

Episode 2x10 – Companion

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Air Date: 31 May 2006

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It had been hard, losing Shepherd Book, but it somehow made it all the more sweet to sit there after dinner with his people, watching Kaylee flirt with Simon and Inara telling stories while Wash joked around and made his chopsticks hit on Zoe. And Jayne was—

"Jayne, *no*." Mal said firmly, gazing at the large knife Jayne had pulled out.

"Aw, cap, I was just gonna put it in the pie. She don't like it once the crust's broke," Jayne confided, leaning towards Mal.

In the blink of an eye, River had the pie tin in her lap and was lifting a delicate forkful of flaky crust and warm, gooey filling to her mouth. "You brutalize the crust," she said severely, before eating the bite.

Mal couldn't help laughing. It was fair enough—River never ate as much as Jayne, so it was good to see her taking an interest in her dinner for once. "See there, Jayne? You hadn't drawn, I wouldn't have distracted you."

"You in league with her or somethin'?" Jayne demanded, sulking and lifting his plate to lick off the sticky residue of the last slice he'd eaten rather ostentatiously.

"Sorry to say, but it does not require a conspiracy for that girl to outsmart you, Jayne," Mal said, grinning at River as she continued, eating her pie with relish.

It was quiet for a while, then, and Mal took the time to savor it just as River did her pie, sipping at the coffee that Simon had made and relaxing into the pleasure of just being with his crew.

Inara cleared her throat. "I have...something to say."

Mal looked up immediately, wary and suspicious. It didn't take a psychic to read the intent in her eyes. "*Now?*"

"Now," she said softly. "Ever since Shepherd Book left, I've...I've been thinking that perhaps it's time for me to move on as well. I've waved the training house at Highgate, and they have a place for me there."

Mal felt as though he'd been struck, or perhaps shot. Sick and hurting in the middle and cold and numb in the extremities. He set down his cup of coffee. "Fine," he said, hardly knowing what he spoke, only that everyone was waiting for him to say something.

"Fine? Cap'n, Inara can't—she don't really want to leave," Kaylee burst out, her face stricken.

Mal rose, his face heavy and set. "Inara's a grown lady, Kaylee. Reckon she knows what she wants. I'm goin' to bed."

None of them said a word to him as he left, but he could hear their voices echoing down the corridor as he moved towards his quarters.

"Nara, what's goin' on?"

"It's just time—"

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

"Did he do somethin'? He wants you here same as the rest of us!"

"So should I set a course for Highgate? Or...yeah, maybe wait till morning. Yeah."

"It takes a burst of force to break gravitation."

"What brought this on?"

"I know he wants you to stay!"

Kaylee's last words rang in Mal's ears as he climbed down the ladder into his bunk and collapsed onto his bed, breathing heavily. Kaylee didn't know anything. Not a single thing.



Turn, scan, stack.

Turn, scan, stack.

Zoe reached for the last crate, the motion creating a welcome burn in her arms and back. Inventory was boring, but it cleared her mind in a steady buzz. Like cleaning her guns or repairing her boots, most physical labor calmed her in its repetition. Kept her from obsessing over the stream of anxiety life had been over the past few months. Other crews picking up jobs that would normally have been offered straight to Serenity. Shepherd Book taking off for Haven with Zach. The Alliance pressing in

ever closer to the border worlds - not to mention Serenity's resident fugitives as well.

And then there was this morning. Only the latest in the series of screaming matches between her and her husband.

Ai ya, was that ever not fun. They'd spent most of the morning yelling across the bridge at each other. Their contact had waved from Highgate, and let slip the news that their latest attempt at fencing the Lassiter had fallen through. Ever since Muir, it had gotten harder and harder to find people willing to even look at the thing. Wash, of course, just had to get in his usual *I told you so*.

Wasn't as if he were wrong in saying it. He'd told everyone as soon as they'd left that harridan Saffron (or whatever she was calling herself that week) on Bellerophon that they'd never be able to fence the Lassiter without her contacts. Wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't been right. Every time Mal and Zoe came back from another failed attempt, Wash's smug grin would reappear, and he'd start yammering about how they should've listened to him. Would've been nice if he'd thought of mentioning something to Mal before he went off and made that *feng-le* deal with those kids.

Zoe slammed the crate of protein bars on top of the stack, with a little more force than was probably necessary. Wash got under her skin like nobody's business - which was usually a good thing. But why he'd felt the need to constantly criticize both her and Mal about this was beyond her. He usually wasn't so quarrelsome . . .

"You didn't listen. He was right about everything. Told you the chameleon couldn't change color, and you pulled its tail anyway. Wouldn't have sabotaged us if you'd left it alone."

She spun on her heel to find River perched on top of the crates of bullets she'd just stocked underneath the catwalk.

"Didn't the Captain make a rule 'bout you hanging around the cargo bay?"

The girl stuck her tongue out at Zoe playfully. "Said no touching guns. Doesn't care what I do as long as I stay out of the way."

The girl's bare toes curled into the plastic lids, and Zoe noticed with bemusement that they were painted bright yellow.

"Kaylee," River said, peering down at her feet, then back up at Zoe. "Yours are prettier. Pink and sparkly. Kaylee would approve."

Zoe sighed. Apparently the girl had caught wind of Wash's endless amusement over her toenails. First time she'd taken her boots off in front of him, as a prelude to much more interesting activities, man couldn't stop snickering. Said it figured that she couldn't be all armor and bullets. But armor and bullets were what kept her safe - kept them all safe. Not pale pink nail polish with sparkles set into it.

"Kaylee and Inara kidnap you for one of their girls' nights?"

River nodded, wrapping her arms around one knee. "Helps more than Simon's fussing and fixing. He can make me think and feel like a girl, but he can't make me look like one. Not when he can't see it himself. Still a child. Still his *mei-mei*, the horrible old tyrant."

She had to smile at that. Lord knew they all admired Simon's dedication to his sister, but the boy was going to be in for a bit of a shock when River eventually matured into a full-grown woman. He'd be having kittens – worse than he'd been when Kaylee's brother Finn had taken a shine to River back on Hartford.

"Speak of the Doc, Simon know you're down here?" Simon was doing better since his close shave on Whitefall, but probably not so much that River couldn't exploit it if she wanted to.

A roll of the eyes. "Asked permission. Said it was fine as long as someone kept an eye on me."

"He's just overprotective, little one. Older siblings do that."

She tapped River on the knee, and the girl jumped lightly to the floor, allowing Zoe to pick up the top crate. River pulled aside the plating on the hidey-hole and stepped back to let Zoe muscle the crate of protein inside along with the others.

"Bet you're a *jie jie*. Like Kaylee and Finn."

Girl was being sneakier than usual, now wasn't she? She never asked an outright question, poking 'round in people's heads - least she usually had the sense not to do it to Zoe too often. Zoe sat the crate down in a new pile, looking over at River.

"You're the mind-reader, girl. You tell me."

River shook her head. "Can't."

"What do you mean, you can't? Seen you do it to Jayne and the Captain."

"You don't think about the past—you're not like him, the Captain, it's only now and today for you, and what's ahead. Never yesterday, or who you are, or what's gone. You keep yourself safe. Good."

Zoe picked up the last of the supplies that had to go in the hold. "Don't suppose that's true, honey."

River cocked her head. "Why?"

"Some'd say I'm too closed-off. That I've gotten too used to shutting things away."

"You don't know how to be any other way," River said, holding the paneling that walled off the hold from the rest of the cargo bay. Zoe set the last crate down, following River out into the bay and helping her slide the paneling into place. "Helps more than they know. Cord is strong, but if worn too thin, will unravel."

Zoe couldn't help but think of the leather cord ringing her neck. Knot had held for a good twenty years, but lately it had gotten frayed in places. It had seen her through too many battles to name, two different kinds of Serenity, and a rockety marriage--to say the least. But Mama'd made it for her girls, and she hadn't ever known her mother to use anything that was like to break.

River stood next to her, slipping a small hand into hers. "Knew it." After Zoe's quizzical look, she continued. "Knew you were a big sister. Your Mama had girls, two of them. You were her life, the other her rock. Had to take care of your *mei-mei*. Like Simon."

Zoe thought briefly of asking the girl how, if she couldn't read Zoe, she'd figured out Zoe had a sister. But it would probably be useless - River saw what she saw, and even Simon had never figured out exactly why. "Gonna need that hand back, you know," she said, looking down at the younger girl.

River returned the look. "Stop thinking you're not welcome. You push and pull and try to make things easy, but they're not."

"Lost me on that one, little one. Just as well - got stuff needs to be done, and you'd better run back to Inara's shuttle. They're probably combing the ship, wondering where you are."

Peering up at Zoe through dark hair, River shook her head. "Too busy not talking about things. Need something to fill the silence. Besides, you braid hair better than Kaylee. Better than Inara, too."

Zoe thought briefly of refusing. There were still dishes to be washed--it was her week to pick up the Shepherd's chores along with her own--and laundry to fold. Lord only knew what state it'd be in, since they'd let Jayne take a turn at the washing.

"Please?" River asked. "Don't want to listen to might-haves and what-ifs."

Despite River's convoluted way of saying things, Zoe knew what the girl meant. Didn't have to be a reader to know that a big part of Inara's leaving was currently holed up in his bunk, pretending he didn't care that his last days with her were slipping by. Inara would be heading for Highgate soon, and Zoe was not particularly looking forward to Mal's temper when she did. Lord, could Mal Reynolds be an utter idiot sometimes, but it wasn't any use to tell him so.

And she could certainly understand River being sick and tired of hearing, even inadvertently, Inara's regrets about the Captain.

Zoe sighed and started up the stairway to the catwalks and the shuttle docks, River at her side. The girl moved so silently, even the pads of her bare feet made no noise on the metal. A complete contrast to the ringing of her own boot heels. Sometimes she wondered if River was aware of how potentially deadly she was. Never mind the shooting and stabbing and crazy episodes where she could convince everyone her brother really wasn't her brother - it was written into her movements. In her entire military career, the only people Zoe had ever seen come close to matching River's

innate grace and stealth were the Blackbirds - an elite group of spies for Browncoat Intelligence.

"There weren't four and twenty of us, you know. Just me."

Zoe rounded the corner and looked over in confusion. "What?"

River stopped in front of Inara's door, knocking four times in succession. A feminine voice--she couldn't tell if it was Kaylee's or Inara's--called out an invitation to enter.

"Never mind. Come on, *jie jie*. Inner strands to outer, cross them over, but I always get them tangled."



Wash was feeling rather self-congratulatory. Not only had he pulled off a tricky reverse-burn landing on New Canaan, he was currently--and rather spectacularly, in his opinion--beating the pants off Mal in a game of Tall Card while they waited for their next contact to wave.

"Pair of plums, and cooking duties for tomorrow," he said, drawing a third card off the top of the pile and nudging a slip of paper over to Mal.

