

Episode 2x08 – Havenwww.firefly-tvs.com**Original Air Date:** 25 April 2005**Writers:** Kari and Eustacia Vie**Executive Producers:** Michelle Makariak (Michmak) & Jen Hook (Mistress Shiny)**Producer:** Michelle Makariak (Michmak)**Special Edits:** Sophie Richards and Michelle Makariak**Dialog:** Sophie Richard**Proofing:** Sophie Richards and Michelle Makariak**Animations:** Taerowyn**PDF Formatting:** Kendall Jung

The sun dipped lower onto the horizon, lengthening the shadows in the alley. A rat scrambled across a load of trash, and the man pressed himself further against the brick wall. He clutched the cross hanging around his neck and his lips moved in silent prayer. *Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...*

Full darkness slowly stole over the alley, and the man crept toward the street. He looked furtively around, one hand pressed against the building for support, the other hovering over the gun on his hip. It didn't sit quite right in the holster, and looked too small to be of much use. Seeing no one, he slipped out onto the dusty back road. He kept to the shadows, using doorways and alleys to hide him, but moved rapidly, heading for somewhere he knew well.

His destination was soon in sight, and he allowed himself a sigh of relief. Letting his guard drop, he dashed quickly across the street and behind the building to the backdoor. He knocked softly in a recognizable pattern -- twice, pause, twice, pause, once -- and waited for the door to open.

Light spilled into the alley, a woman's silhouette framed in the entrance. "Zach? That you?" she asked, her voice low.

"It's me."

The woman sighed, and sunk against the wooden frame in relief. "Oh, thank the Lord. Get in here. I'll take you up the back stairs." She tilted her head, but didn't wait for him to follow before she padded quickly and quietly to the stairs.

Zach smiled, the tension in his body releasing in a bark of laughter. The woman turned and glared at him, bringing her finger to her lips before heading for the stairs again. Zach frowned apologetically, and followed silently.

The wooden steps creaked under their combined weight, but the sound was drowned out as a piano started playing. Zach followed the woman through the second-floor hallway, working to keep up with her long strides. She unlocked the last door on the left, leaving it open for him to follow her. "Listen, if anyone finds you in here, I'm in

trouble, so be quiet and careful. The 'Wave machine is over there, and the code to call is 2839." She leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek. "Good luck."

With that, she slipped out the door, the latch almost silent. Zach collapsed into the chair and punched in the code she'd given him and a number he'd memorized by heart. He only prayed his sergeant would answer.



"Mal? Mal, you have a 'wave." Wash's voice, distorted slightly by the intercom, boomed down to kitchen. "Wanna come up and get it?."

Mal frowned. If it were Badger, checking in about the upcoming Constance job, Wash would have said; besides, that was a simple smash and grab operation. Setting down the gun he'd been cleaning and reassembling, he walked to the cockpit and clicked on the screen, nodding at Zoe as she fell in behind him. "Mal here."

"Sarge? Oh thank god." The man on the screen smiled. A smudge of dirt crossed his face, and there was a cut above his right eyebrow. A large purple and yellow bruise circled his left eye; it looked relatively fresh, but healing, not more than a week old. His hair stuck up in multiple directions, and wasn't very clean. "Sergeant, you gotta help me," he said, his voice low and breathy.

For a moment, Mal didn't speak. The man's smile faltered, the brightness in his eyes dimming. "Sarge?"

"Zach? What did you do?" Mal finally found his voice, his words coming out harder than intended.

"I didn't do nothing, Sarge, I swear. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and what with being a Browncoat and all...it looked bad." Zach looked behind him, then dropped his voice even lower. "I just need to get off this rock."

"Zach, you're asking for my help and you don't even have the decency to tell me what I'm risking my crew and my ship for?" Mal's eyes narrowed and he stood up a little straighter.

Glancing back behind him again, Zach sighed. "I got in a fight, Sarge. Me and a couple of the guys I met here went to a bar, and we got pretty drunk." Mal could see his hands rubbing together nervously at the bottom of the screen. "Some guy started trash-talking the Independents, and, well, I got a little riled up."

Mal closed his eyes, pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead. He had an idea where this story was going.

"Sarge, don't do that. You know I was never a fighter." Zach's voice was pleading. "But it turned into an out and out brawl, and the first guy..." He bit his bottom lip, pain clear on his face. "The first guy never got up. Since I was the first one on him, they're tryin' to pin murder on me, 'cause someone's gotta pay."

"*Gaoyang zhong de guyang!*" Mal slammed the flat of his fist against the wall. "You're asking a lot of a man you ain't seen in a long time. How am I to know you didn't catch the man in bed with your girl and beat the hell of him?"

Zach closed his eyes and looked down. "You know I ain't like that, Sarge. You know I don't like to fight, and I never meant nobody to get kilt." He stared at his hands for a moment, then fixed his eyes on Mal's. "Sarge..."

"Where are you?"

"Zephus. Hiding. Is there any way..." The younger man let his question hang, eyes hopeful.

"We're at least two days out," Wash offered when Mal looked at him.

"Zach -- I've got a job lined up. Have you tried Marcus? Hollarhan? Dykstra?"

"I don't know where they're at, Sarge. Could be dead for all I know and 'sides, you're the only one with a transport. They'll kill me if they find me here."

Mal sighed in frustration and looked over his shoulder. "Zo'," he muttered, "you know we can't..."

"Don't see why not, Sir. He's one of ours."

"Yeah, well so was Tracey and look where that got us. And you know Zach...he ain't always the most upfront." His whisper was ferocious. "Don't rightly feel like losing two days if we don't need to."

"We trained with him, Sir," she replied just as softly. "He's one of ours."

Mal pressed his forehead into his hands. He could hear the underlying steel in Zoe's tone and knew, despite how tempting it was to tell Zach to find someone else, that he would go get him. Zoe was right -- the man was one of theirs, not that it counted for much nowadays. And, for some reason, he and Zoe both had always had a soft spot for the younger man, despite the trouble he managed to get into. The desperation in Zach's voice was hard to ignore. After a few moments of silence, Mal looked up. His voice was soft, resigned. "Where can we meet you?"



The air within Serenity thrummed with tension. They were docked on Zephus, one of two moons in the Antiope system, and Mal and Zoe had gone out alone on some secret mission. Kaylee, River and Jayne sat in the mess, edgy and nervous.

Kaylee watched over River as the younger woman worked on her knitting. "What d'you think is so important that the cap'n and Zoe wouldn't tell us nothing?" Even as she spoke, she reached over to correct River's technique.

"Family," River answered cryptically.

Jayne snorted from his seat on the other side of the table. "Mal ain't got any family, and they certainly wouldn't be this far out on the rim, if he had 'em." He pinched a mass of noodles with his chopsticks. "This place weren't settled but twenty years ago," he added just before shoving the food in his mouth.

Kaylee frowned disapprovingly at Jayne. "People move, you know. Where do you think settlers come from?"

Before Jayne could answer, River interrupted. "Not that kind of family. Not all family is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

Jayne shot River a hard look, which she ignored, her eyes never leaving the project in her hands. "Anyhow, Kaylee, I don't think Mal's family's the type to settle a place like Zephus. Nor Amphion, and that moon's softer than this 'un."

Shrugging, Kaylee corrected River's stitch again. "People surprise you, you know."

Wash's voice crackled over the intercom. "Captain and Zoe's incoming, and it looks like we have hostiles chasing them. Jayne, get down to the cargo bay."

"*Ni tama de tianxia suoyou de ren duo gaisi!* Can't Mal go anywhere without trying to get me shot at?" Jayne slammed his chopsticks on the table and jumped up, heading toward his bunk and his weapon stash.

Kaylee's eyes went wide at the pronouncement, and she stumbled off the bench as she tried to stand. "We should get Simon, make sure the infirmary's ready." Without waiting for an answer, the mechanic headed off in the direction of the passenger dorms, leaving River alone in the mess.

Within minutes, the rest of the crew, minus Wash who was ready to take off as soon as everyone was aboard, had gathered in the cargo bay. Simon held his medical bag, ready for any injuries Mal and Zoe had sustained. Kaylee stood next to the airlock, behind a crate, ready to open and close it as soon as they were close enough. Jayne hunched behind another crate, rifle pointed at the still-closed airlock doors.

"NOW!" Mal's voice rang in their ears even though the intercom, and Kaylee slammed the button to open the airlock. Bullets pinged off the metal ramp as it lowered too slowly for the crew's taste. A dark-haired man dove into the cargo bay and huddled away from the door. Mal and Zoe backed in, returning fire to the men chasing them. "Shut it, Kaylee! Wash, GO!"

Speechless, Kaylee smashed the button again, and the ramp pulled up, and Serenity was off the ground before it clicked into place. Simon rushed to Mal's side, medical bag at the ready. "Is anyone hurt?"

"Just clipped me, doc. Nothing for you to worry about." The captain held his hand tightly against his upper arm, blood seeping through his fingers.

"Let me be the judge of that," Simon muttered as he pulled out a bandage.

While Simon and Mal argued about Mal's wound, the rest of the crew stared at the third member of the returning group. The man slowly climbed to his feet, dusting off his filthy pants. He flashed the crew a wide, cheerful smile. "Uh, hi."

"Who the hell is this? This who you're getting shot at for?" Jayne glared at the man as he clicked the safety on his rifle. "Don't look much like he's worth it to me."

