over his chest, rubbing softly. “Even the captain thinks so; weren’t your fault what happened. Captain should’ve paid more attention, anyway.”

“He had warning this was going to happen?” Wash replied, a hint of confusion in his voice.

Zoe nodded against his shoulder. “River was having one of her fits in the cargo bay ‘fore we lifted out of Athens. She was sayin’ strange things ‘bout . . .” she waved her hand, unable to explain. “Well, you know how she gets. But the captain just waved her off.”

Wash sighed. “How does he do that, Zoe? How does he trust someone completely one day and then turn around and stop the next?” He seemed completely bewildered. “And how can you agree with that?”

She shook her head. “Baby, we’ve danced this dance before. I’m not going to argue with you. He’s the captain; I follow his orders.”

Wash touched her softly, his fingers warm and light. “But you know sometimes he’s wrong, Zo’ and sometimes it’s okay to disagree with him.”

She raised her hand to fold it over his. “I know, husband,” she replied. “And when it’s important enough, I disobey.”

He squeezed her softly. “I just worry that one day you’ll side with him when you shouldn’t have and you’ll end up regretting it. We could have died tonight.”

Zoe’s other hand rose to caress his cheek. “That’s the kind of life we lead.”

Wash leaned into her touch and closed his eyes. “All the more reason we ought to stick together. Seems to me, we got more enemies than friends.”

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An old enemy sat by himself in front of a monitor, staring at the information he'd just received over the Cortex. It was not the news he had been looking forward to.

Snarling, he looked up at a large board he had in front of him. It had a schematic layout of Serenity on it and beside it was Malcolm Reynolds wanted poster. Hissing, he pulled a knife from his boot and hurled it at the face glaring at him.

He was missing an eye, so his depth perception wasn't as good as it used to be. The knife missed Mal's face, imbedding itself in the corkboard instead.

Laurence Dobson pushed himself up out of his chair and crossed to the poster. He pulled the knife out of the board and leaned in close to the picture. With a flick of his wrist, he effectively sliced the throat of the poster. The bottom half of the page cut free and drifted down to settle on the trash-riddled floor, before it was crushed beneath his heel.

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