Mal threw a card into the pile. "Ain't no way you've got a pair of plums after that double-up of cherries you just had. Call." He swiped the cards Wash had placed on the table, and groaned as he glanced at them.

He tossed the pile of duties at Mal, biting back a laugh. "Forgot plums are tall, didn't you? Hope you can manage cooking and cleaning at the same time. And don't even think about ordering anyone to help you this time, especially my wife. I have post-dinner plans that involve the two of us, our bunk, and not you in any way."

"Yeah, well, you just remember that next time I clean your clock at pool. See how you like it."

Wash shook his head. He'd learned his lesson the last time he'd tried to beat Mal at pool. Wasn't his fault Mal tended to make his opponent drink a cup of sake for each shot he missed - after missing four straight shots in a row, Wash hadn't even been sure where the table was, let alone the balls. Mal had taken pity on him and hauled him back to the ship, dropping him into his bunk and leaving Zoe to deal with the fit of giggles he inevitably turned into when drunk.

Zoe. His autumn flower had been anything but delicate this morning, yelling across the bridge at him over the latest Lassiter disaster. Should've listened to him and River, though. He hated fighting with her, mainly because it reminded him of how many different ways she knew to break him in half, but it seemed like it'd been happening more than usual in recent weeks. She probably still hadn't forgiven him for the incident with those knockoff Francesco Chans.

"Hey, your bid," Mal prompted.

He picked three cards out of his spread and laid them with a flourish on the table, enjoying Mal's wince. "No way you're gonna be able to match this. Flying pigs don't have these odds. And let me tell you, I've seen flying pigs. Those rich scientists on Aberdeen do some weird things with hydraulics and lighter fluid."

"Swear to God, Wash, that ain't natural. Ain't nobody ever gotten a triple of pears in this game."

"What isn't natural?"

Wash spun in his seat to find Simon at the entrance to the bridge. "Me kicking Mal's ass at Tall Card. Well, that, or flying pigs."

"Uh huh . . . I don't suppose River's up here?" Simon rubbed his face. He still looked a little worn—too carelessly used—but far more himself than he had when they'd first brought him back.

He had to shake his head at Simon's over-protectiveness. True, River could most often be found on the bridge, alternately showing some scary aptitude for piloting or watching him play with his dinosaurs, but she hadn't been up there all day. He found he actually missed making her laugh at his T-rex voice, or hearing her explanations of why his dinosaurs were anachronistic.

"Nobody here but us chickens, Doc," Mal drawled. "Misplace little sis again?"

Simon's eyes flashed in irritation. "I have not. She said she would be in Inara's shuttle, having a girl's night with her and Kaylee, but that was hours ago. I assumed she would be up here."

Wash didn't miss the way Mal's eyes hardened at the mention of their resident companion. He supposed she wouldn't be theirs too much longer--she'd asked him to put down on Highgate in two days. She'd be joining a new Training House in Platonis, the capital city. He'd been there a few years ago. Nice place, not far from both mountains and ocean, with enough of a population to give it a city feel, but not enough to make you feel claustrophobic. It was a good place for someone who both thrived on social contact and enjoyed their privacy; someone like Inara.

"Well, she ain't here, so--"

Fortunately, Wash and Simon were saved another of Mal's diatribes about keeping an eye on River by the Cortex connection's loud chime. Someone wanted to talk, which usually meant a job, or the possibility of a job. That meant cashy money, which was always great in Wash's book. Making his way back to his chair and waving at Simon as he left the bridge, Wash did a double-take as he caught sight of the return address of their caller-- New Berlin City, Orion.

It looked like business was about to pick up.



"Think I've managed to solve your Lassiter problem, big brother."

Quinn Washburn was the youngest of the Washburn siblings, by about three years. Wash's little brother was the black sheep of the family, having the audacity to go into composing music instead of a "proper" occupation. Most of the reason Mom hadn't thrown too much of a fit about her middle child shipping out with a bunch of criminals was that at least he was flying. Like his father, who ran Phoenix Airlines, the best shuttle service in the Perseus System, and his older sister, head flight mechanic for their fleet of ships. Quinn hadn't even the decency to do anything remotely resembling the family business.

But Quinn had done well for himself. He'd rarely gone a week without some type of assignment or commission, and recently, he'd been on retainer to the Londinium Philharmonic. Wash supposed the main reason their parents disapproved of Quinn was that he took payment from pretty much anyone - Alliance included. But Wash couldn't fault his little brother - the kid had talent, and it got him off Orion.

"You told him 'bout the Lassiter?" Mal said, a suspicious tone creeping into his voice.

Wash rolled his eyes. "Remind me who tried to sell it to a couple of kids for fake money a few weeks back? Cause my memory's getting a little hazy."

Mal grumbled to himself, but kept quiet while Wash turned back to his brother.

"We're listening."

"I ran into someone last night at the Sihnon premiere who may be able to help you out. Do you remember when I took that teaching gig with the Ariel Conservatory of Music last year? Well, Kerith, the headmistress of the conservatory, was at the premiere last night. I swear, big brother, the woman knows everyone in the damn 'verse. She networks like nobody's business. She's got it in her head that I need a girlfriend, so she introduced me to this big-shot companion, out of Santo, and well - you know me. Foot makes a beeline for my mouth if I even make eye contact with a lady."

Wash could only imagine it. "So what happened?"

"Bai Lin--that's the companion's name--mentioned a gala she's hosting on Santo for the retiring House Mistress. Brought up my possibly writing a few pieces for it. But that's not the best part. She starts mentioning how she's got no idea what to give the House Mistress as a retirement present. I ask her what the woman likes, and get this: she's a weapons collector. Got the largest collection of old weaponry outside of that guy from Bellerophon. Don't know why you haven't tried fencing it to him, but hey, not my problem."

Wash suppressed a snort of laughter--he'd never told Quinn who they'd stolen the Lassiter from in the first place.

Mal spoke up for the first time, addressing Quinn. "You reckon she's got the money for it? Don't know that many companions, but they're usually tighter 'bout their finances."

Quinn nodded. "If she can afford to pay me a hundred in platinum for each piece she commissioned, she can afford whatever you're asking for that piece of junk."

Mal rounded the pilot's seat to get a better view of the Cortex screen. "Your friend the Companion, she's willing to pay cashy money up front?"

"She is. Eighty thousand in platinum, upon delivery of the weapon."

Wash and Mal exchanged grins. Impending payment was always a good thing. "That's a reasonable chunk of change. So we deliver the Lassiter to her at the house on Santo, and that's it? Gotta be a catch."

Quinn sighed ruefully. "There always is, Captain. That's the other reason I came to you."

When Quinn finished outlining the hitch in their plans, Mal's hand was at the bridge of his nose. Never a good sign. Wash had to admit, this job was getting considerably more complicated than "land on Santo, send Mal, Zoe, and Jayne to make the exchange, and fly off with their eighty thousand in platinum." Oh no. That would have been far too easy.

It seemed that Bai Lin's training house--Zhanshi House, to be exact --strictly followed all Guild laws and observances. As per Guild law, the retirement and naming of a new House Mistress necessitated a large and important ceremony. No offworlders or non-companions were permitted within the House. Furthermore, Zhanshi House was entirely female in both students and faculty, with only one or two exceptions.

That left Mal and Jayne out of the deal, which pissed Mal off to no end. But it also meant sending in Zoe by herself, which didn't sit too well with Wash.

Quinn had offered the fairly obvious solution. "You do remember that you have a bona-fide companion onboard, right? God knows Zoe can take care of herself, but Inara's a native. She should be able to get them both into and out of Santo."

Wash tried to step in, seeing as Inara wasn't one of Mal's favorite topics of conversation right now. "I don't think it's really fair to just assume that--"

"She's leaving," Mal said, in a flat voice. "Ain't gonna kill her to give us a hand 'fore she takes her leave. Sides, Santo ain't far from Highgate, if you're worried 'bout making her deadline."

Neither brother was about to bring up the fact that Inara herself should have a say in the plan. Not with Mal in the mood he'd been in for the past week or so. Tended to start fights, and Wash was already at his fight quota for the day. So he just let Mal and Quinn work out the rest of the deal--contact names, places, and times and instructions for where Zoe could pick up her fake Companion documents--and plotted out the quickest route to Santo.

He couldn't complain too much--hell, at least he was going to see Zoe in some slinky clothes--but he couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen, again.

"Cheer up! We just brokered the biggest deal of our lives for eighty thousand in platinum. That's almost twice what Loeben and his half-wits paid us!" Mal said.

He grinned over at Wash, in his usual post-deal high spirits, and Wash hated to be the one to crash Mal's party, but he'd do it. "You're forgetting something."

"What?"

"You're assuming Inara and Zoe can get themselves and the Lassiter through ten kinds of Alliance security and make it back out toting all that money."

Mal stared at him uncomprehendingly. "So?"

"Did you miss the part where they have to be Companions?!" Wash yelled, spinning his chair around to face his clearly-insane captain. "I know it's not exactly a stretch for Inara, but how the hell is my wife going to pull it off? I mean, she's ridiculously beautiful, but she isn't a Companion. Why are you not concerned about this, Mal?"

Mal's face hardened, his own worry creating turbulence in those blue eyes. "Ain't sayin' I'm not concerned, but that don't enter into it. Zoe's goin' in there, and that's all there is to it."



" . . . so I woke up the next morning smack dab in the middle of a cornfield. And I'm covered head to toe in indigo dye. Had to sneak home and hose myself off in the barn. Thought I'd gotten away with it till I took my kerchief off for dinner and Daddy choked on his mashed potatoes. My hair looked like a damn blueberry!"

The shuttle rang with simultaneous laughter, Inara wiping up a spatter of tea that had sloshed over the side of Kaylee's cup as she was telling her story. It wouldn't stain anything, of course – most of her things were already packed up. All that was left were the couch, the bed, and a few sundries she didn't want to pack until the morning she departed.

It wasn't an empty promise, an idle threat thrown out to prompt truth and catch only lies; she was really leaving. And she would leave this shuttle in the exact same condition she'd received it in, bare and sterile. It was the least she could do for Mal, to leave no reminders of her life on Serenity. Her goodbye present, if you will.

But this was Kaylee and River's goodbye present--one last girls' night, complete with hibiscus tea, fresh oranges, and cinnamon wafers like Kaylee had tried on Persephone. She was determined to make this night good, something they'd use to remember her by instead of impersonal letters and Cortex waves. Mal hadn't even protested when she'd turned on the Sihnon music channel and a string quartet could be heard through the entire cargo bay.

Then again, Mal hadn't spoken more than five words to her in as many days.

"You get in trouble?", Zoe asked, mid-braid on River's long hair.