Suddenly, River was at his side, making Jayne jump. "Family is always worth it."

"Gorram moonbrain, don't go creeping up on a body! It ain't right, you being all sneaky and quiet-like." Jayne moved away from River, keeping a distrustful eye on her the whole time.

Zoe moved to the young man's side. "This is Zach. He fought with me and the captain during the war, and got himself in a bit of trouble here on Zephus. We're just giving him a lift. No more than that."

Jayne opened his mouth, but Mal cut him off. "I don't want to hear any protests. It's my boat, and what's done is done. Now, if you all are done gawking like little schoolgirls, you mind if we take this somewhere a mite more comfortable?"

As the crew filed out of the cargo bay, Jayne muttered, "Now we're carrying three 'fugies? How is this a good plan?"



"So there I was, drunker than I think I'd ever been in my life, standing on a table in just my shorts, reciting the Independent creed for the whole bar." Everyone except Mal laughed uproariously at this as Wash came striding in. "And that is why Sarge and Zoe and I never drink Santo tequila."

Wash plopped down next to his wife. "What'd I miss?" he asked, a plaintive look on his face.

"Just reminiscing, husband," Zoe said, placing her hand fondly on his arm. "Talking about old times."

Jayne snorted. "Hearing about Mal and Zoe getting liquored up and doing something stupid, more like."

Kaylee punched him lightly on the arm and Zoe arched an eyebrow at Jayne. "I can still hurt you."

Zach chuckled. "Same old Zoe. There was this one time, we were training out on Verbena, and a bunch of us went to this bar. It was, how many you think, Sarge?" He looked at Mal, who just shrugged. "Oh, like to be fifteen, twenty guys, and Zoe. 'Course, we all knew not to mess with her; she'd as soon whack you over the head as look at you, but the locals, they just saw a beautiful woman who was new to town."

Wash nudged Zoe with his elbow. "She is beautiful." She shot him a look. "And scary. Very scary," he added hastily.

Zach chuckled. "That she is. But anyhow, these guys all came up and tried to get her to dance. We were all on our way to drunk, me and the Sarge and all the boys, but Zoe tried to keep sober most of the time we were offbase, to keep us out of trouble." He grinned at Mal. "Seems like some of us needed it more than others, and I think I was one of the dumbest. Sarge wasn't nearly so bad."

Kaylee giggled. "Cap'n don't like to be silly. Got a stick up his *pi gu* size of--"

"Kaylee!" Mal shouted. "Keep in mind you're talking about your employer here."

Clapping a hand over her mouth, Kaylee tried to keep a straight face. "Yes sir," she mumbled, muffled through her fingers.

Zach's face contorted in an effort to keep a smile off his face. "Well, anyway. Zoë was sitting over at a table, minding her own business, and a bunch of us were playing holo-pool with the locals. One of them, drunk as can be, gets it in his head that he's gonna take 'that pretty curly-haired thing' -- his words, not mine, Zo' -- out on a date. 'Course, Zoë didn't so much agree with that, what with him looking like a dirty polecat and smelling worse. So he heads over and starts this whispered conversation, but instead of coming out of the encounter with a date, he came out of it with a look like a pickled frog, eyes all bugged out and his face as green as you please." He grinned and looked at Zoë. "Never did figure out what she said to him what scared him so bad."

"And you never will know, Private," Zoë said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Hell, I'd like to know too," Jayne added, looking at Zoë across the table.

Mal's face had been growing harder as he listened to the story about Zoe. He wondered if there was a single person besides himself who had any idea what Zoe'd been through in that war, how many men she'd had to deal with hassling her, grabbing her. They'd called her cold, and they'd called her hard, but they'd never for one minute, let her be anything else. "I think that's just about enough of stories," he said, thickly.

"Aw, come on, Mal," Wash said, grinning widely and nudging Zoë playfully. "We all want to hear."

Zoë turned slowly to Wash, her eyebrow raised high, her face a mask of calm, though she was completely attuned to Mal and his shifting mood. "Really, Wash?"

Wash blinked and smiled broadly. "You know, I think I'll be fine. I don't really want to know anymore." He nodded vigorously until she turned away from him.

Jayne grumbled something from across the table, his eyes on the half-eaten sandwich in front of him, and Zoë shot him a similar look. "Yeah, I think I'll die happy if I never know what you said to make some kids balls shrivel up like that. I like my pecker nice and healthy."

Simon cringed. "Do you have to talk about things like that at the table?"

Jayne looked at him, a look of honest confusion on his face. "Why?" He paused for a moment, then turned to Book. "Sorry Shepherd." The older man nodded his forgiveness.

Eyes wide, Simon continued to stare as if Jayne had grown a second head. Jayne frowned, taking a bite of his sandwich. Around a mouthful of bread and protein he said, "What? Ain't no ladies about and I'm the only one what's eatin'. Doesn't bother me none."

Simon stared at him. "Need I remind you that Zoë, Kaylee, and my little sister are listening?"

Jayne stared back. "Like I said. Ain't any ladies about." Kaylee elbowed him in the side, prompting a muttered curse. "Gorram it!"

"And do I need to remind you about keeping a civil tongue in your head? Or is that beyond your comprehension?" Mal snapped.

Jayne rolled his eyes and took bite of the sandwich, but remained silent.

Kaylee smiled sunnily at Zach. "You got an awful lot of stories about the captain and Zoë, don't you?"

"Well, we trained together for six months on Verbena, then I fought under Sarge for more'n a year. Got transferred out just before Serenity Valley," he said, turning to Mal. "Still wish I'd been there for you, Sarge. It weren't fair."

"You'd have just died with the rest of 'em," Mal muttered darkly. "'Sides, we ain't talking about that now."

An awkward silence gripped them for a moment. River shifted uncomfortably in her seat, looking from Mal to Zach. Both men stared at the table, avoiding the eyes of the rest of the crew. Frowning, Kaylee pursed her lips, looking ashamed that she'd brought on such a bad train of thought.

Wash broke the unnatural hush. "So, I think we need to hear more about Mal doing some embarrassing things. Like crazy pranks and wearing dresses and the like."

Zach's face lit up and his eyes started to sparkle. "Pranks, huh?"

"Think we've all had our bellyful of funny stories just now," Mal said, his voice hard and threatening.

"Aw, but it's a damn funny story! And Kaylee here thinks you're all work and no play, and well," he winked, "that ain't exactly true."

"Aint it?" Mal said coldly. "I reckon there's some who'd feel differently. Tracey, for one."

There was a dead silence as he said that. "You...shouldn't oughta talk about him like that," Kaylee whispered.

"Yeah? And maybe the rest of you shouldn't oughta be talkin' at all. War's long done, and you don't know the first thing about me, son, and you might wanna be rememberin' that," Mal said, glaring at Zach. He stood up then, kicking his chair back. "I got work to do, even if the rest of you don't." He strode away, sick and tired of hearing about the past.

There was a long silence. "Should I go...apologize or somethin'? I didn't mean no harm. Just thought y'all'd think it was funny's all."

"Go ahead, Private," Zoe said calmly, trying to restore order. "Reckon they'd like to hear about it."

Simon, holding two cups of tea, returned to the table and handed one to River, who cradled it in her hands, large eyes focused on Zach. "So what was this prank?" he asked cautiously.

Zach's grin returned, a little uncertainly. "Well, we were training on Verbena, like I said. There was one drill sergeant that no one, and I mean no one liked. Meanest old sumbitch I've ever met --"

"Meaner than that hunk of meat?" Wash interjected, pointing to Jayne.

Jayne shot him a glare. "Watch yourself, little man. Just 'cause your woman can hurt me don't mean you can."

Zach laughed. "Yeah. Much meaner. This guy had recruits in tears on a regular basis. Sure, we all needed toughing up, being about as green as you can get, but some of the kids were threatening to leave, and us being the underdogs, we needed all the bodies that we could get.

"Well, one Saturday night, we were all playing tall card in the barracks and drinking. This new kid, Rogers, was really getting the short end of the stick from the drill sergeant from hell, for no good reason. Well, he starts bellyaching, and Sarge gets it in his head that we can run this *tama de hun dan* out on his ass. We're all good and liquored up by now, me and Sarge especially. So we start plotting ways to get rid of the bastard..."

"And then what?" Kaylee said, leaning forward.

"Now you are bein' impatient," Zach scolded teasingly. "Can't no one keep this girl in check, or is it y'all just don't wanna?"

"Hell, even the cap'n can't resist them puppy eyes," Jayne snorted.

"Yeah? Don't know as I blame him," Zach said, grinning at Kaylee, who blushed, pleased.

"You wanna get back to the story?" Zoe demanded coolly, falling easily into the role of second in Mal's absence. "Don't reckon the captain'd take kindly to you sweet-talkin' his mechanic. You ain't gonna be around so long, remember?"

"Well, it's nice to be appreciated around here," Kaylee replied, crossing her arms and frowning. "Seems like the only men who notice me are only here for a few days, then run off and get themselves shot or dropped off on outer rim planets or some such. Wish we could keep 'em around for a bit."

A dark color had crept up into Simon's face, and he opened his mouth to say something. Zach saw it and cut him off. "All right, all right. Back to the story. So me and Sarge are making all these crazy plans to get rid of Drill Sergeant *Hun Dan*, ones what involve way too much effort for a couple of drunks to pull off. Zoë here talked some sense into us, and tried to put us to bed before we got ourselves a month of latrine duty. But not us," he said, shaking his head. "We were determined. It weren't so much that we like Rogers, 'cause we all thought he cheated at cards, but more that we'd got this idea in our heads, and weren't excited to let it go.