That had been a shock, she thought, River leading Zoe by the hand into the shuttle, handing her a cup of tea, a slice of orange, and a hairbrush. She'd half expected the woman to walk right on out again. She and Zoe were never the closest of friends, but Zoe had surprised her. She'd sat herself down on Inara's couch and taken a sip of tea, before sectioning River's hair and popping the orange into her mouth.

Kaylee snorted. "Are you kidding? I couldn't sit down for a week!"

"Father used words," River murmured to herself. "Like whips, worse. Thought he taught us good and bad. Didn't do anything but tie a ribbon round our heads and wait for the firing squad."

River had spoken in that same singsong tone that she used for her "hands of blue" rhyme, sending a chill down Inara's spine. Two by two, hands of blue – Inara knew they were supposedly Alliance men, but no matter how many times she thought about it, she couldn't make herself believe in them. A tiny part of her that sounded a good deal like her mother kept insisting that the Alliance would never be that cruel, that horrific. She pushed the thought from her mind.

Shaking her head, Kaylee replied, "Doubt Simon was ever anything but prim and proper."

"Can doubt the stars're fire, little one. Don't stop 'em from burning."

Hamlet? Zoe had read Shakespeare? And could quote it? Inara tried to suppress her shock --probably not entirely succeeding, as Zoe shot her a rueful smirk. She supposed it shouldn't have been that big a deal, but she'd never thought of Zoe as particularly scholarly.

"More things in heaven and earth, Horatio," River said, glancing at both Inara and Zoe through the fall of her hair.

"Don't know about Horatio, girl, but I'd 'preciate it if you and Kaylee'd run along so I can chat with Inara and Zoe a minute."

Hundan still didn't have the courtesy to knock.

She stifled her smile as Zoe took her time finishing up River's plait, paying the Captain's histrionics no mind. Mal sighed, tapped an imaginary wristwatch, and rolled his eyes until Zoe had tied the braid off and Kaylee and River had both passed the shuttle door. He slid it closed and turned to Zoe with a bemused grin.

"Break out your best slinky dress, Zoe", he drawled. "We just sold ourselves a laser gun."



Her first reaction to Mal's explanation of their latest caper was to break into hysterical laughter. Luckily, she'd curbed that instinct, but it didn't decrease the idiocy of his plan. Crash a Succession Ceremony on Santo? Convince an entire House of initiates and Buddha-knew-how-many dignitaries that no-nonsense, gun-toting Zoe was a trainee? Sell *the* antique laser pistol of all antique laser pistols to Bai Lin - and did she ever remember the last time she'd crossed paths with that woman-- under the radar of Core-level Alliance security?

The man was out of his gorram mind.

"Sir, are you listening to yourself? We've practically bent over backwards, forwards, and sideways to avoid the feds since takin' on Simon and River, and you want to waltz into Santo at a high festival with our immediately recognizable stolen property?"

Well, it was good to know that she wasn't the only one questioning Mal's sanity. And while she would have liked to believe that he'd have listened to her, the truth was that he probably wouldn't have. She was off his crew and on her way to Highgate in less than a week. Her words meant nothing.

Zoe's words, on the other hand, had always carried more weight with Mal than anyone's.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do," he said. "Ain't like we been anywhere near Santo in the past few years, so they ain't gonna recognize you, and the doc and his sis are staying firmly on board."

Zoe's right eyebrow shot skyward. "Possibly you zoned out during the part about Alliance security and our stolen laser gun."

Mal shrugged. "Be just like Ariel. We've got two contacts on the inside, and you'll have a native to get you through the place."

"Nati- Sir, Inara hasn't said yes to anything yet, and neither have I, for that matter."

"Was referring to Quinn, but yeah, Inara too."

Oh, wasn't that nice? He'd finally remembered that not only was he sitting on her couch, but that she was still in the room.

"You seem to be under the impression I've already consented to risk my career to help you on this insane venture."

He finally looked her in the eye. "Haven't you?"

"One customarily *asks* a favor of someone else, Mal."

"Don't need to, Inara", he said, taking his feet off the table, where he'd indolently thrown them when he'd sat down next to Zoe. "You weren't intending to help, you'd have told me flat out I was off my rocker and kicked me outta your shuttle, 'stead of sitting there and listening."

Damn the man. Sometimes he knew her too well. And sometimes, she didn't actually hate that.

Inara slowly nodded. "That's not the only reason, but yes, I am willing to help."

Their connection worked two ways. For all of their arguing, she and Mal actually understood each other pretty well. He didn't have to ask what the other reason was; it went without saying that she'd always wanted to do more for the crew than occasionally bail them out of tricky situations and sit around worrying about them. And she'd been invested in the Lassiter from the beginning, ever since he'd barged into her shuttle and told her his plan for double-crossing Saffron.

Inara had helped them get their hands on the thing in the first place; she was damn sure going to see this one through. And then...then she could leave, no regrets.

"So you'd be willing to teach me what I'd need to know?" Zoe said. "Get me into the place and past all their security?"

Inara once again tried not to laugh outright. "Security's going to be the least of our problems."

"Why?" Mal asked.

"This is a Succession Ceremony, Mal. Every highly-placed companion in the Core will be there. And trust me, they can spot deception immediately--it's a requirement of the profession. They'll know within a glance if Zoe really is what she claims to be. I'm more worried about passing her off as a trainee than any security issues."

She'd almost refused to consider the job on that basis alone. Inara had spent her entire life first learning the rules of companion life, both spoken and unspoken, and then trying to escape their confines. She'd be walking right back into the maze she thought she'd left behind when she left Sihnon. And this time, she'd be bringing Zoe with her, which was a fate she wouldn't wish on anyone.

Zoe was good, but was she good enough?

Inara turned to Zoe. "Look, if you agree to this, you should know what you're getting in for. Being a Companion is complicated. It's not just sitting around, complimenting people through our teeth and spreading our legs for whomever can pay. The Guild has thousands of little customs and standards of behavior that you'd need to learn in a matter of days. I've seen you maintain a cover, and while that's beneficial, it's not going to be enough. They'll see through you in a second if you're not completely committed to this."

"Ain't askin' to learn a new career. Just enough to get me by for a few days," Zoe said quietly.

"Just...everything. Your history, your person...do you know how badly the Independents were treated within the Guild?" Inara said desperately. The Guild hadn't always been so enlightened--after the War of Unification, everything had been

in chaos. The Guild had supported Unification, of course, but there had been those unlucky few whose loyalties had lain with the Independents.

Her cousin Camille had been one of those.

With the entire Guild on alert, rules had been tightened. Everyone was under scrutiny, and if one didn't measure up to the stringent regulations of the Guild...well, Inara had never known for certain. She'd always, she knew dimly, been shielded from the darkest side of her profession. It was meant to be so, and most of the time, she'd been grateful for it.

"Look, Inara, I don't expect you to work miracles. Just do your best and we'll play it by ear. Maybe we can do this job without Zoe havin' to play dress-up." Mal said.

Honestly, how much of an idiot could the man be? Who virtually told a woman to her face that he didn't think she was beautiful enough, or clever enough, to be taken for a Companion? Yes, it was going to be difficult, but not impossible. Zoe was really the only woman on the ship who even had a prayer of pulling this job off. Kaylee was a dearheart, but she was useless in fights and possessed a refreshing lack of social graces. And River? Even if she weren't a fugitive, Simon would have a coronary.

Zoe raised her trademark eyebrow at Mal. "You telling me I ain't capable of turning myself into a lady like Inara?"

"Tellin' you you ain't capable of turning yourself into a whore like Inara."

In the middle of the stunned silence, Inara wondered how she could have ever thought that word would lose its sting over time. Once, in a time when she believed in the Guild and the Alliance unquestioningly, she'd sworn that no one would ever degrade her like that. A Companion had rights, had the power over her clients and her own body. A whore was nothing. And Inara Serra would not, could not, tolerate someone making her feel like nothing again.

How could Mal wonder why she was leaving?

Zoe's lips thinned out as she looked at Mal in disbelief. Fixing a thin smile on her face, Inara rose to her feet, brushing past Mal to slide open the door to her shuttle.

"Now that you've succeeded in insulting both of us, I'm going to ask you to leave. This is still my shuttle, Captain Reynolds."

Mal looked about to protest, but Zoe cut him off. "Suggest you leave us to our planning, sir. Got us a laser pistol to sell."

"Leave you to it, then" he said, eyes gone cold and unable to look at either of them. "We're putting down on Ibis in three days to meet with Quinn and his contact. Best be ready by then."

He walked out, pulling the door closed with a resounding slam.



Mal sat up in the cockpit, scanning the Cortex for details on Santo in a vain attempt to not pay attention to the woman currently occupying the co-pilot's seat. Inara was playing around with the course headings, ignoring him in return.

Click. Tap. Beep. Click. Tap. Beep.

Click. Tap. Beep. Click. Tap. Beep. Cl-

"Would you cut it out?" he yelled, slamming a hand on the console.

Inara simply continued her movements, rolling her eyes at him the way she always did when she thought he wasn't looking. "No. I'm making sure our heading isn't off."

Mal huffed. "You telling me you know how to plot a course better'n Wash?"

"It doesn't hurt to check."

"It does when--"

He stopped himself mid-sentence as an "incoming transmission" message flashed brightly across his screen. Originating address: Zhanshi House, Santo. Motioning Inara over--all bickering forgotten in the face of business--he switched the wave up to the overhead screen, and tried in vain to convince himself he hadn't immediately identified the scent of her shampoo as she leaned over his shoulder to view the screen.

"Malcolm Reynolds?"

He almost did a double take to ensure Inara hadn't spoken--the cultured, soft voice coming over the speaker was nearly identical to hers. The speaker, though, was an Asian woman in her early forties, waist length black hair worn loose over her shoulders. Her clothing, marked with the purple-and-gold Alliance crest, probably cost more than they earned in a year, and he resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the fancy silver frippery adorning the black kimono. Her face, though, seemed so very familiar, but he put all non-business thoughts out of his mind as he gave her a slow nod.

"That's me, ma'am. Captain of Serenity. And you are?"

She flipped a few strands of hair over one shoulder in an impossible move that should have looked rehearsed--it had to have been, with that much hair--but actually managed to look graceful as well.

"Bai Lin. House Mistress of Zhanshi House on Santo. A pleasure, Mr. Reynolds."

"It's Captain Reynolds, Miss Lin. Put a lot of work into this ship."

"Then it's Mistress Lin, Captain. I, too, have put effort into gaining my title, and I appreciate when one uses it."

Inara quickly interceded before Mal could bicker with Bai even more. It wouldn't do for him to alienate her after all the work that had been done setting up this job for them.

"Mistress, it is an honor to be graced with your presence. My name is Inara—"

Bai turned a sharp eye in her direction, and the warmth bled out of her voice as she addressed Inara. "I know who you are, Miss Serra, as well as your connection to Captain Reynolds' ship. Luckily for you, it works in your favor. I would not have dealings of this nature with a companion more closely allied with the Guild, for risk of discovery. It seems your mother was wrong about you--your temper tantrum and departure of Sihnon was of some use after all."