"So, finally we come up with a plan. It's short and simple, and hard to trace back to anyone. It was gonna take a little bit of stealth, but we needed to get the supplies, so we were a bit more sober by the time we were ready. We snuck into the officer's barracks, right past the sleeping guard, and found the drill sergeant's bed. His boots were sitting at the end, polished black as night, just like he tried to get us to do every damn day. We were ready." He paused for dramatic effect, looking around at the crew.

"Did you piss in 'em?" Jayne demanded.

Zach winked. "Just hold your horses, everything will be revealed in good time." He took a drink of his tea. "Turns out this particular drill sergeant was allergic to the powdered laundry detergent they used in the camp. Had to have his clothes washed special, or else he turned patchy beet red for weeks. So me and Sarge rubbed the inside of his boots with the stuff, enough that he'd go all red, but not enough that he'd notice it right away. We were just about finished, and he started to wake up. We hightailed it outta there, and got away clean."

Simon's mouth dropped open. "You deliberately provoked and allergic reaction? What if he'd gone into anaphylactic shock? You could have killed him!"

Zach blinked and frowned, turning to Zoe. "He always like this?"

"So, what happened?" Ignoring Simon's concerns, Kaylee grinned. "Did he leave?"

"Not right away, no. It took a little more'n a day before the rash started; we thought we hadn't put enough. But then his legs started getting red, creeping up from his boots to his knees. Next day it was on his arms, and he was a cussin' up a storm. Tried to figure out who'd washed his clothes in the bad stuff, but of course, no one had. Took a week for the stuff to disappear, and that whole time we couldn't stop laughing. Nearly got ourselves caught, grinning at him the way we was. He puffed out his chest and acted all tough, but it's hard to take a man seriously when his face is all splotchy and he can't keep from scratchin'." Zach laughed in retrospect. "Took

him another couple weeks to transfer out; guess he left to head up some special ops. Turns out the guys up top didn't so much like how he treated the recruits either."

A soft rumbling emanated from Zach's stomach and he clapped a hand over it. "Well, sounds like I'm hungry. When's dinner around here?"

Book smiled. "It's about that time, son. Can you cook?"

Grinning, he nodded. "Definitely. Just ask Sarge and Zoë. Didn't like to let anyone else cook when I was around."

Book stood. "Well then, you can help me in the kitchen. We don't have much, but we try to make it taste good."

Zach stood as well, following Book to the pantry. "You guys got any basil? You need basil for anything decent." The two men's conversation became muted as they walked into the small pantry.

"So what are we plannin' on doing with him?" Jayne had finished his sandwich, and pulled out a small knife. He started cleaning under his nails with it.

"Trust Jayne to get to the point," Wash muttered. "Can't we keep him, Zo'? He's a lot more entertaining than that thing," he said, motioning to Jayne. "It'd be a fair trade."

Jayne glared. "Don't push your luck."

"What? He can string words together and make sentences. It's a skill you should look into."

"Cap'n and I'll get it sorted while they're cookin'. Maybe Santo or some such. Somewhere he can't get into too much trouble," Zoë said, standing up.

As if on cue, the two men returned to the kitchen, laden with spices and flavorings. "Alright, everyone out! Can't cook with you all watching." Zach grinned as he dropped his armful of pantry goods on the counter. "Out!"



The crew and passengers settled in around the table as Zach and Book placed the dishes they'd prepared in the center. "I still can't believe you let a Shepherd on board your boat, Sarge," Zach said as he settled into his seat. He grinned at Mal. "Heard you'd given up on God after Serenity Valley."

"After he gave up on me..." Mal muttered darkly. "He ain't a Shepherd on this ship, he's the cook."

Zach ignored his comment. "Can you say Grace, Shepherd? I haven't been to church in a long time."

"I really don't think that would be appropriate," Book said quietly, glancing at Mal. The captain had been in a mood ever since they'd changed course to rescue their guest. Seemed he'd been angry ever since that Lassiter job had turned bad. Saying grace at the table would do nothing to improve his disposition. Besides, Book hadn't really prayed he'd returned to the ship either. He'd tried to, but the words had lodged in his throat. He wondered if God would even listen to him anymore.

"Of course it's appropriate! It'd be more inappropriate if we ate without giving thanks for what we've got."

Simon snorted. "You want to give thanks for barely edible protein mash and rice?"

"Better than some stuff I've eaten," Zach countered. "And a good sight better than nothing." He turned back to Book. "Shepherd, I'd be much obliged if you'd do the honors."

Book shook his head. "I really don't think I should."

"You can say that again. You want to pray, Zach, you go on and do it in your head. Rest of us don't really care to hear it said out loud. Even Preacher's got the idea." As he said it, Mal looked sideways at Book, considering. It was strange for Book to be so hard to convince to pray.

Zach sighed and looked at Zoe. She shook her head almost imperceptibly at him and picked up her chopsticks. Defeated, Zach bent his head over his bowl of rice, mouth moving in silent prayer, before he picked up his own utensils.

"Well, can ya tell us more about what happened? You told us some stories, but you gotta have more. You said you fought with Cap'n and Zoe for more than a year," Kaylee chirped once Zach's head rose.

"War stories?"

"That might be a bit much for the womenfolk," Jayne piped up. "'Specially the one in the loud shirt down there," he added, indicating Wash with his chopsticks.

"But you're the one the boys all like," Wash replied cheekily.

Jayne flushed. "You sorry son of a—"

"Jayne, shut it," Zoe said, voice sharp as a whip crack. Disgruntled, he went back to eating.

Kaylee turned her sunny smile back to Zach, ignoring Wash and Jayne's spat and Simon's pointed stare. "Yeah, war stories. I ain't scared of 'em none."

"Little Kaylee, I don't think that's table appropriate," Mal cautioned.

"Well Jayne ain't generally table appropriate, but we let him stay," she replied cheekily. Jayne simply shrugged, silently agreeing with Kaylee's assessment.

Zach took a bite of rice, considering. "Kaylee, the war weren't all fun and games. In general, it weren't fun at all. I got stories about the war, sure, but they ain't the kind you tell with a smile on your face. They're the kind you keep to yourself, trying to keep those you love from ever experiencing what you gone through." He looked up at Kaylee, smiling sadly. "You're too good of a woman for me to tell you the things we saw out there."

Kaylee's smile faltered for a moment, and she took a bite to cover. "Well, what happened after the war," she finally asked. "That ain't nearly so bad, I guess."

"True, it ain't so bad, but it's really boring. Nothing that's of interest to you, I'm sure," Zach said, picking up a mass of protein and bringing it to his mouth.

"But it is," Kaylee protested. "We don't get too many new people around here and you're a born story-teller. You've been telling the best tales I've heard in a dog's age."

Zach grinned self-consciously, a faint blush tingeing his cheeks, the earlier seriousness pushed to the back of the crew's mind. "Thanks, Kaylee. Coming from a girl pretty as you, that's a real compliment." He took a bite of his rice, savoring the taste for a moment. "After the war it was hard to go back to how it was before. Home was gone, family was gone. There wasn't anything for me to go back to anymore."

"Happens more often than not," Mal murmured, face hard.

"So I fell in with some other Browncoats, took some odd jobs. Never went well around Alliance Day, but you know how that is."

Zoe smiled at that. "I surely do. Always an interesting time around here, that's for sure."

"But you can really only knock about for so long afore you get in trouble." Zach shrugged as he ate a mouthful of rice. "Weren't my fault Alliance can't keep their goods."

Kaylee's eyes widened but it was Inara who spoke next. "What did you take?"

"Seeds, mostly. Tools, food bars, supplies. Sometimes money. Weren't much of that though. Alliance out on the Rim's just about as poor as the rest of us."

"Seems like that's all items settlers would need," Simon said. His voice carried a hint of disapproval in it, though whether it was because of the job or because the man had been flirting with Kaylee all night was anybody's guess.

Zach stared at Simon, an eyebrow raised. "Who'd you think I was giving it to?"

Simon blinked, confused. "So where was it supposed to go?"

"Weren't marked for any border worlds that needed it," Zach insisted. He pushed his bowl aside and leaned forward, using his chopsticks to point at Simon. "The seeds

were set to go to some Core planet that ain't got good growin' soil for it anyhow. How are you gonna raise a crop if the dirt's so irradiated won't nothin' grow? You can't raise the same crop year after year and expect it to go as well, 'specially if you do it the Core way and force the crops to go. Eventually, the soil will just give out. You need to rotate crops every few years, renew the soil, add back the stuff the plants take out. Look to nature, Doc. It takes care of its own, it got the good sense to let the ground renew itself. I know what I'm talkin' about here, I lived on a farm my whole life, up until the war. You can't get a good crop worth livin' on if the dirt's about to die."

"Dirt is an amalgam of weathered stone and decayed matter. It would require more to replenish itself to full potential," River murmured. She shrugged at Zach's stunned expression.

"Done any farming recently?" Mal asked, shifting the conversation to safer territory.

"Well no, but some things are just in the blood. You can't leave it behind."

"There's farmland on Haven," he noted, eyes on Zoe rather than Zach.