"So it seems." Inara refused to give Mal the satisfaction of seeing how easily Bai Lin had rattled her, and so she simply turned herself toward the screen. "It is gratifying to hear that you are not averse to dealing with me, but I have one problem to negotiate with you. Our contact tells us you're interested in the Lassiter, but surely you realize, Mistress, that getting it onto Santo itself, as well as into the House through Alliance security is going to be difficult."

A genuine smile broke out onto Bai's face. "Surely you and Captain Reynolds here are up to the challenge. It provides you with a plethora of ways to test your law-breaking abilities."

"We're up to it, but getting the Lassiter off our ship and onto Santo will require your influence. I trust you'll bypass any and all security at the House for us, in the interests of cooperation, of course." Mal said smoothly, having recovered from the surprise of someone from the Core not bowing and scraping to Inara.

"I will do my best. I assume only your personal shuttle will be docking, Miss Serra?" Bai said, not waiting for Inara's response. "When you dock, display the code I am transmitting to you now, as well as the documents you will undoubtedly receive from Mr. Washburn. They will see you through planetside security."

Inara nodded, handing Mal a printout of the clearance code. "That will most definitely assist us, thank you. But there is the matter of getting the Lassiter through the House, as well as my own personal safety."

"We're sending along one of my crew as protection for Inara. She'll be undercover as a companion-in-training, or whatever it is ya'll call people who ain't yet companions." Mal said, looking up from the printout to address the House Mistress. Inara wasn't shocked when Bai broke into contemptuous laughter. Mal, unfortunately, was, and he leapt to Zoe's defense. "Now what's so gorrarn funny 'bout that? Ain't sending Inara into a dangerous situation by herself, and that's all there is to it."

Bai composed herself, but retained a bit of a smirk around her dark eyes and perfectly-lipsticked mouth. "First of all, that's a clever away around our restriction of non-Companions inside the Training House, but you must be joking, Captain. There

is no way that any woman could possibly pass herself off as a novice during a Succession Ceremony when half the Companions in the entire galaxy will be in attendance. They quite simply will see through whomever it is in under a second."

"You don't believe we've thought of that?" Inara said quietly, cutting off any further protest from Mal. "You don't believe that I've thought of that?"

"There's no need to sound quite so haughty, Miss Serra. I simply spoke what you, as well as I, know to be truth. I will admit to being curious as to how you're planning to circumvent these problems." Bai said, leaning back in her chair to cross her legs.

Inara outlined her plan to train Zoe in the Companion arts so that she could have passed her first-levels along with any other novice. She explained about Zoe's marital status, and while Bai laughed, Mal could have sworn he'd seen a flash of alarm in her eyes. She also kept asking Inara why having Zoe along was necessary - what could Zoe do that Inara, a trained Companion, could not? And the marriage issue was definitely a problem.

Bai shook her head at Inara. "You said yourself she is a married woman, Miss Serra. How far undercover can she possibly go?"

"Far enough", Mal replied.

"Please, Captain - I know we're subject to all kinds of stereotypes, but there is a reason why the majority of companions do not marry. Very few men or women have that kind of trust in their partner."

He bristled. "And her husband ain't none of your business, either."

Back and forth they went, and Mal's head was starting to pound. He'd had enough when Bai managed to obliquely insult both Inara and Zoe's parentage. "Look, Mistress Lin, or whatever the hell you wanna call yourself, I ain't gonna sit here and let you speak of my crew like this. Zoe's going with Inara, and that's that."

"And I'm telling you I will not allow you to bring a former Independent officer into my Training House. I don't care how well you train her."

Mal spoke before he could stop himself. "Now how's it that you know Zoe's a Browncoat?"

"You honestly don't think I didn't do my homework when presented with this opportunity, Captain? Trust me, I know all about your allegiances, Sergeant."

He was about to tell the ignorant Alliance whore exactly what he thought of her, but Inara again cut him off before he could make the mistake.

"Well, how's this for a bargain, Mistress? You let Zoe accompany me into the Training House. Test her. Put her through trials any first-year novice would undergo. If she passes, she stays with me, and we have ourselves a deal to hand over the Lassiter. If she fails, then we walk. You lose nothing either way."

Technically, that wasn't true. Bai lost out on a one-of-a-kind laser pistol. And it was a big enough fence that he didn't think she'd back out now. He slid Inara a look of approval, and had to suppress his guilt at her rueful smile in return.

Bai was silent for a few moments, glancing over her shoulder at something offscreen. Finally, she nodded. "Agreed. Captain Reynolds, it has been an . . . enlightening conversation. Miss Serra, I look forward to meeting with you and Mrs. Washburn three days hence. Buddha light your way, both of you, wherever you may travel."



Inara hated it when Mal felt the need to air business at the dinner table, but couldn't very well stop him when he'd waited until after they'd finished eating. Everyone was still hanging around the galley, but only Inara, Mal, Jayne, Kaylee, Wash, and Zoe were still at the table proper.

"Okay." Mal leaned forward, resting his elbows on the galley table. "Inara, there some reason this Bai Lin was so set on you not havin' Zoe along? Is she plannin' something? 'Cause I swear to God, I've had about enough of my customers plannin'. They're all too gorram wily for their own good. Or ours." He rubbed his forehead. Maybe they could start dealing more with stupid people. Stupid people who could be easily cheated.

Inara shook her head. "I don't think so. But I do think she's used to having the upper hand in every contact she has with people—particularly companions—so I imagine she doesn't want me to have anything that might level the field a little bit." She turned to glance at River, who was industriously scrubbing at the burned bottom of the pot that had held their dinner. "Sweetie, that needs to soak."

"Chores are complex." River turned her attention to wiping down chopsticks instead.

Mal ignored her. "I am not seein' this go south. Jobs've been slim of late, and we need this to go right. Inara, you tell me straight you think this'll pan out, or we're callin' it off right now."

"Could we maybe focus on something other than your obsession with money right now? You're talking about sending *my wife* into a companion training house as a companion. That isn't problem enough?" Wash demanded. He wouldn't even look at Zoe, and hadn't, in fact, spoken to her in hours.

"My obsession with money?" Mal was using his dangerous, calm voice. "You like gettin' paid, Wash? You like eatin'? You like fuel in Serenity so you have a job? You like those things?"

"Look," Inara said desperately, not wanting to watch another shouting match. Her temples were already throbbing from all the thinking she'd been doing, trying to work out everything necessary, weigh the risks. "I don't think Bai Lin's plotting to double-cross us. But she does have a very...well, she has a reputation, and we'd be foolish to go in without considering it. I wouldn't risk myself if I didn't think it would work out, though, let alone Zoe."

"Well, it's nice to know *someone's* concerned for my wife," Wash remarked, glaring at Mal.

"Hell, y'all're so concerned, I'll go instead," Jayne said. A lewd grin on his face, he added, "I'd do a lot more to unload that gorram thing than just spend a few days in a whorehouse."

"They won't take men," Mal said, sounding tired. "Inara, tell me about this reputation Bai Lin's got."

"She's...ruthless. The consummate politician, within the Guild. She appeared some years ago, already perfectly trained, as far as I know, and started gaining power fast. She became a...sort of investigator and enforcer within the Guild about six or seven years ago. But...she does follow the rules, of sorts. They're Machiavellian, her rules, but I do know how they work. She won't cross us by direct force. If we keep our wits about us, this won't be a problem," Inara said conclusively.

"Sides, Zoe, it'll be real shiny to see the good parts of the Core. All I ever got to see was the scrap yard," Kaylee said, giving Mal a slightly baleful look.

"You love scrap yards!" Mal protested. "Anyhow, the Core's dangerous."

"Yes, it is..." Simon looked away from River, whom he'd been watching carefully while she was washing the cutlery. Not that he didn't trust her, but... It was good, what they were trying, though, making her more a member of the crew, and River seemed to agree. "We do remember that there are very wanted fugitives on board here? Does flying into a place with high Alliance security seem like a very good idea to anyone?"

"Sounds dandy to me," Jayne grumbled, though his heart wasn't really in it. His baiting of Simon had been a lot more subdued since the incident on Whitefall.

"Does it?" Simon whirled to fix Jayne with a piercing gaze. "And you think it would be 'dandy' if Zoe were arrested as well? River and I aren't the only ones wanted, you know."

"Wouldn't be a problem if Mal'd let me go instead. Hey, I could shave my beard! I seen uglier women than me before." Jayne considered that for a moment. "Hell, I grappled with uglier women than me before."

"No." Mal stood up, moving towards Simon. "Doc, I've given you no call to mistrust how I take care of me and mine, so you just pipe down and look to your sister."

Simon's lips thinned, but he obeyed.

"This...this is all academic," Wash said, floundering. "Zoe is not going. It's dangerous, and...and she's my wife, and I forbid it!"

"Forbid it?" Zoe lifted an eyebrow, looking very, very displeased. "Someone make you captain and forget to tell me?"

"And me," Mal added unpleasantly. "Wash, you don't give orders on my boat. *Dong le ma?*"

"Oh, yes, *sir*," Wash said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I forgot that the only one with any right to tell my wife what to do is you, not me, her husband."

"Well, maybe you'd best remember." Zoe was tired of the entire discussion. "This ain't an issue anymore. Inara needs someone to keep watch and make sure the deal goes through, and that's gonna be me. I appreciate everyone's concern, but there ain't gonna be any problems."

Wash, his face betrayed and hurt, rose and walked out of the galley, heading towards his quarters.

Zoe sighed. "I'd best follow, try and smooth this over." When Mal gave a slight nod of dismissal, she followed Wash.

"Well...least we don't have to see Jayne in a dress," Kaylee piped up, trying to lighten the mood amongst those left behind. "Gotta think about those...small mercies, right?" she said, then, noting the entire lack of response to her comment, moved toward the sink. Maybe River could use some help with those dishes.



"Wash, will you slow the hell up?" Zoe caught up to her husband just outside their quarters, which was just as well. She'd always hated fighting actually *in* their bunk. It made her feel...sullied the place, their bed, to have fighting in there.

He stopped, whirling to face her. "What is it, Zoe? Another lecture about how I have no right to tell you anything, even though you apparently have the right to decide everything about me from how much information I have at any given time to whether or not we have children?"

"We are not talkin' about that right now, and if we were, you ain't noticed me suddenly gettin' pregnant, have you? This is about a job. My job, and the fact that you have a problem with me doin' it. That ain't gonna fly, Wash."

"Then maybe I won't either," Wash said in a low voice.

"Oh, what...you gonna mutiny now?" Zoe could hardly keep from laughing. "You really want to take this to that level? Hell, you were as happy as any of us about this deal goin' down until you found out I'd be along. Why don't you say what you really think?"

"What I really think?" Wash's voice was rising dangerously. "I think maybe Bai Lin thought more about this than you did! How far *are* you willing to go, Zoe? How close to Inara's world are you going to get? Close enough to show a little leg? All right. I'm a secure man. Close enough to service another man? I'm not that secure. How far will you go for the job, Zoe? How far will you go for *Mal?*"

"That what you think?" Her incredulity and anger had faded to hurt. "You think I wouldn't find a way to stay faithful to you? You think our marriage isn't worth more to me than any job?"

"I don't know anymore! I just know that my wife's going to pretend to be a Companion, and I don't even...I don't even begin to know how to deal with that. Oh, I trust you—I believe you'd never touch another man in desire. But to get a job done, please Mal, keep Serenity going?" He shook his head. "That I don't know."

Zoe, who had been leaning against the wall, slid down to a seated position. "Wash, you don't know what it was like, before you came. After the war, I mean. Things were so lean, Mal and I were just...hitchin' from planet to planet, couple of hired guns...we ain't goin' back to that." She lifted her head, gazing straight at him. "But that doesn't mean that our marriage isn't worth more to me than..."

"You can't even say it, can you?" He turned away, laughing bitterly. "She can't even say it! It always comes back to that, to the war, to Mal..."

"You remember the last time it came back to the war and Mal? I do believe I left that man to be tortured to death to save you. Or did you forget that?" Zoe didn't know how he was capable of forgetting anything at all about that space station. She hadn't. Still woke up at night to the smell of engine steam and oil and blood all mixed together. Still closed her eyes to see Wash tied to that rack, head hanging in defeat, but still conscious. Still remembered Mal's grim certainty that she had made the right choice - but still crying out her name with the loss of his ear. Still flinched as she saw the twin scars the electrodes had made on Wash's chest. She had made her choice, oh yes, but she still had to live with it.

Zoe rose to her feet again, her chin lifted. "Don't matter. Either you trust me or you don't, and if you don't, then we got bigger problems than this job." She moved towards their bunk. "Go sulk in the cockpit. I'm goin' to bed." Wash's face was torn as he watched her climb down the ladder, but finally, his expression straightening into unreadability, he moved towards the cockpit.

Zoe loosed her hair from where it was tied down, then stared in the mirror. "Wasn't supposed to be like this," she sighed. "Days when I wonder if he wasn't right." Mal or Wash, didn't matter which one, maybe. Someone had been right. Maybe Mal, when he'd said shipboard romances only led to complications. Maybe Wash, when he'd said her loyalties were...askew.

She laid down her hairbrush and turned away from the mirror. It didn't bear thinking on. There was a job to do.



Inara finished drying the dishes, smiling a little. River had tried hard, but had balked at the idea of drying, instead treating Inara to a lecture about how drying them wasted dish towels, and that allowing them to air-dry instead would raise the ambient moisture level, proving beneficial for the entire crew. Mentions of water streaks had only earned her an incredulous glare. Now Simon was putting River to bed, and Inara was finishing up.

She turned to go and found Mal in the doorway, watching her. "I thought you'd gone to bed," she said quietly.

He shrugged. "Don't generally this early."

"What do you want?" she asked, brushing back her hair a little wearily. The entire night had been a bit much for her, and she had a headache. She was also remembering why she left Sihnon. All the complex in-fighting, the invisible lines of influence—they were all crowding her mind once again, and they made her feel older than her years.

"Want to know why you're so set on doing this." Mal sat down at the table and leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. "Don't see how it should matter to you, being's you're leaving at the end of it."

Inara sat down across from him. "Just because I'm leaving doesn't mean I don't care about Serenity, or her crew. This is something I can do to help, and a good way for me to return to being a proper Companion once again."

"A proper Companion." Mal sighed. "There ever a time when you wasn't one?"

She laughed. "The last year and a half wasn't precisely the sort of thing the Guild looks favorably on." Her face softened a little. "It doesn't matter. I have no regrets."

"No? Because you're leavin' here in a hurry like a woman with a whole pile of regrets," Mal said, rubbing at his face.

"Mal, it's just...just time for me to move on. You know that as well as I do," Inara said, desperate to avoid having this conversation.

"Right." He turned sarcastic. "'Cause you love this ship and her crew so damned much you can't wait to get out of here. I'm sorry, were we supposed to pay you for your affections?"

"Why are you being like this? You surely don't want me to stay!" Inara was sitting up ramrod straight. He wasn't going to make her angry this time. She wouldn't let him—couldn't. Not this close to the end.

"'Cause....'cause it's gonna hurt Kaylee somethin' fierce. She don't want you to go," Mal said evasively.

"Oh, yes. *Kaylee* doesn't want me to go. Does it ever seem strange to you that you transfer your problems onto Kaylee all the time, or does it just go along with never being able to actually say what you mean?" Inara snapped. "If you have a problem with me, don't bring Kaylee into this."

"You brought up the crew." Mal was stubborn. "And Kaylee's crew."

Inara slowly massaged her throbbing temples. "Do you think you could ever just be honest with me?"

"I don't know. Could you?"

That caught her up short, and also brought the conversation to an impasse, as though they'd both discussed jumping off a cliff, and, short of someone actually hurling herself to her demise, the subject needed changing. Inara just breathed in and out, trying to relax. It was almost done—almost over.

Mal was the first to recover. "Be a lot of work gettin' Zoe ready to pass for a Companion. You sure you're up to it?"

"It—" Inara cleared her throat. "It won't be too hard. Zoe's very graceful and womanly, and she speaks better than—"

"Than I do," Mal said bluntly.

"Most of the time," Inara admitted. "And I'm sure she's skilled at maintaining a cover."

Mal snorted. "That what you think?" He shook his head. "Zoe is a gifted woman. Lyin' ain't precisely one of the gifts she's been given, for which I'm thankful, nine days out of ten."

Inara shrugged. "Yes, but she's so withdrawn that it won't take much to turn her into a Companion. She's already calm and poised. It would be far more difficult if she were outgoing or talkative. This will still be a fair amount of work, but it's hardly impossible."

"Well, keep me posted," Mal said, standing up and moving towards the door.

"Mal," Inara said quickly, stopping him.

He turned around, fixing her with a questioning gaze.

She lowered her eyes. "This will also...save you a diversion to Highgate. I won't be coming back after the job is done. It will be far easier for me to just go straight on from Santo." She could hear both of them breathing in the silence that followed, and it struck her as the cruelest of ironies that for once, they were perfectly in sync.

Mal nodded finally. "I'll let Wash know. Appreciate you savin' us the trip." He swallowed, then turned away again.

"Not at all," Inara murmured, watching him move towards the cockpit. It was done. She'd been planning to leave and talking about leaving for so long...and now it was set, and there was no turning back. But it was for the best. She believed that...she had to believe it.

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Inara sat down, offering Zoe tea. "This job seems to be creating a great deal of tension for you. With Wash and the captain both."

Zoe shrugged, ignoring the tea. "Nothing I can't handle."

"I never said you couldn't," Inara said, smiling slightly. "But maybe you shouldn't have to." She cocked her head slightly. "Is there some reason that doing this job is so important to you?"

"You need my help. We're not sendin' you in to do this trade all on your own. You're crew, for now anyway, and you need someone with you." Zoe shook her head. "Mind, I haven't got the least idea how this is going to turn out. Feminine wiles are...kinda new to me."

Inara laughed gently. "Zoe, just looking at you, I would say that you're no stranger at all to feminine wiles, and I'm fairly certain that Wash would agree."

A small, secretive smile curved Zoe's full lips. "Not for this kind of thing, though. My way's...simpler. Don't so much involve pouring tea and having fourteen different dresses at the ready."

"You can learn." Inara moved closer to Zoe, forcing her to take a cup of tea from her hands. "And the very first thing you'll need to learn is to relax. Tension...it's something we're trained to look for, as Companions. If you walk in there looking as uneasy as you do right now...well, it won't go unnoticed."

Zoe finally gave in and sipped the tea, sighing. "Fine. You got some special way of relaxing?"

"I do, though it's more...spiritual than professional," Inara said, smiling. She rose and took a cushion from the sofa, sitting on the floor, neatly sitting on her heels. She beckoned Zoe to join her.

Zoe, with a few misgivings, did. "This wasn't developed for people who've been shot much, was it?" She shifted, trying to put an aching hip into a more comfortable position.

"I don't suppose so," Inara replied. "If you're more comfortable sitting on the sofa..."

"Just...show me," Zoe said, resigned to her fate.

Inara closed her eyes. "Just focus on your breathing, to begin with. Don't try to control it, but become aware of it..." She continued to speak in a low, soothing voice, guiding Zoe through very basic meditation techniques. This was basic, but it could be important. Inara had the sense that around Bai Lin, they would both need all the focus and control they could get.

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"Ohhh..." Wash's eyes were closed, an expression of pure bliss on his face. "Oh, this is...I gotta be the demonstration more often."

Inara smiled as she rubbed oil into his back. "Don't get too used to this. Now, Zoe, you see how I'm focusing on each individual muscle group, starting at the top and working down?"

"I see," Zoe said neutrally, arms crossed over her chest.

Inara held her hands up, sensing a little bit of jealousy. "You try, then."

With a frown of concentration on her face, Zoe slicked up her palms and took over. "Definitely don't get too used to this," she warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it, baby. Also, ow. Is it supposed to hurt?" Wash demanded.

"More lightly," Inara instructed. "You're supposed to be bringing pleasure, not performing physiotherapy."

Zoe continued a little more gently. "When precisely they gonna see me givin' somebody a rubdown?"

"We should be prepared for everything. When I was a novice, I was sometimes summoned to assist the House Mistress in relaxation. Don't worry so much. There aren't any high-ranking males in the House—Bai Lin's assistant is probably the only one, in fact--and any touching will be purely platonic," Inara said calmly.

"But you can practice more on me," Wash said hopefully. "In a non-platonic sense."

Zoe smiled as she followed the column of Wash's spine down. They'd both been trying to work towards a cease-fire, at least, if not a truce. "Might do, husband. Might do."

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River sat on Inara's bed, her nose wrinkled up under her. "It's ugly."

Inara looked up from where she was pinning the folds of Zoe's sari to her skirt. "It's beautiful. Zoe's tall enough to really carry off a sari well."

"But the color."

"Gotta go with River on that one," Zoe said, looking down at the dull green of the fabric. "You sure they won't notice how ugly it is?"

"They'll notice how fashionable it is," Inara said practically. "This shade is very chic right now."

"It looks like decaying flesh. Or an old bruise. Or maybe infection," River supplied helpfully.

"Fashionable infection." Inara helped Zoe down from the footstool. "Now take small steps, and don't trip on the..."

Zoe glared up at her from the floor. "So it's the color the bruises'll be after a couple of days?"

Inara leaned down to help her up. "Yes. Precisely."