"There is," Zoe agreed, looking at Mal. She turned to Zach. "Good people, too. The town's struggling pretty hard to make a go of it. Mostly, it's a mining town – or was, until the mines stopped producing. It's out on the edge, so the Alliance ain't got no reason to go there anymore. Means the settlers can pretty much do what they want, but also means they don't get near the supplies they need. Last time we were there...must have been near about two years ago now, they'd decided to make a go with farming the land on the outskirts of the settlement. We'd stopped off to drop off some supplies and a few new settlers...you might know some of them. There aren't too many there that know about farming properly."

"They could use a teacher, I suppose," Zach said.

"Probably could," Mal agreed. "Think it's a good enough place to stay a spell?"

Zach chewed another bit of rice. "Might be. I ain't never been afraid of hard work. What's it like?"

Zoe shrugged. "'Bout like any Rim planet. Miners, farmers, settlers, those displaced by the Core expanding outward. More than a few of them are former Browncoats. None of them harbor any love for the Alliance." She smiled. "Our kind of people."

"You'd fit right in there, being a 'fugee and all," Jayne said around a mouthful of food. "Too damn many of 'em down there. Who's after you anyway?"

"Who ain't?" Zach evaded smoothly. "Besides, sometimes it just don't matter where you come from. Sometimes it just matters where you go on from there."

"Everything matters. Everyone remembers, no one forgets, nothing is erased completely."

Zach looked on at River in surprise. "You think so?"

"Of course." She rose from her seat and glided from the room.

"Don't mind her... She ain't all upstairs all the time," Jayne offered helpfully in the awkward silence. He answered the glares shot his way with a shrug. "What? 's true."

Inara shook her head. "Jayne, must you insult her every chance you get?"

Jayne just shrugged. "Guess so."

Mal shushed the crew. "Listen, we've got a job on Constance, then we'll set a course for Haven. The job'll go pretty quick, and we'll be at Haven in about three days," Mal said in his final tone of voice. "You'll see if you like it there or not. Good people, lots of work to do. It's enough to keep a man's hands busy for years if you like."

"It's a chance, son. Everyone deserves a second chance." Book's voice was soft, his look almost wistful. He shook his head and leaned toward Zach. "Seems like Haven might be just what you're looking for."

Kaylee nodded, smiling. "And if you're as good with the ground as you say you are, folks'll be more'n happy to have you."

"Ain't no boast, Kaylee," Zach said proudly. "Used to work Ma's farm, used to do lots come harvest time. But work like that's hard to do during wartime, and it sure as hell ain't easy to do on the run. Easy to pick up a messenger job, easy to do what needs doin'. But it ain't the same as having a home. If this place is more like a home..." He seemed to deflate somewhat. "I'm tired of running. I feel old afore my time."

Book nodded wistfully as the younger man spoke. "I understand the feeling, more than you might know." He paused and Mal caught his eye with a quizzical look. The Shepherd turned away quickly. "That's when you know it's time to settle somewhere. You can't always walk around the world a spell."

"You can try for as long as you can," Kaylee murmured, looking at Book almost sadly.

He smiled at her. "That's just so. You have to know how to listen for when the time's right."



"Haven. A respite from storm, a harbor to dock safely in," River murmured in the recreation room during breakfast the next day.

"Oh, it's a nice enough place," Kaylee said brightly. She grinned at River, Simon and Book. "You haven't been there, have you? Not yet?"

Simon shook his head. "No, we haven't. Seems like just about the only place out on the Rim we haven't been."

"It's a good place to sit a spell, get some target practice in." Jayne took a long drink of water. "The locals got some good food growin' up in there."

Zach frowned. "Now wait a sec. If they don't got any good soil, how good can it be?"

"Better'n protein mash, that's for sure," Jayne said. "Most anything would be better than that *go se*. I suppose it's mostly the company that makes it so nice. Dinner's always better with good company."

"That's right," Kaylee added, nodding. "We're almost like family. Why, the last time they got Jayne to play guitar around the campfire, and we were up late all night just talking. They don't got much, but whatever they got, they share."

"You just like it that the kids there play with you," Wash joked. "You have a mean game of jacks, my friend."

Kaylee laughed as Zoe playfully swatted Wash's arm. "Aw... Are you still jealous I beat you so hard you were doin' my chores for a week?"

Zach laughed along with everyone else. This is what he had been missing while on the run from the Alliance, doing jobs here and there. He had been alone for so long, he hadn't realized how fun it could be to have friends. He had contacts, he had fences and names to set up jobs. He had a few men he saw regularly, men he drank with and gambled with, but they weren't friends. He hadn't had friends since the War, and most of them were dead now anyway. He had missed this, and now he didn't want to let it go. "So, you're a mean jacks player, eh? I'd like to see you prove that."

Kaylee grinned wickedly. "You think you can beat me, Zach? Ain't no one been able to beat me, not in the long run anyhow. River can get a game or two in, but never two out of three."

"Well, you might have to remind me of the rules. It's been a long time since I played with my *mei mei*."

"Well you sit right here," Kaylee instructed, "and I'll go get 'em." She winked. "Don't go runnin' scared now!"

Zach laughed. "Yes ma'am!"

A few moments after Kaylee left the room, Book stood and nodded to the rest of the crew. "If you need me, captain, I'll be in my room," he murmured before retreating.

Once in his room, he sat at his desk, pulled out his Bible and opened it. Book tried to read, to meditate on the words that had been his guiding principles for seven years now, but the ink blurred in front of his eyes. He shook his head to clear his vision, but he found even once the words were clear, he couldn't concentrate. Sighing, he closed the book and pushed it to the edge of the desk.

He lowered his head and tried to pray. "Father, oh Holy Father, please forgive me. Please take this sin from my heart." Even as he said it, he felt dirty, as if he'd

shamed God by even asking for absolution from such a horrible crime. Book squeezed his eyes shut to attempt to halt the flow of tears, but one leaked out and slid down his face.

He slammed his fist onto the wooden table, the sharp pain breaking his reverie. In the sudden silence of his bunk, he waited for God to talk to him but heard nothing over the din of his pounding heart.



The surface of Constance, like most of the planets out here on the rim, seemed to be made entirely of a fine dust. A warm wind picked it up and whipped it around, coating the crew in a brown film. "Preacher, you sure you need to go to town? I'd feel a mite more comfortable you staying with the ship," Mal said as he adjusted his goggles.

Book shook his head. "I believe Wash and Kaylee can hold down the fort without my assistance. A body needs to feel the earth below him and the sky above him at times."

"We'll be on Haven in less than two days; you can't wait that long?" Zoe and Jayne stood behind Mal, looking impatient as the captain argued with Book.

"It can't." His voice was hard, a tone he'd not used frequently in years.

Mal seemed to recognize the tone and nodded his acquiescence without another word. "You just get back to the ship in three hours. This job's going to go fast, and I ain't planning on leaving you."

"Understood, Captain. You go on about your business; I'll do the same."

With that, Mal, Zoe and Jayne headed off toward one end of town and Book walked slowly toward the main street. Once in the shelter of the buildings, the wind died to nothing, and the dust settled. Book attempted to brush some of it off his clothing.

"Ain't gonna help. Stuff's worse'n glue for stickin'." A young girl, no more than twelve, smiled down at him from her perch on a tree limb. She dropped to the ground, landing gracefully on her feet, her dress billowing around her legs. "You're new in town."

Book smiled. "Visiting, dear."

The girl cocked her head to the side, studying him, her green eyes wide. "You don't look like a courier cap'n. Seems like that's the only kinda visitors we get around here." She grinned and scrubbed at her cheek, leaving a line of dirt across her freckled skin. "What are you?"

Book blinked. What *was* he? "I'm a Shepherd. A man of God," he answered reluctantly.

"Really? You know the Bible an' everything?" Her eyes went wide with wonder. "Oh, Mama's gonna be so excited!"

"What's Mama gonna be excited about, Anne?" A young woman, perhaps in her late twenties stepped out of the nearest building. She looked like an older, taller version of the red-haired green-eyed girl that had fallen out of the tree: clearly her mother.

Anne turned to her mother, a wide smile on her face. "He's a preacher, Mama! A real Shepherd!"

The woman looked at him, taking in his dust-covered appearance. "That so? We ain't had a preacher 'round these parts for nigh on a year; last one died in the sickness run through the town 'bout that time." She nodded. "You oughtta come in out of the heat. We ain't got air conditioning but there's a good working fan and a sight less dust." Without waiting for an answer she turned and headed back into the building she'd come from, her shoes clicking on the wood sidewalk.

Anne smiled and reached for Book's hand. "Come on, Shepherd. I bet the townsfolk will want to talk to you real bad."

The building turned out to be a general store and diner; Anne's father owned it, and her mother worked the counter most days. It also served as an impromptu meeting place where it seemed like half the town had gathered. Anne dragged Book to the restaurant area, and sat him down with the pronouncement that she'd found a new preacher.

It took ten minutes to calm the townspeople down, and another ten to explain that he was only visiting. "Your town looks like a wonderful place; I'm sorry I'm not able to stay longer."

A young man with hair the color of straw grinned toothily. Book thought his name was David, but he'd been introduced to so many people. "Preacher, it don't matter how long you stay, 's long as you bring the word of the Lord, you're welcome. If it ain't too much trouble, would you mind saying a few words?"