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Zoe, arms folded over her chest, watched while Mal, Simon, River and Inara weaved in and out in the complex figures of the dance. "Sir, there a reason you actually know how to do this?"

Mal bowed to River, who was his partner. Simon had protested that arrangement at first, then caught the expression on Inara's face. "Not one you're ever gonna find out," Mal grumbled.

"His mama thought it would make the girls like him better." River glanced mischievously up at Mal. "But it was hopeless."

Inara smothered a laugh. "All right, Zoe, take my place with Simon. I'll call out the steps. Just watch River if you get confused. Wash, start the music again?" Inara watched them move critically. "Forward, forward, join hands, curtsy, back, forward, hands joined and move under the—oh, dear." It seemed that either Mal and River hadn't been holding their hands up high enough, or else Zoe had misjudged her height. It was almost comical to watch them try and untangle from the heap on the floor.

They took a break, and Simon prescribed analgesics all around.

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Zoe's hand shook as she poured out the tea. Inara sighed. "Zoe, one detail, one moment in which your touch isn't deft and sure, and you'll be given away completely."

Wash reached for the cup, and Inara slapped his hand away. "Zoe, do it again."

Zoe smiled apologetically at Wash, and he patted her hand. "Sweetcakes, it is such a good thing that I don't even like tea."

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"Yaegaki tsukuro...Sono yaegaki wo," Zoe said, haltingly.

"It's the oldest poem in the Japanese language, Zoe. Try just a little more care in your pronunciation," Inara chided.

"There some reason I have to be able to spout poetry in a language no one on Santo even speaks?" Zoe sighed.

"Japanese culture is still tremendously influential in the Core. It's a very important language. Just knowing Mandarin isn't enough, for a companion. You need to have

something of a more cosmopolitan sense. Besides, it's good to have something difficult up your sleeve in case poetry comes up. Now try again," Inara prompted.

"Yakumo tatsu..." Zoe looked over Inara's shoulder at River, who was mouthing the next line at her. If River weren't wanted—and insane—Zoe would suggest sending the girl along instead. With all her pretty airs and graces, River would surely manage much better. Didn't matter, though. She'd made the commitment, and so she'd do it right. Distracted, she stopped. "What's this poem mean again?"

"It's a wedding song, remember? Eightfold rising clouds..." Inara recited the verse flawlessly in English, then again in Japanese.

"Oh, splendid eight-fold headache," Zoe muttered, then tried again.

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"Enough," Zoe said, after she'd walked across the room about fifty times, with increasingly more precarious things on her head. She laid the eggshell-thin tea cup down on the table and collapsed onto the sofa.

"You're tired," Inara said soothingly. "But you've done wonderfully. In just this short time, you've mastered so much, and you look far more comfortable in the clothes than you did in the beginning." She smiled. "Let's take the afternoon off...and drink something other than tea." Moving towards a cabinet, she pulled out a bottle of plum wine. "I was saving this...but I can't think of any time when we'll need it more, can you?"

"Not hardly," Zoe laughed, and accepted a glass. Taking a long draught, she sighed. "You really think this is gonna work?"

Inara laid a gentle hand on her knee. "I have faith in you, Zoe. I'm sure it will."

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"Sir, you reckon Kaylee'll be pleased having to fix the hole you're about to wear in the floor?" Zoe asked.

Mal stopped and sighed. "Should know better than to let that feng le doc talk me into drinkin' coffee after dinner."

She shrugged. "It's one of his things. Like Inara and the tea. That all that's keepin' you up?"

"Hell, Zoe, you know it ain't. I...it ain't that I don't trust Inara, cause I do. But the things she said about this Bai Lin make me more'n a mite uneasy. And Wash..."

"My marriage is my private business, sir," Zoe replied, her tone final.

"No, it's not! It's not because I'm the captain and I give the orders, so if my orders make your marriage all ugly, then it's my business, isn't it? Hell, I don't care about what you do or don't do. Just care that you come back safe, and right now, I ain't so sure that's a guarantee," he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"There's never a guarantee. What's this about?"

"Just...hell." He dropped into a chair. "I don't take kindly to having my people shot at, you know that? Sent those two down there without much ceremony, and look what happened!" Mal had been haunted since Whitefall with the specters of what might have been if they'd been just a little slower, if River hadn't guided him. He'd damn near gotten two of his crew killed through sheer lack of caution.

"It's not the same, sir. There's no one here with a grudge against us, and no reason to expect anything but a peaceful business transaction," Zoe said reasonably.

"Well, what we expect ain't exactly what generally happens, now is it?" he snapped. "I just...don't like sendin' you in there, Zoe."

She sat down to face him. "Then tell me not to go." They stared at each other for a long moment. "You order me off the job, and I'll stay right here. Inara can look out for herself."

Mal was silent for a long time, staring at her and considering. In some ways, it was tempting. But the idea of letting Inara fend for herself, when she was helping the crew out on a job...it would just be one more sin to carry on his over-burdened soul. Finally, he said, quietly, "Best get to bed. Gotta get up early to put on your whorin' clothes."

A slow smile crossed Zoe's face. "Yes, sir," she said, rising and moving towards the door. "See you in the morning."

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Inara looked up from the book she was pretending to read at the knock. "Come in."

Zoe stepped in, dressed in the graceful dress Inara had loaned to her. "Think we're about ready."

Inara looked up inquiringly. "Are we? Zoe, we haven't talked about this before...we've dealt with every single aspect of a companion's life except one..."

"And that's the one I don't intend on dealin' with," Zoe said firmly. "Inara, that's your life, not mine."

"All I'm saying is that it could arise. The women there, they'll be trained to note any kind of hesitation, any withdrawal. If you're not completely committed to this, they'll spot it in a second."

Zoe pressed her lips together. "I said my vows, and I do recall there was something in there about keeping to one man only. I found that man, and there won't be any others."

"Zoe—"

"It ain't open for discussion. Now come on—we're just waitin' for you to say your goodbyes." Zoe stepped aside, gesturing for Inara to precede her.

Inara nodded finally. Stepping out onto the catwalk, she found the entire crew waiting and smiled slightly. "So I get a proper sendoff after all."

"Course you do!" Kaylee, always unrestrained in her affections, stepped forward to wrap her arms around Inara. "Gonna miss you so much."

Inara embraced Kaylee tightly, then bestowed a sweet kiss on her cheek. "You'll hear from me often. It'll be all right, Kaylee, I promise."

Kaylee stepped back, wiping her cheeks, and River was facing Inara. She looked at the companion with bright, curious eyes, then turned away slightly. "Goodbye. We liked you." Her voice was thin and unhappy.

Inara caught her quickly, giving her the same hug she'd bestowed on Kaylee, and a kiss as well. "You're growing up into a beautiful woman, River. You make us all so proud of you." Turning to Simon, she added, "You take such good care of her."

Simon kissed Inara's cheek formally, smiling faintly. "Good luck."

"Hey, 'Nara, could you send us some captures from the trainin' house? Nekkid pillow fights and such?" Jayne grinned, dodging the irate hand she raised to thwap him.

Wash stepped forward. "Keep an eye on my wife, will you?" He clasped Inara's hand rather self-consciously.

"Of course I will," Inara promised.

"And on yourself too," he smiled, then turned away.

And then there was only Mal left, and Inara stepped forward, trying to summon something to say. "Mal, I—"

He turned away from her. "Zoe, take her out. You don't wanna miss your rendezvous with Quinn. Then get yourself back quick as you can. No sense in lingering." His boots rang loudly on the grate beneath him as he walked away.

Her face a mask, hiding her emotions from the pitying gazes of all present, Inara turned and climbed into the shuttle. Zoe gave Wash a quick kiss and a squeeze of the hand, then followed.

Mal sat below, in the cargo bay, until he could hear the shuttle's burners firing.

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"Sure we're in the right place? Thought we were puttin' down on Ibis first?" Zoe said, as Inara touched the shuttle down at the main dock.

Inara could understand the other woman's confusion - Ibis may have been Santo's smallest moon, but it was still a bustling metropolis and spaceport for its mother-

planet. They'd landed at around 2 am local time, but the city proper was lit up like a Christmas tree, and people elbowed their way down shopping boulevards that rivaled Londinium itself. Ibis was bustling, hectic - the perfect place for a clandestine meeting like the one they were about to attend.

They set off across the square for the Tune Up pub, apparently one of Quinn's favorites. Zoe entered first, quickly scanning the room for any threats. She needn't have worried about keeping a low profile - a piercing wolf whistle sounded from the corner booth.

Well, they didn't need to inquire about Quinn Washburn any further.

Inara followed Zoe across the room to meet their contact - a slight blonde man that she'd have picked out of an entire city of people as Wash's brother.

"So this is my new sister!" Quinn approached, arms outstretched. Catching sight of Zoe's rather stony expression, he said, "Okay, so not much with the hugging. Duly noted. I'm Quinn, anyhow, and it's really nice to meet you. Can I get you a drink?"

"No. This is Inara," Zoe said. "She's our bona fide Companion to get us into this place." It was strange, meeting him. He looked a lot like Wash, but a little more formal and a little more upright. She supposed time in the Core would do that to you.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Inara said graciously, extending her hand. Quinn shook it eagerly, relieved.

He turned back to Zoe. "So how is Wash? Still happy as anything out in the middle of nowhere?"

A grudging smile crossed Zoe's face. "That about sums it up, yeah. Sent his love, though."

"Well, I knew he couldn't be unhappy with such a beautiful wife. I was sorry I couldn't come to the wedding—"

"We didn't invite you," Zoe said, unwillingly amused. They'd had just a small ceremony, with the captain officiating and Kaylee and Jayne for witnesses. Captain didn't take kindly to strange people on his boat, and Zoe didn't take kindly to strange people period.

"Which was a very good reason why I couldn't be there," Quinn said with a laugh. "But I meant to send a present, if for no other reason than to express my devout gratitude that you got rid of that horrible moustache."

Zoe crossed her arms over her chest. "And just what makes you think I had anything to do with that?"

Quinn gave a slight bow. "Trust me, nothing less could have induced him to part with it. You should feel honored."

"I'm sure she does," Inara said with a laugh. "Now, I understand you have papers that can get us through Alliance security and attest that Zoe is someone other than the first mate of a smuggling ship?"

"Indeed I do." Quinn felt in his pocket. "Right here I have the Companion trainee license for one Zoe Lanford, with ident-card to match. And here are the papers to get you through without being searched...should be a breeze from here."

"Let's hope so," Inara smiled. "It's very good of you to go to so much trouble for us."

"Anything for family, right? Except hugging. No hugging in this family, no ma'am," Quinn said solemnly.

Zoe grinned at him. "Maybe next time."

"You sure I can't get you a drink or something?" Quinn said wistfully. "I don't hear from Wash that often, and it would be nice—" He broke off as Zoe stood up.

"Maybe when she doesn't have stolen contraband strapped to her thigh," Inara whispered helpfully. "Goodbye, Quinn, we'll look forward to seeing you at the celebration."



Quinn was as good as his word, a fact Zoe duly noted in his favor. Their papers made security wave them through as quickly as possible, and there was no suspicion of Zoe at all.

"We've got half the battle won," Inara murmured as they moved towards the training house gates. "And you look beautiful." Zoe wore a dark crimson cheongsam-styled dress with birds of paradise embroidered on it, and her dark hair piled up on top of her head.

"You ever seen a battle half lost?" Zoe inquired wryly, ignoring the compliment. Her sharp eyes caught sight of the couple standing on the steps. "I take it one of them is Bai Lin."

Inara nodded. "The other must be her assistant. She's one of the few here who could get away with having a male assistant in this training house, and the only one who would do it."

They came to a halt in front of Bai Lin and her assistant, and both curtsied deeply with natural grace. "Mistress," Inara said, rising. "It's an honor to meet you."

Bai nodded her head curtly. "Indeed. I take it this is your...bodyguard?"

"Yes, this is Zoe," Inara said cautiously, her eyes flickering between Bai Lin and her assistant. She didn't think they would be planning anything...but one never knew.

"I suppose I should be offended that you feel you need a guard, particularly here," Bai mused. "Strike that. I am offended."

Zoe lifted her head. "No insult is intended, Mistress. We simply want to finish this job to the satisfaction of both parties," she said calmly and clearly.

"Well." A slow smile crossed Bai's face. "Far better than I expected. The accent can be removed, but the phrasing is usually the tell." There was something fierce in her eyes.

"If she satisfies your expectations, then perhaps we might enter and conclude our business after we've rested from our travels?" Inara said, smiling slightly.

"You might." Bai was circling Zoe, looking her up and down from every conceivable angle. "And I believe you may. This is Eitan Danzinger, my personal assistant. He can assist you in any...difficulties."

Eitan bowed. He was slim and finely formed—so beautiful that even Inara, who didn't particularly approve of male companions, had to admit his appeal. Inara bowed her head, and Zoe curtsied again. Inara had drilled her for hours on the various ranks and the proper greetings for each, emphasizing that, as Inara was a companion in full standing, Zoe couldn't count on watching her for cues.

Bai smiled, and Inara shivered. The last time she'd seen the woman had been just before her cousin Camille had disappeared. There had been rumors afterwards of Camille's suicide, but suicide was attributed to every disappearance possible, maintaining the illusion that no one left the Guild alive.

"Eitan will show you to your rooms. It's a pity that we can't perform our business out here like barbarians, but no one would be allowed to enter who wasn't remaining for the duration of the celebration. I'm sure you understand." Bai flicked her fingernails dismissively.

"We do," Inara replied. "Thank you, Mistress." Another curtsy from both, and they were led away, through the massive gates and into the training house.

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The ballroom was filled with music so gay that it fairly forced feet to dance, and most of the party was taking advantage of it, floating about the ballroom with smiles and laughter. Looking across the room, Zoe caught sight of Quinn, who waved and came to greet them.

"Hello, hello. Glad to see you both made it—very glad. I'm sure Wash has picked up violent traits in the last few years, and I'd hate to think what would happen to me if anything had befallen you," he said, bowing gallantly over Zoe's hand.

"He has gotten better with a gun," Zoe allowed with a slight smile.

"Quinn, this music is delightful—you'll have to send me recordings of some of your pieces, if you will," Inara said.

"Of course. They'll be on Serenity before you get back."

There was a short, awkward silence. "Actually," Inara said finally, "I won't be returning to Serenity. I'm going on from here to a training house in Highgate. I believe it's time for me to be earthbound once more."

Quinn gave a little smile. "Believe me when I say that I'm the only person in my family who could understand that. Would you care to dance to this delightful music?"

Inara looked to Zoe. "Are you all right here?"

"Just fine," Zoe said absently, her eyes following Bai Lin around the room. "You go on ahead."

Inara shrugged and turned to Quinn, who led her onto the floor with alacrity. Zoe, meanwhile, began skirting the edge of the floor, trying to get closer to Bai Lin. Maybe she could hear if something was being planned. Forestalling surprises was usually a good idea.

"...I never saw anything outside the maiden's house until I was fourteen, of course," Bai said, her face now carefully schooled to hide that danger that lurked just behind her eyes. "A traditional one, on Sihnon, where we were schooled to be brides to the planet's elite. I saw my sisters paired off with ugly men, vicious or just...well, uncomely," she said with a laugh. "I remember crying for those girls, and then, I remember the day when I realized there was a way to choose. I never wept so hard for those girls as I did the day I entered my own training house to become a Companion. The relief of escape was...impossible to describe, really."

"Miss Lanford." A tap on Zoe's shoulder made her turn just a little too fast, and she nearly bumped into Eitan, who was standing just behind her. "You seem a little lost." Bai Lin's head raised from her conversation, predatory and fast.

"I'm not so fond of social gatherings, sir," Zoe replied, curbing the urge to spit after calling that Core pretty-boy by the title only one man she knew had ever actually earned.

"Indeed. I'm sure you're...very devoted to your training," he said, nodding easily to Bai and her associate, who were approaching. He leaned against a pillar, surveying her with an insolent curiosity. Zoe couldn't help but notice that most people were giving him a wide berth; she wondered what kind of reputation *he* had.

"I do consider hours away from my studies as a loss," Zoe confessed solemnly.

"Well, how fortunate," Bai murmured. "Did Inara not tell you of Eitan's expertise?"

"I—no?" Zoe said, standing perfectly still, and wishing more than anything that she could just shoot someone.

Eitan gave a slow, seductive smile. "I'm considered quite gifted at sensual massage. I actually teach it here at the training house. Perhaps you'd like a short...workshop?"

"You really must avail yourself," Bai said coolly. "It's an opportunity you might never have again."

"Yes, I suppose it is." Zoe could feel her heart beating, her breath straining at her chest, and she forced herself to recall the focused, slow breathing Inara had taught her. They were all waiting for an answer: Eitan, Bai, the other woman. She could feel all eyes on her, and there was only one thing to say. "Certainly. I'd enjoy that very much."



"Where's Zoe?" Quinn said, as they stepped off the dance floor.

"What? She was..." Inara looked around rapidly, eyes scanning for Zoe. "Right here."

"Relax." Bai Lin seemed to simply materialize behind them. "She's hardly come to any harm. She simply decided to avail herself of one of our most gifted teachers."

"*What?*" Quinn's face was aghast.

"I beg your pardon, but I'm not sure I'm following your meaning," Inara said, more delicately.

"Classes. That is what we do here, Miss Serra. We train novices. Perhaps you've been away from us for too long if that's escaped your mind. Eitan offered to lead her in a special workshop. Such a lucky girl."

"*Eitan?*" Inara demanded, aghast.

"Did someone call me?" Eitan strolled up, adjusting his collar. He bore an expression of extreme amusement, and seemed very pleased with himself.

"Where's Zoe?" Quinn demanded, losing a little of his polish.

"Oh, I believe she'll be along in a moment. It takes women a good bit longer to put themselves together, you know." Eitan was buttoning up a stray cuff with finicky care as he spoke.

"How delightful." Bai smiled at Inara. "We can all meet in the blue salon to discuss our transaction, once she's with us once more. I believe enough of the niceties have been observed."

"Splendid," Inara said, rather more sharply than usual. "We'll be along shortly." She hurried off without waiting for dismissal, Quinn in her wake.

"What do you think--?" Quinn began, agitated.

"I don't know," Inara said flatly, then spotted Zoe in the hallway. "Zoe! What happened? You were...they said you were..."

"They say a lot of things here," Zoe said coolly. Her hair was just slightly mussed, and Inara moved to adjust the pinning almost automatically.

"But...but you didn't. With him. I mean...no?" Quinn shot out, agitated and raking a hand through his hair. He looked very like Wash in that moment.

Zoe stepped closer to him. "You are my husband's brother. He likes you. That does not make you party to either my marriage or my conduct. Do you understand that?" Quinn nodded emphatically. "Good."

"Bai Lin's ready to negotiate for the Lassiter now. We're to meet her in the blue salon," Inara said. "Are you sure you're—"

"Fine, Inara. Come on. Let's get this job done."



"So you actually believe that I'm going to pay you your asking price. Tell me, is it just people from the Core that your captain thinks are naïve, or is it because I'm a woman?" Bai demanded with lazy amusement. They'd been negotiating for half an hour already, and Bai was stretched on one of the sofas, though her eyes and manner were wholly alert.

Inara sat in a heavy carved chair facing her, and Zoe stood behind her. "I'm hardly going to contradict your views on the captain. But that doesn't change the fact that we're not empowered to negotiate the price. It has been set," Inara said firmly. "Perhaps he thinks that we are too naïve to be trusted."

Bai gave a genuine laugh. "If only he knew," she said speculatively. "But I begin to think that if you aren't empowered to negotiate price, then perhaps you simply shouldn't be here. A price of eighty thousand in platinum, after all, ought at least to be discussed with an agent who can do more than simply follow orders."

Zoe's smile was tight and set. "A price of eighty thousand in platinum ought to be discussed with someone who can afford to pay it, to my way of thinking. If that isn't you, we can always leave."

"So uncompromising," Bai murmured, then sat up. "I'm tired of this. This chest contains seventy-five thousand in platinum. Now you can walk away at the end of the ceremonies with these boxes, or you can walk away with your white elephant. It's your decision. Do let me know which you think your captain would prefer." She moved to the table and poured herself a glass of shimmerwine.

Zoe sighed. "Very well, then. I suppose, considering the hospitality you've offered us, a discount could be acceptable." She held out her hand.

Bai crossed the room to shake it. "Apparently you are empowered after all. Perhaps Inara should be learning something from her... 'novice,' then."

"I don't think personal remarks are called for," Inara said, forcibly keeping calm. "We've both gotten what we wanted."

"Have we? I suppose so. I, in particular, have been fortunate enough to see first-hand what it was that Epoline was trying to mold into a house mistress." Bai laughed unpleasantly. "She was a fool."

Zoe's hand tightened on the back of Inara's chair, but Inara was apparently unruffled. "No one has ever called into question my abilities as a Companion. Perhaps it's been too long since you actually fulfilled the proper duties of one?"

"Oh, I know you're quite gifted. Graceful, talented, everything a companion should be. A shining star, really. And I imagine that's why no one's ever once told you the truth—you still believe in every suicide, don't you? You, a house mistress? I can't even begin to imagine the kind of chaos that would ensue. You don't have the savoir faire or the endurance to stomach how the Guild really works." Bai brushed her fingertips over Inara's cheek. "It's better this way," she said cruelly. "Truly."

Zoe had a pistol in her hand in record time. "Given this deal is done to the satisfaction of both, I think you might want to just leave now."