Book attempted to refuse. "I'm very sorry, but I don't have my Bible with me, and I don't have anything prepared." The lines on his brow deepened; how could he explain to these people that he wasn't worthy to preach a word of the Lord's teachings? "I really can't."

"I got a Bible right here, Shepherd, if you'd like to borrow it." Anne's mother held out a worn but obviously well-loved tome. "Even just a few words would satisfy. The good Lord said, 'It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.' We been living on just bread for far too long."

Book took the Bible, fingering the edges lovingly. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength, but felt no answering resonance within him. Sighing, he opened the book, hoping the Lord would guide his tongue even if he didn't deserve it.

Randomly opening the Bible rarely failed him; God guided his hands more often than not. This time, however, he had to bite back a grimace at the passage his fingers touched. Let no one say God had no sense of humor. He stood and moved to the front of the room.

"Don't judge, so that you won't be judged," Book read. "For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye? Or how will you tell your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye;' and behold, the beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye.' Matthew 7:1-5."

He looked up from the book, unsure of what to say. "Jesus' main detractors were not the people, but the Jewish leaders. They saw him as a threat to their authority, but did not see what he brought to the world." As he spoke, his voice grew stronger, his words more sure. "They sought to preserve their way of life, which, in itself, is not wrong. But in blindly defending their system, they were unable to see the Truth.

"This is something each of us must struggle with every day. It's easy to say you believe in God, that you follow the precepts set forth for us in the Bible. It's much harder to do so in practice. We are sinful creatures, at our base, but we have been blessed with free will. It is up to us whether we match our actions to our words, or point out the speck in others while ignoring the plank in our own eye."

The townspeople looked up at him with smiling faces, and Book felt like a fool. Who was he to talk about hypocrites? What was that old saying, takes one to know one? His chest felt tight even as the people started asking questions. Book did his best to merely moderate a discussion, avoiding answering questions himself as much as possible. He wasn't worthy to preach to these people; if they knew what he'd done, they would run him out of town on a rail.

An hour later, the discussion having broken up into a few small groups, Book tried to leave quietly. He thanked Anne's mother for the loaned Bible, and let the young girl lead him out. "Thank you, my dear."

She grinned up at him, her adult teeth looking almost too large for her child-sized mouth. "You oughtta stay for dinner. Mama cooks real good."

"I would love to, but I really must get back," Book declined with a wistful smile. He started to thank her, as he had her mother, for their hospitality, but was interrupted by the clanging of a large bell, and accompanying yelling coming from the town square. "What is that?"

Anne's eyes grew large. "Warning bell. Raiders," she breathed, her small hands clutching her skirt. "Oh no, oh no." She looked up at Book, terror evident in the lines of her body. "We gotta get out of the street. Gotta get inside."

"You go in. I'm a big man, I'll be fine." He shoed her toward her parents' store, watching her until she made it inside. Then he turned and jogged to the center of town. "What's going on," he asked the first man he saw.

"Bank's been robbed," he answered absently. His eyes were on the crowd of men gathering around the bell. "Seems like the thieves got away mostly clean, but they're headed to their ship. Off-worlders." As he said it, the man turned to Book. "Reckon they only got here today," he said, studying the Shepherd's face. "Seems you got here today too."

Years of training were the only thing that kept Book's face neutral. "The crew I'm with would never think to rob a bank." *Though if they were hired to do it*, he added ruefully in his head.

The man stared at him for a moment longer, assessing him. He finally nodded. "You're a good man, Shepherd," he said before moving toward the center of the crowd.

Those words and his own weighed heavily on Book's heart. He backed away from the crowd and started to make his way back toward Serenity. He could hear the contained roar of the mass of people behind him and sent up a quick prayer for the crew's safety.

Book quickened his stride when he heard the crowd quiet. Someone -- the mayor, he assumed -- was speaking, rallying the townspeople to coherent action. This didn't bode well for the crew, or for him, if they were caught in town. The people seemed nice enough, but they seemed provincial enough that hanging was the main form of punishment.

The crowd roared in unison, and Book felt a shift in the air. It wasn't anything tangible, no change in the wind or temperature, but rather a tension so tight he could feel it on his skin. The crowd was moving, and the street suddenly felt very unsafe. Without looking behind him, Book ducked into the first alley he found, pressing his back to the wall of the building. His breath caught in his throat when he saw the mass of people move by, all angry and armed.

"Preacher? That you?"

Book jumped, the voice rattling him in his anxious state. "Captain? Is that you?"

"Yeah. We're waiting out this storm before making a break for Serenity. You look to be doing the same." Mal picked his way through the trash that filled the narrow alley, moving toward Book. Behind him, Zoe and Jayne held their guns at the ready.

"It didn't seem safe to be a visitor at the moment, even though I had nothing to do with their bank suddenly missing a large amount of cash." His eyes narrowed at Mal. "I assume you know something about that."

"I do, but not in the way you think," Mal answered. He opened his mouth, intent on explaining, when a feral yell caught his attention. "*Zaogoa!* Looks like we'll have to continue this conversation later, Shepherd," he muttered as he grabbed Book's wrist. "Let's go!"

Dragging Book along, Mal rushed between Zoe and Jayne and down the alley. Zoe turned and followed next, Jayne acting as rear-guard for their retreat. Book didn't

turn to look, but could hear the pounding of many feet following them. "Wash, Kaylee! Get my boat ready, we're coming in fast," Mal shouted into his comm.

"We'll have her ready for you," Wash's voice crackled back.

A bullet sang past Books ear and he could help but duck. The action caused him, and Mal by proxy, to stumble. "Gorram it, Shepherd, don't have time for you to go getting squeamish on me now!" Mal yelled as he pulled the man to his feet.

"Stop! Thieves! Stop!"

Jayne snorted, even as he shot back into the crowd. "Like that ever works. 'Sides, we may be thieves, but we didn't take your damn money!"

Serenity rose into sight above a hill, and it gave the crew one last burst of energy. The cargo bay door was already lowered. Bullets whizzed past them, pinging against the metal hull of the ship. Behind them, Jayne grunted in pain as a bullet sliced through his arm. "Gorram it! I like this shirt!" He turned and shot twice, eliciting two screams of pain.

The four of them ran up the ramp, taking cover as soon as possible. Book sat staring ahead of him, his chest heaving. As the ramp closed and Serenity engines warmed up, Book could hear the shouts of the crowd. A voice that sounded like David, the blonde man from town, rang in Book's ears: 'You ain't no Shepherd! Just a thief like the rest of them!' A sharp pain shot through his chest. He wanted to deny it, but knew he couldn't. He wasn't a thief. He was much worse.

"Well, that was more exciting than I expected. Seems we'll be having a talk with Badger next time we see the little *pian zi*." Mal stood and holstered his pistol, taking stock of his injuries.

"*Qingwa cào de liúmáng*," Jayne growled, his hand tight on his wound, trying to slow the bleeding. "Thought this was supposed to be a milk run, Mal."

Zoe walked calmly toward them, unloading her shotgun. "It was. Seems like Badger didn't trust us too much. I think I recognized one of the other crew. Looked like someone Badger's contracted with before."

"I don't blame him for not trusting you." Book's voice caused all three to turn to stare. He'd climbed to his feet during the conversation, and was staring at Mal. "You stole from those people, and they think I had something to do with it." His voice and eyes were flat, his jaw tight.

"Now, listen, Shepherd, it wasn't exactly--"

"Captain, I don't want any of your excuses. These people may never trust a man of God again, and I am partially responsible for that."

Mal held up a hand. "Now, Shepherd, don't go getting riled up--"

"Riled up? You haven't *seen* me riled up, Captain!" He managed to make the title sound more like a profanity than Jayne's earlier curses. Stepping closer, he glared at Mal. "Those people trusted me, and you used that!"

"I don't need to explain myself to my passengers."

Breathing heavily, Book took a step closer. There was a moment's pause, and he felt everything slow down. Like in a Cortex movie, his fist seemed to move in slow motion as it arced toward Mal's jaw, and the drops of blood and spittle that flew from his lips took forever to land on the cargo bay floor. "No. But we must all explain ourselves to God."

Mal narrowed his eyes and held his face, blood pooling at the edge of his mouth. "You best be getting to your room before I turn around and drop your holy ass back on that rock."

"With pleasure," Book said, his jaw clenched, his fists itching to throw another punch. His heartbeat echoed in his ears as he turned, steps measured and deliberate.

The last thing he heard before leaving the cargo bay was Mal calling Simon to ready the infirmary.



Thirty-six hours later, *Serenity* touched down on Haven. It was just before noon, and the majority of the town's residents were outside working or, in the case of the children, playing. The arrival of any ship was cause for excitement; the arrival of *Serenity* was cause for celebration. Mere seconds after the landing ramp hit the dusty ground, the townspeople swarmed the ship, attacking the crew with handshakes and hugs.

"It's good to see you again, Malcolm Reynolds," Elder Meir said, clapping the captain on the back. If he noticed the large purple bruise on Mal's jaw, he didn't mention it. It wasn't uncommon for people visiting Haven to come in battered and bruised; the townspeople patched them up and treated them just the same.

"You too, Elder," Mal agreed, walking through the crowd with the shorter man. He smiled to those he recognized, and nodded a greeting to those he didn't. "Town's growing," he observed.