Bai Lin turned to her, predatory and eager. "My dear, I think you'd like to put that away. You don't want to end up back in an Alliance prison, do you? I thought you'd had your fill of those after the war...you've found something better, haven't you, thieving and murdering people? You wouldn't want such a rich and full life to be cut short..."

Zoe's eyes narrowed, and she reached down and unholstered the Lassiter from her thigh, then laid it carefully on the table. "Here. Go enjoy your rich and full life of making people hate your guts. We're done here." She turned and moved towards the door to open it and let Quinn and Eitan enter.

Inara rose from her seat. "I think Zoe is quite right." She glanced at Quinn, who was looking very anxious. "Quinn, can you help Zoe get the chest to our rooms safely?" At his nod, she gave him a gracious smile, then left with as much speed as her grace would permit.

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"Are you all right?" Quinn asked cautiously, following as Zoe carried the chest of platinum to her suite.

"Dandy," Zoe said coolly. "Getting paid's always a good thing."

Quinn sighed. "Zoe, I get that you're not a big talker, and I can respect that. But you've put me in a position where...well, where I can't look into my brother's eyes. And that's not exactly something I can handle, you know? We're close."

There was a long silence, while Zoe turned over the events in her mind, and realized that Quinn did, in fact, have some right to reassurance. "If I tell you that nothing happened, are you gonna take my word for it?"

"Yes. I figure anyone who talks as little as you do probably doesn't lie much. It's usually a good rule of thumb."

She gave a short, curt nod. "Fine. Nothing happened. We ended up sparring a little, I tossed him on his back, and we came back to the party. Satisfied?" Her face was closed off, with no way to tell whether she was speaking truth or lies.

"Yeah. I just...it worried me, you know? It must kill Wash, you leading this kind of life. He's always been a pretty peaceful guy. Gentle, you know?"

Zoe hesitated a little at that, then fell back so that she was walking beside Quinn. "Let's see...either my husband's been airing his marital problems to you, or else you're psychic."

Quinn laughed softly. "Trust me, Zoe, Wash has never said one word about you that makes him sound even like a sane human being, let alone unhappy." A small shrug. "But he's my brother, and I know him. That's how it works, right?"

Zoe thought of her sister briefly, and her face shut down a bit. "Maybe. Some families, I guess."

"Oh, well. Speaking as another portion of your family, may I ask how Wash took to the idea of you doing this particular job? I can't imagine him being thrilled about it."

"Your imagination's not particularly faulty," Zoe sighed. "He wasn't best pleased."

"Fight?" His voice was sympathetic.

"Kinda," Zoe said, still guarded.

He nodded. "But you've probably faced this before, this line of work. The two of you presumably make up afterwards, right?" They had reached the suite, and Quinn helpfully unlocked the door, as Zoe's hands were occupied with the chest.

A little smile crossed Zoe's face as she stashed the box under her bed. "That we do." She raised an eyebrow at him. "In a way that I am *not* going to discuss with you."

Quinn laughed, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Understood."

Zoe was quiet for a minute, then spoke again. "There is one thing might help, though," she mused, standing up and brushing off her hands.

"And that would be?"

Zoe smiled and reached for her purse. "You know anywhere on this planet sells slinky dresses?"

He grinned, guileless and seductive all at once. "Sister, do I ever."



"Inara." The voice was soft, but urgent, and moving closer. It was disturbing the perfect peace of the gardens to which she'd retreated. "Inara!"

Inara finally lifted her head, her face calm and unreadable once more. Then, on seeing who was approaching her, her expression changed to surprise. "*Sheydra*?"

"Hi." Sheydra sat down next to her on the bench, taking a moment to tilt her head back and look up at the sky. "I thought I might find you out here."

"Am I so predictable?" Inara asked with a smile.

"No, these parties are. I think they make most of us ache to sneak away." Sheydra stretched her legs briefly in front of her to admire her dancing slippers, then turned to look at Inara. "I heard that you're coming to Highgate, to the training house."

"Yes. It's...a nice compromise between the two worlds, don't you think?" Inara reached out, catching the hand of her old friend for comfort.

"I certainly do. Particularly as I'm running the house now." Sheydra's eyes danced with laughter.

"You—when did this happen?" Inara asked, squeezing her hand tightly to convey that this was good news.

"Just recently. You know how it is with succession ceremonies of this size. Everyone gets jostled around to fill empty spaces. I got sent to Highgate."

"Sheydra..." Inara lifted her head and smiled broadly. "If I tried to convey to you even a particle of how happy that makes me..."

"You would fail horribly, I'm sure. So," Sheydra said, with a rather deliberate casualness, "was there any particular reason that you came out here tonight?"

Inara shook her head. "Bai Lin. She's an art of looking for the best place to put the knife, and doing it, wholly for amusement."

"So...she brought up your mother?"

"Good guess. It seems you know the best place as well," Inara teased.

"Through intimacy, not unscrupulous guesswork."

"She said Mother ought to have known I hadn't the—how did she put it?—endurance or savoir faire to make a house mistress," Inara said, sighing. Even so, just Sheydra's presence had eased the tightness in her chest.

"I shouldn't have thought your endurance was in question. Shall I go correct her?" Sheydra demanded blandly.

"You're terrible!" Inara laughed. "No, I don't think you need do that, but perhaps you can give me passage back to Highgate in a few days' time, once the negotiations I've been doing are wholly complete?"

Sheydra smiled at her, warm and luminous. "Inara, believe me that it will be my pleasure."



Two days later, the ceremony was complete, and all shuttles were cleared for takeoff. Zoe carried the chest of platinum back towards the shuttle, with Inara beside her. "You sure this woman'll get you where you need all right? It'd be no trouble for Serenity to pass by—"

"Sheydra is an old friend, Zoe," Inara said. "She'll take me there in perfect safety, I assure you. Besides, one horrible farewell scene was quite sufficient."

"Don't reckon I can argue with that." They reached the shuttle, and Zoe stowed the money with a sigh of relief. "Won't breathe easy till I get that back to the captain."

"Neither will he, I imagine," Inara said wryly. She leaned forward to kiss Zoe on the cheek. "Give everyone my love."

"Will do. Want me to—" Zoe broke off as she saw a shadowy form approaching behind Inara. It took a moment for her eyes to pick out the figure in the gloom, and then she saw who it was. "Oh, Lordy. What does he—" She broke off as she saw moonlight glinting off polished steel. In one fast, ruthless movement, she knocked Inara down and out of the knife's glittering, deadly path.

Unfortunately, that left her directly *in* the knife's path, and it ripped down the length of her arm, slicing the fine silk of her kimono and leaving a dripping trail of blood in its wake. Zoe didn't take the time to focus on the pain, however, just flung her head back. This was why she was there.

Eitan was silent as he squared off against Zoe, his refined face a mask of determination. Zoe dodged fast as he feinted again at her with the knife, wishing to hell she had her piece on her hip instead of stowed away somewhere because they'd thought themselves safe. This was not safe.

"Inara, stay down!" Zoe dodged a few more feints, watching his eyes the whole time. He was marking her movements carefully, judging and measuring as she jumped right each time, away from Inara. She waited until she could see the calculation in his eyes, then waited, perched on the balls of her feet, for his final rush.

She didn't dodge this time, but he, anticipating another movement to the right, veered in that direction. It made it quite easy to grab his arm and snap it behind him, a crunch of cartilage assuring her of his shoulder's dislocation as the knife fell harmlessly to the ground.

All the same, he wheeled around fast, and Zoe took a hard blow to the jaw before she had a chance to react. A kick to the back of his knees, however, weakened his footing enough that Zoe was able to get properly behind him, one arm hard across his chest, the other catching at his head. He was fighting hard now, snarling and kicking, but couldn't dislodge her. His lips parted, teeth showing, all veneer of sophistication now gone. "You were a terrible—"

With one swift movement, Zoe snapped his neck, cutting off the rest of his sentence forever. "Yeah, you too," she muttered, as she let the body drop to earth with a sick thud. She turned to help Inara up. "You all right?"

"Fine. I can't believe Bai Lin had the gall to send her own assistant. She must have thought we'd be very easy prey. Do you think—"

"I think I best get out of here," Zoe said immediately. "Once the money's gone, there's no reason for her to try anything. Though you might want to watch yourself until you leave."

Inara nodded. "Don't worry about me." She kissed Zoe's cheek once more. "Go on. I'll be fine."

Zoe smiled briefly. "Good luck, Inara." With that, she stepped into the shuttle, closing it up in a hurry, and waiting only until Inara had stepped back to lift off. Her view of the shuttle dock faded as she left behind Santo, the only sign of her presence there a beautiful, broken body sprawling on the ground



Mal was waiting outside the shuttle door when she returned, and they exchanged sudden, impulsive grins. "Flew all night just to get back, huh? They not have proper beds there?"

"Morning, sir. And I'm afraid not. Not one of those beds seemed to have my husband in it," she quipped, smiling.

"You bring your cranky old captain a big bag of money?" Not that he really had to ask—it was clear that the deal had gone through clean. "You'd better. Just spent 'most everything we had acquiring a few new armaments. Space station off of Ibis has a nice selection."

"Box, actually." She pointed at it through the shuttle door. "Counted it twice. Bitch only haggled us down to seventy-five thousand, can you believe? Mind, I do believe she thought she'd be getting it back," Zoe said, her face grim.

Mal shook his head. "These core folk have too gorram much money, and I am...so pleased to take it from them. Good job," he said, clapping her on the shoulder.

She was about to thank him when she was very nearly knocked down by her husband running in from the cockpit. "Hey, there. You miss me, then?"

"She asks if I missed her!" Wash threw his arms around her, holding her tight. "No more going away for a while, baby, okay?"

"That sounds very okay," she whispered against his hair, returning the embrace.

They descended to their quarters, Wash carrying her bag, Zoe carrying one very specially made purchase on Santo. "Your brother's a piece of work, you know that?" she said, sitting down on the bed.

"I do, in fact, but I'm sorry you had to learn it so quickly. He didn't try and hit on you, did he?" Wash demanded.

"Technically...yes," Zoe said, laughing. "But I think you'll forgive him in a minute. Man has good taste. Close your eyes."

Wash closed his eyes obediently, despite not wanting to stop looking at Zoe for a single instant after her absence. "What am I not looking at?"

Zoe opened the box from the dress shop, pushing aside the tissue paper. "Open your eyes and see."

Wash opened his eyes, then gave a delighted grin. "Oh, baby. Oh, *baby*."

She smiled at him, her face warm and relaxed at his pleasure. "Wasn't one minute in that place I wasn't thinking about you and wishing you were there."

Anything else she might have had to say was lost in his mouth on hers, all tension disappeared in a rush of desire and affection.

A moment later, the box was knocked to the floor, but neither seemed to notice in the least.