Elder Meir nodded. "We've had an influx of new residents, and several babies have been born in the past few months. Our people are doing well, despite all our trials and tribulations. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. My youngest has married since you last visited, so there's enough room for all of you in my home, if you'd rather not stay on your ship."

They broke through the crowd, leaving the crew to fend for themselves among the people, and walked in silence until they reached a more secluded spot. Elder Meir looked up at Mal and said, "They tell me you may have a new resident for us." Mal's

face must have displayed his surprise, because the Elder laughed. "You may have your sources, Captain Reynolds, but I have mine as well."

Mal grinned with him, shrugging. "I do indeed. Name's Zach Ibsen, and he fought with me 'n Zoe in the war. Seems he got himself into some trouble with the law, and needed to get off planet."

Elder Meir nodded as Mal spoke. "He is a lost soul, like you, then?"

"Now what does that mean?" Mal frowned, halting in his slow walk.

Elder Meir paused too and turned to him. He didn't answer in words, only smiled. "Zach Ibsen. What can he offer us here on Haven?"

A small frown still sat above Mal's eyebrows, but he tried to ignore the comment. "He was a farmer before the war, and he loves it. Seems to think he can help you out with your soil problems."

Nodding, the Elder said, "If he'd like to stay, he's welcome here. Any enemy of the Alliance is a friend of ours, especially if he can help us."

"Alright then," Mal said. "Well, I ought to get back to my ship before your kids try to stow away."

Elder Meir grinned. "I think they just might try. Go, then."

With a nod, Mal jogged back to Serenity, where the rest of the crew continued to talk to the residents.



Something that made Haven such a good hideout was its location: it was built mostly underground. Haven used to be named Alberich, and it had been colonized years before by miners. When the veins ran dry, the miners moved on, leaving the planet bereft of nutritious soil and tunneled through like a rabbit's warren. Building on the surface was treacherous at best, so the people who lived there appropriated the old mineshafts.

"Secrets can be buried here," River murmured, looking up at Zach. "Buried deep."

"I'm thinking so. Mal done good by me, just as always." He smiled at River. "He always was a good man."

She nodded. "Sometimes he doesn't know it." With one last look, she jogged over to Kaylee, leaving Zach with Zoe.

"River! I got some people you just gotta meet," Kaylee shouted. "Jack, this is my friend, River. River, Jack."

Zach watched the scene with a wistful smile. "I think I could be happy here."

"I think you could too." Zoe stood just behind him, watching the children crowd around the two young women. "You just have to let yourself."

Zach turned to her. "Like how you did with that Wash character? Never thought I'd live to see the day tough Zoe Allyene got herself hitched."

"Neither did I. There's just somethin' about him..." She trailed off. "You just need to stop running for a minute, and you realized what all you were missing when you were."

He snorted. "Seems like you ought to be telling Sarge that, not me. I've been trying to stop running for years, just never could do it."

Zoe grinned. "You try telling him that. Captain is just as stubborn as he was back then."

He chuckled. "I've seen that."

"We should head in to grab some food before Jayne eats it all," Zoe said after a moment of companionable silence. "Wash's already inside, I'm sure, and Kaylee and River will head in when the kids do. And by the looks of it, that might not be for a while."

"You're right. It'll be nice to get some decent food for once."



Jayne was surprisingly civil with some of the Havenites. He and Book were sitting at one table with some of the older citizens, chatting about how hard it was to expand the town. "Too much work, and lots o' the young 'uns want ready places to stay. Rim life is tough as nails, it is, and it's not for some easy-peasy child to work on," one of them said.

"How's the huntin' been?" Jayne asked. He sipped on his soup and looked around the table. The last time they had been to Haven, he had pitched in on their hunting trip for target practice. It had been a lot of fun, and there had been meat in the mess to boot.

"Pretty good. Season's off at the moment."

"Wouldn't want to overhunt. We'd have to import more game to keep up the season longer, and we all know we can't afford that." The man sighed and shook his head. "The miners didn't leave nothing in the ground but dust."

"Damn shame," Jayne murmured, shaking his head.

"Don't swear in front of a Shepherd," one of the older men chastised. "Ain't good for your soul, and ain't right."

Book smiled at Jayne's discomfort. "It's alright, Seamus. I understand what Jayne meant. It is a shame it isn't easier for you to make your home better. If anyone deserves it, it's the people here."

"We try, Shepherd. We all do our best," Seamus said, chest puffing up with pride. "Thanks be to God Almighty, we'll keep on keepin' on."

Book smiled warmly at him and nodded. "Seems like the best kind of plan." He stopped awkwardly, feeling like he should say more, but unsure. Seamus nodded at him, and the trust in the other man's eyes eased the pain in Book's chest a little. "God has a plan for everyone. He never gives us a load that we cannot carry." He reached for his glass and took a long drink of fresh milk.

"Well now... I don't mean to be a nuisance..." another man began uncertainly. Book remembered him as Harold. He rubbed his hands together as he looked around the table, where the rest of the people seemed to be encouraging him.

Book nodded at him, wondering what was so important. "Go on."

Harold, encouraged by his peers and the Shepherd, smiled. "Think you could do a service afore you leave? I know we'd all be mighty obliged. It's been a good long time since the last time a wandering preacher roamed this way, us being so far out, and mostly Browncoats to boot." A ripple of laughter spread through the room, and the speaker grinned himself. "I know we're leaning on the Good Book, but I for one like hearin' a sermon. A body can only take so much of Thomas Aikensenn preaching on the Beatitudes." Another wave of laughter, this one a bit louder, spread out from the speaking man. More than one pair of eyes focused on a white-haired man who looked more than a little confused. The man, presumably Thomas, merely smiled vacantly. While the rest of the people were occupied by laughter, the first man leaned forward slightly and his voice lowered a notch. "Ain't so good with the reading myself, and I ain't the only one. We only got a schoolteacher a year ago, and some of us folks are too old to learn."

Book smiled at the man. "I'll see what I can do," he said softly. "I can certainly lead a discussion after dinner tonight, and if the Lord wills it, can try to have a sermon ready for the morning."

Every face at the table lit up. "Truly? That would be mighty fine, Shepherd."

Jayne was grinning at Book and nodding at him. "Looks like you got a place, too."

"It seems that way," Book murmured thoughtfully, wondering if wrong could still sully if it was deeply buried. Could it be hidden deeply enough not to corrupt goodness? He contemplated the rest of his soup in silence, surrounded by innocent chatter.



Zach was introduced to many of the families that had helped to found Haven. They appreciated his input on their gardens and seemed to like him well enough. "I think it would be a nice place to move to. Like on a permanent basis."

"Really now?" Charles Anthony said. He turned from Zach for a moment and watched his son Jack run around in the town's square. "It is a fine place to settle down, make a home, have a family... Are you interested in staying on, then?"

"Most definitely. I've been looking for a nice place to be."

"It will be some hard work, getting everything up to scratch."

"Most good things are," Zach replied easily. "But the best things for you need to be worked on, else you don't appreciate it enough."

"Wise words," Charles replied. "Why don't we all talk in the church? We don't got no preacher, so it's doubling now as our Town Hall."

"Why, there's a Shepherd on the ship," Zach offered. He looked over at Book, who had finished his lunch with the other Havenites. He had moved to another table and was now talking with Mal, Zoe and Wash at one of the restaurant's open-air tables. "That's him over there, white hair and talkin' with Mal."

"Really? We kept askin' if someone would want to come here. Most of our folk feel most comfortable with someone preaching, than to do their own reading. Not too many always understand what the good book says. It would be a greatness if a Shepherd was willing to stay and do services for us, but most don't like how far out in the black we are. But we haven't had any Reaver attacks, and we got a home guard to protect us if there are."

"Well, this one says he's a roamer. Why not ask if he'll do a service while he's here and if he knows anyone in search of a good homestead to preach to? Not every preacher wants to stay in the Core, you know."

"Certainly something to think on."



That evening, the people built a bonfire on the surface of the planet. Although they slept and ate in the tunnels, the citizens of Haven preferred to socialize on the surface when the weather allowed. Harold had gathered those in Haven who wanted to join in a Bible discussion to one side of the fire, and Book smiled as he directed and moderated the group. He didn't fully participate, but the residents of Haven didn't seem to notice, or if they did, to mind. Having a Shepherd around seemed to be enough for them.

The rest of the crew sat on the other side of the fire, surrounded by some of the younger residents. Kaylee and River sat on the ground, young children draped over them like blankets as they talked with some of the girls their age. Most of the children were in varying states of near-sleep, though occasionally one would jump and sit up, as if to prove that he or she was still awake. This never failed to cause the girls and their companions to giggle uncontrollably, which in turn caused yet another child to sit up.

Soon the children's mothers started to pick up their children and the rest of the girls scattered to be with their sweethearts. Kaylee offered to help the last woman, a mother of triplets, put the three girls to bed. "You want to come, River?"

"No. The darkness is too heavy inside. I'll go sit by the fire until you come back." Kaylee grinned and picked up one of the girls, cradling her in her arms, and followed the weary mother to the main entrance to the town.

True to her word, River drifted toward the main group of people, carefully avoiding some of the larger rocks in her bare feet. She closed her eyes and felt the soft dust between her toes and the gentle glow of the fire on her face. The gentle hum of the people's thoughts was little more than background noise in the peace of Haven. She smiled and moved toward the main hum of thoughts, using her mind, not her eyes, to find her way.

Seamus convinced Jayne to play his guitar. "Been a long time since I was able to play much more than slow tunes. My fingers ain't as nimble as they used to be."

Jayne grinned. "And you always was a mite tone-deaf, wasn't you?"

"Ain't that the truth," his friend Reuben added with a laugh. "And don't look at me, I never learned to play."

Laughing along with them, Jayne took the instrument and began to tune it. Seamus tried to look offended. "You think I don't keep my instrument in tip-top condition?" Even as he said it, a smile turned up the corners of his mouth, giving away the joke.

"You was the one who said your fingers didn't work as good as they used to. If I can keep from sounding like you, I'll do it," he teased.

He was rewarded by hearty laughter as he listened for the tell-tale wobble that indicated the string was out-of-tune. He bit his bottom lip in concentration.

"Your G string is a half pitch sharp." River's voice drifted out of the darkness, followed momentarily by the girl.

"I weren't there yet, crazy," Jayne muttered. "Still tuning the D." She lowered herself to the log beside him even as he plucked the G string. It was sharp. Muttering a curse, he turned the key, lowering it to the correct tone. "Your brother know you ain't in bed yet?"

River smiled, her eyes focused on the fire. "He's distracted. Wants to heal sickness before we leave. Mine will be there in the morning."

Jayne didn't even look up. "Thought you was on good medicines now."

"They made me feel strange," River said simply. "Thoughts...not mine."

"Are they now?" he asked, looking up. He tried an experimental chord and was pleased when it turned out perfectly.

"Don't know. The secrets that will be buried here don't rest easily." She turned to look at him. "The music is as blue as your eyes and the goodbyes on the wind."

Jayne shook his head, eyes still on the neck of the guitar. It wasn't his, and it felt just different enough that he needed to practice. "Tell the Doc that. He'll know what to do."

"No. Can't be fixed with needles and smoothers. Cracks run deep. He thought they were patched, but once a thing is broken, can't be the same ever again." She dropped her eyes to her hands, tracing the veins in one arm with the fingers of the other. "Secrets don't like to stay buried, no matter how hard we try."

Jayne eyed River as if she were some dangerous animal, though he didn't move away. Seamus smiled at the girl. "You're right. Fixin' things is good and all, but you gotta remember that there's always gonna be weak spots."

River looked up and turned her huge brown eyes on the man. "No glue is perfect. Not even holy glue." With a quick glance back at Jayne, who had gone back to picking the guitar strings, she rose to her feet and disappeared into the darkness outside the fire.

Seamus frowned. "Strange girl. What'd you think she meant with all that?"

Jayne snorted. "Girl didn't mean nothing. She's more than a little whimsical in the brainpan, spouting *go se* like that all the time."

He picked out a few notes, plucking them strongly. The gathered people smiled; this folk song was one of Haven's favorites. Jayne's voice was soft but on pitch when he started to sing. "Where have you been, my long lost friend? It's good to see you again." A few more voices joined in at the next break, "Come and sit for a while. I've missed your smile. Today the past is goodbye."

Just outside the circle, Book heard the words and felt the burden on his heart lift just a little bit more.



The next morning, the church was packed. Everyone, young and old, crammed into the pews, eager to hear the Shepherd's message. Book stood at the pulpit, staring into the earnest faces of Haven's people. These people wanted to hear what he had to say, and for the first time since Muir, he felt God's presence, prompting him to speak.

His Bible lay open before him, but he didn't look down at it. He spoke from his heart, not reading from a book. "You believe that you have nothing if you have no one to guide you on your way." He looked around, picking out the faces he recognized, those that had begged for him to speak today, and focused on them. "But this isn't true. You have faith. I've seen it. There's faith in the everyday miracles, that the sun will shine and the earth will grow the crops. There's faith that in the morning you will get up and work, and the Lord will reward you."

"You can't see this every day, but you don't need someone to point out that it is truth. And what is truth but faith? You trust that what you believe is true. You *trust* that your needs will be met. It's not science, but even science has faith. A scientist must trust in theorems he cannot see. A scientist knows that atoms exist, that they contain mostly space. But you feel objects and they feel solid. The scientist *trusts* that they are solid, and *trusts* that they are made up of atoms which are mostly space. Doesn't that sound like a paradox?" He smiled at the crowd. "Doesn't it sound like something that must not be true? Something so odd that even a child would be able to pick it out as false? But we learn it in school as true, and we know it to be true in our hearts. This is what faith is.

"Faith is knowing something to be true. You know that there is a good God above, you know that there is a plan for all things. You don't need me to tell you these things. That's not what I'm here for." Book paused and looked around the pulpit. The people of Haven looked at him with rapt faces, the need clear on their faces. "You don't need me to show you the way," he said, voice gentle and soft. "You know what it is. You have it here. You need a friend on the path, someone to guide you and assure you that things are right. And they are *right*. This is a good place, with good people. There's so much to be done that is right and good, and there is much that we can do to help each other.

"There is a plan for all things," Book continued. He closed his Bible and raised his arms. "Each of us has a place in God's creation, just as we are, flawed and skilled and needy. We need each other," Book said, allowing his hands to fall. "Each of us here has a purpose. We hold each other up. We take our past experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, and move through it to a better place. It takes faith from all of us to do this, and I *know*, we can do it. I have that kind of faith, and I'm sure you all do, too."

Book's words petered out. He had been so confused lately; unsure of who or what he was—and he realized it wasn't just because of Hodges. Hodges had merely been the catalyst to his doubts, but his concerns had been there long before. Standing in this church, preaching to these people, he realized that he could still be a man of God. He still *was* a man of God: bruised, broken, a little lost, but he could be found again.

Looking out over the smiling faces of Haven's people Book *knew*, with utter certainty, that the wickedness inside him could be not just buried, but turned to good, like swords into ploughshares. He felt a peace welling inside him as he picked up the sermon again. These people needed him – and he needed them. He knew where he belonged. The joy in his heart was too great and too true to be ignored.

Book knew what he had to do.



"I've decided to leave," Book began.

Elder Meir's dining table was barely big enough to fit them all, so the man and his wife had taken their meal earlier, leaving the crew alone. Most of them dropped their chopsticks and looked at Book in dismay. Mal's hovered somewhere near his mouth, the bruise the Shepherd had given him making his face look lopsided. His eyes

locked with Book's for a moment, then slid away to look down at his food. Mal took his interrupted bite and chewed thoughtfully.

The rest of the crew couldn't keep silent. "What? Where would you go?"

"Why are you leaving us?"

"This doesn't signify."

"You sure you can't stay on?"

"Why would you leave now?"

Book looked at each person in turn, his eyes lingering on Mal before he spoke. "I care about all of you. Each and every one of you has a place in my heart, and always will. But traveling with this crew--" He sighed. "I've compromised my principles one too many times. I must answer to a higher authority. Each time I sin, even if it is to save another, I feel a part of my soul crumble." He looked away, his eyes focusing on the rice in his bowl. "I worked very hard to achieve the peace I had at the Abbey, to put my past behind me. But my peace isn't as complete as it was. I've done things I would never have done in the abbey." As he said it, he looked back up at Mal, his gaze resting on the bruise. "I've hurt people, people I care about, and I can no longer justify that."

"No one's asking you to leave, Shepherd," Mal said coolly. "Things happen, ain't no one's fault."

Book shook his head. "There is a time for all things, a reason for all things. I think my time here has passed, and it's time to move on."

"Think so?" Mal asked, voice soft.

"He never said he was gonna stay," Kaylee said. She had been painfully silent before, watching everyone become upset. "Book was only gonna stay a spell, only gonna see life outside of the Abbey. You never were gonna stay." She strived for understanding, but her tone came out somehow accusatory.

Book smiled at Kaylee fondly. "It's been good to wander, but sometimes you have to pick a place to stand up on."

Jayne was shaking his head. "I don't get it though. Why now? Why here? Why not any other rock without a preacher?"

"It feels right here," Book murmured.

"Can't stop you from doin' what's right," Mal said, voice carefully neutral. He sipped water from his glass calmly. "Can't stop you, period."

"He's practically crew," Jayne protested. "You said so yourself – he's he cook!"

"But he never came on as crew. He joined us as a passenger; the fact that he's taken on the cooking duties has been a side-benefit to all of us, but he ain't crew. He's a passenger that decided to stay on, is all."

The silence after Mal's statement was painful. Kaylee looked over at Book in near tears. "I—I guess you want a place where you can preach, find them as'll listen to you."

"That's definitely a draw," he said wryly. "It's not easy to change. It's never easy to change, but this is something that feels right. I can't ignore it."

"Don't. Nobody's asking you to."

"Captain!" Zoe hissed, kicking him under the table. This had gone on long enough.

"It's all right," Book said magnanimously, raising a hand to stop Zoe. "He can speak what's on his mind.. It's all right."

"No, it's not," Wash said, breaking into the conversation. "It's not all right."

"It...it is, isn't it?" Kaylee said, soft and hesitant. "But it don't feel right. Guess we can't keep you, but I don't..."

"It is all right, Kaylee," Book said gently. "This is for the best. You'll see."

Jayne looked down at this plate for a moment then pushed it away a little. "I suppose you was never intendin' on stayin' long."

"Wherever the Lord sends me is where I'll be." Two days ago, those words would have turned to ash in his mouth, but they felt right again. That thought alone made him smile.

He took a breath, as if about to reply, then closed his mouth. Jayne looked up after a moment. "I wish you the best, Shepherd. It was good having you aboard."

As if the dinner table wasn't shocked enough, Jayne left the table and headed for the room Elder Meir had appointed for him.

"Why don't you want to stay?" Wash asked in all seriousness. "I understand about wandering feet, believe me. But I thought you liked it here with us."

Book thought of Hodges, of the communicator stowed away in his bunk on the ship, of the vows he had taken at the Abbey. "I do. But sometimes a man has to move on, to see the rest of the 'verse." Book looked at Wash, at the hand he had twined with Zoe's. "I took holy vows at the Abbey. I promised to be a good man, to preach the word of God and the teach those that are willing to be taught. I promised to be a Shepherd, the best one that I could be." Book looked at everyone in turn. "I feel as if I've had my span of time here, doing the best I could. Now it's time for me to move on, to spread the word as best I can somewhere else."

"Haven is a good place," Zoe said gently.

Book smiled. "They're good people, strong people." He looked at them all again. "I can do good there. I can be of help."

He thought of who he used to be, who the Alliance still thought he was, and who he wanted to be now.

There was really only one choice to make.

"He's got to go," Kaylee said, voice warbling as she tried to hold back tears. "He's a Shepherd, and he ain't never really was our Shepherd. We was just borrowin' him a bit, is all. The entire 'verse can get mighty lonely without one."

Book closed Kaylee's hand in his. "You're a good soul."

Inara had been quiet throughout the entire exchange, watching everything with large eyes. Book had the feeling that there was a great yawning emptiness behind them that she was afraid to let loose. "We'll miss you," she said, voice as soft as ever.

"Not the first time she's ever said that, Shepherd, but I reckon with the slimness of your pocketbook, you can take it for truth," Mal drawled in a hard voice. "Kaylee, you gonna eat or cry?"

Everyone at the table glared at Mal, but he paid no attention, just continued eating calmly.

Book pressed his lips together, then forced himself to smile at Inara, who had risen, pale with fury. "It's been a good time traveling with you all," Book said, letting go of Kaylee's hand. "I cherish every moment. God bless."

And with that, the conversation was over. Inara left, and the rest of the crew finished their food in silence, then returned to the ship to help Book pack.



Moments seem to last forever sometimes, a single second stretching out into infinity before breaking apart and falling into the next second. It was like listening to the soft whimper of a crying child, the final mournful note on a bamboo flute, the decrescendo in an opera. Book was leaving, and the very air within Serenity fell upon everyone like a shroud, pressing in with its awful finality.

Book had said quiet goodbyes to everyone. He had looked River in the eye and wished her well. "You will learn how best to deal with your gifts in time, River," Book had said. "You are growing into a fine woman. I'm sorry I can't be there with you."

"I'm sorry we weren't enough, Preacher Man," River had replied before running back into the ship.

Simon had shaken his hand and smiled a sad smile. "It was good to talk to somebody who doesn't expect everything I say to mean something."

Book smiled and nodded. "You think too much, you know. You weigh every decision too greatly. Sometimes it's enough just to feel."

"I'll keep it in mind."

Kaylee had given him a small picture in a wooden frame. "It's so you have a piece of Serenity with you here on Haven."

"Thank you, Kaylee."

"You're a good man, Shepherd. Always was, I suspect."

Something within him roiled at her words, but he pushed it away as he always did and inclined his head slightly. "You are one of the joys here. Your cheerful smile and your warm heart. I hope for the best."

She hugged him tightly, surprising him. "I'll miss you. It'll be good here, I know. But I'll still miss you." She sniffled a little, then added, "We'll visit."

"I'll miss you, too, Kaylee. And I hope you do."

She hadn't looked back when she ran into Serenity.

Wash and Zoe had rather stoically wished him well. Book almost missed the wisecracks Wash would make, but he supposed that now was not the time. Jayne was even polite, shaking his hand like a gentleman and wishing him well. "You're a good shot and a good man, two things ain't often seen together out here in the black. And, if you're going to stop moving, Haven is the place to do it. You'll do good here. I'll miss having a spotter, though."

"I will, too." Book gave Jayne's hand a squeeze. "I'm sure you'll manage."

"I reckon so. I always done so far."

"The next time you write to your mother, tell her I said hello, and tell her I've moved here. That way it won't be a surprise when she gets a letter from here." Book smiled at Jayne's grateful smile, and watched the mercenary re-enter the ship.

Inara was quiet, with her gentle smile. "You'll be missed," she said, her voice as carefully modulated as ever.

"I wish you well," Book said, his own voice just as gentle.

She accepted it gracefully, nodding at him and then hugging him. She kissed both his cheeks, then moved back into the ship.

It only left Mal, whose jaw was set and feet were firmly planted on the gangplank. He was stoic, eyes clear and unmisted. "She's right, for once," Mal began. "You will be sorely missed by everyone."

"Even you?" Book asked.

"I suppose. You were a great help on board. You stopped being a passenger a long time ago, you know." Mal rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Or so I thought," he added in an undertone.

That was the problem, Book knew. He had stopped simply being a passenger on the ship, and had slowly started becoming part of the crew. It had been too easy to fit in with them, to ignore the violence that surrounded them, to accept the violence they participated in. He hadn't meant for that to happen, hadn't wanted it to happen. Father Leung had told him to find a place where he was needed, and it had taken Book months to realize that place wasn't on Serenity. He wasn't really needed there—but he had needed it.

"I know. It was time to leave."

"Yeah, I guess so." His handshake was firm, sure. It was just the thing Book needed to make him feel sure he was doing the right thing. "You take care of them, Shepherd. And keep an eye on Zach, will you? He's always getting in some sort of trouble or other, and I don't trust him, even on a place as good as this. He needs looking after."

Book grinned. "I'll definitely keep an eye on him."

Book walked down the gangplank and felt the firm earth beneath his feet. He began walking toward Haven, not looking back.

It was enough to hear Serenity close up and fly away. He didn't need to see it, too.



Wash was sitting in the pilot's chair when Zoe ducked into the bridge. "Hey, baby."

He turned around and smiled. "Hey."

"The stars look nice tonight," she said, her gaze sliding from his face to the view. "Where are we going now?"

"Some job Mal lined up," Wash replied. He held his arms out and Zoe tumbled into them. "You doing okay?"

"I'll be okay," she said. She settled into his lap and leaned into his embrace. He felt warm and comforting, just what she needed. "Will you be okay?"

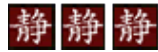
"Yeah." Wash kissed her cheek and held onto her tightly. "We both will."



Kaylee was lying in her hammock, staring at Serenity's engine. It turned slowly, methodically, a practiced ease that had always calmed her nerves when she was upset. Some things never changed, some things always remained the same.

But other things were always changing, always moving, never sitting still.

Lying very still and trying not to cry, Kaylee watched the engine turn. She missed Book already.



In the half-light of the mess, Mal sat at the table. There was a bottle of sake in front of him and a cup by his right hand. It had been a full bottle not so long ago, something he and Book had picked up after a particularly good job in Persephone. Book had recommended the brand, as it was one Mal had never tried before. He hadn't yet had opportunity to taste it.

Book had good taste in sake for a holy man, which did nothing more than amuse Mal. It seemed almost fitting that there was no aftertaste to the sake, that it burned as it went down. It was a clear and smooth alcohol, and it settled warm and full in his belly.

Some things made a man all manner of broken up, and others just made them stronger.

Mal didn't know which this was.



Inara had lit some incense and prayed for the souls of Haven, for Zach and for Book. Mostly for Book, that good would come to him on Haven, and that he found the peace he had been seeking. She knew that not everyone could live on the move, that not everyone could deal with the uncertainty of living in the black.

Rising from her altar, Inara filled a bowl with cool water and perfume. She stripped to the waist and knelt beside the bowl. She dipped her sponge into the scented water and methodically began to bathe. It was a peaceful ritual, one that always calmed her nerves and reminded her of the beauty that could be seen in small things. Every life impacted on every other life, and every small motion always carried a much larger effect. A simple spoken word carried such weight, such clarity.

Book had felt the undercurrent within the crew, had felt the tension rising. He had known when to leave, when it was time to move on to something better.

Inara knew it was time to follow his example.



In the passenger dorm, River was crying in Simon's arms. She had been silent for hours after Book left, and had only begun to sob in earnest when the deck plates began to shift as they broke atmo. Simon hadn't wanted to give her a smoother, since she had done so well on her current medication regimen.

"Mei mei, what is it? What's wrong?"

"You can't fix it with needles."

He had the grace to flush. "I know that. But what can I do? Why are you so upset?"

"The leaves are gone, the pages ruffled. The wind has taken it all away."

Simon thought of Book, how calm River had been at the time. It obviously had affected her more than he had thought. While he was a little sad that he didn't have the Shepherd to talk to, he understood the reasons. Life on the run wasn't for everyone, and it took its toll after a while. He almost couldn't remember his apartment on Osiris, what his friends had looked like, the last movie he had seen or play he had attended. That life had seemed so far away sometimes, as if it belonged to someone else.

But when he looked at River's smiles, he couldn't regret a thing.

"Tell me how I can help. I want to help."

"No," River cried, lifting her head from the bed. She pushed Simon's hands away. The well-meaning concern washed over her, choked her. "No. It's all falling apart. Entropy is taking hold. This is just the beginning."