Summary

What if River had disappeared off Serenity after the events of "Objects in Space"? How would the crew react to a grown up and mostly sane River 4 years later?

Notes

Just a random thought that kind of snowballed. I loved the idea River regaining some control over her mind and abilities, and being able to show the crew what she's truly capable of, and it kind of went from there. Started writing this years ago, took forever to actually complete it.

So, yeah. Let me know what you think!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Prologue: Four years ago.

Propping the small capture up on the flight console on the bridge, River positioned herself in the co-pilot chair, directly in front of the capture. Taking a deep breath and pressing a button on the side of it, the crazy genius began her last correspondence with the crew of the Firefly transport, Serenity.

_It is an old cliché to start how I am, but it will have to do. Captain, by the time you find this capture, I will no longer be onboard. You will find Shuttle 2 at the Eavesdown Docks on Persephone, it is registered under the name of Captain Harbatkin._ River paused and took a deep breath, before continuing. _The reason I am leaving is simple; it is safer for all, especially yourselves. The blue hands will never stop looking for me… I was their prized subject. Simon, you did your best, but you cannot fix what I am. Captain, you were correct in what you surmised about me, the night that Early came on board. I am an assassin and a reader. It is what I was trained for, broken for… She closed her eyes, fighting for calm, for sanity. Simon, try not to be too much of a boob. Don’t push Kaylee away, she is good for you. Captain, I will not tell you not to look for me, because I know you will not listen. But you will not find me; I am very good at disappearing when I need too. Thank you for taking us on board and keeping us safe, even when I brought nothing but trouble and danger. Wash and Zoe; love is the strongest bond there is. Remember that and all else will be fixed in the end. Kaylee; Simon is a boob. He will say and do boob things. But if you can work past that, he will make you happy. Book; some secrets should remain so. Inara; thank you for your many kindnesses. Jayne, please continue protecting this crew, they are family, even if you do not want to admit it. And do not punish yourself for Ariel, I knew and forgave you long ago. Be safe in all endeavours. Goodbye…_

Taking a last deep breath, River stopped the recording and stood up, moving the capture over to Wash’s console and leaving it there, tucked safely between his beloved dinosaurs. Touching the plastic objects gently, she whispered, _“Keep them safe, Serenity.”_ Reaching out with her mind, she made sure the crew were all still asleep as she locked them all in their bunks. Walking silently to the passenger dorms, she locked Simon in his quarters, before retrieving her few possessions from her own room. Moving out into the bay, she locked Inara’s shuttle as well, reprogramming it to unlock again in 5 hours. She had done the same with the rest of the crew. Taking one last look around the bay, the young genius moved into Shuttle 2, disembarked and headed for Persephone.

Once there, she registered the shuttle under the name she had given the Captain. Glancing around Eavesdown Docks, she made sure that no one was watching her, before hefting her pack up on her shoulder. Turning away, she moved forward and disappeared into the crowd on the Docks.
Memories

Chapter Notes

I have this whole thing written, and I will try to post at least one chapter a day, but no promises... Let me know what you think!

Chapter 1: Four years later.

Mal sighed as he shifted in Wash’s pilot chair. How the man sat up here for hours on end without getting stiff, he would never know. He sighed again when he remembered his reason for being up here; checking their progress as they headed towards Persephone. The ship was powered down for artificial night, and the crew were all still in bed, but Mal was unable to sleep. The reason being why they were headed to Persephone in the first place; River Tam had disappeared from there four years ago. Though he hadn’t watched it in months, Mal could still recall near ‘nough the entire contents of the capture she had left them, propped up on the console with Wash’s dinosaurs. The revelations she had shared in that recording had damn near broke the doc when he’d heard them. ‘They’d been a pretty heavy blow to the rest of the crew, too,’ he mused.

Mal jumped at a sudden beeping, signaling an incoming wave.

“Fei fei de piyan!” He cursed as he righted himself in his chair and moved to receive the wave.
“Renci de fozu,” he muttered as he stared at the face on the screen.

“I’m sorry to startle you Captain, but I wished to speak with you.” River Tam stared at him through eyes clearer than the captain could ever remember seeing them.

“Really? Woulda thought that would be somethin’ more appropriate to be doin’ some four years ago, little witch.” The old nickname came out unconsciously, taking some of the bite out of his statement. She nodded seriously in response.

“Perhaps, but explanations would not have been optimally received at that time.”

“And they will now?” Mal’s skepticism showed in his voice, as well as his face.

“Would be better now,” was all she said. Then with a deep breath, she continued, “Captain, if I am correct in my calculations, based on past behavioral patterns, you are now on your way to Persephone are you not?” Mal raised an eyebrow at this, surprised by her guess, if it was a guess. Again, memory of the capture floated back into his mind, he pushed it away in irritation.

“Now how would you be knowing that, little witch?”

“Every 5 months, for the past four years, you have been coming back to Persephone hoping for word of my whereabouts.” She stated confidently.

“Now how do you figure we’re goin’ there for you?” The captain asked, attempting to cover his shock at her statement. The genius gave him her patent “you’re a boob” look that she usually reserved for Simon.

“You have watched the capture, Captain, you know what I am. It has been 4 months, 29 days, 12
“Wo de ma. You sound like you’re keepin’ tabs on us, little River.” He tried to look stern to cover that fact that he was still shocked over her continuing revelations that were, as Jayne would say, starting to give him an ‘uncomfortableness’. He continued before she could say anything. “Now what was it you were wanting to speak with me about?”

“Not just you, Captain. If you, and they, will allow it, I would like to speak to the whole crew. I am on Persephone right now and can meet you wherever and whenever you would prefer.”

“Your brother was mighty broken up at your disappearance, little witch, little Kaylee, too. If your bein’ back temporarily is going to make them upset again, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

River nodded seriously, “I understand; that is one of the things I wish to speak with you about. I would like to come back, if it is permissible.”

Mal was silent for a few minutes, deliberating on everything that had been said. Finally he sighed and nodded. “Alright, little witch. Meet us on the Eavesdown Docks in 6 hours time. We got some things to be doing before then.”

A smile broke out on River’s face, the first this entire conversation. Mal marveled at the way it brightened her serious face. “Xie xie, Captain. I will see you when you arrive.” The connection cut and Mal was left staring at the blank screen. Turning it off, he got up and hit the com above his head. “This is the Captain; I want everyone in the mess in 15 minutes.” With one last glance at their flight plan, he made his way down to the mess. He figured making coffee would make everyone a mite less crotchety about being woken up earlier than planned.

Fifteen minutes later, his crew began to filter in. Zoe was first, of course, Wash not far behind her after a detour to check the bridge. Close behind the couple came Kaylee, Jayne and Simon. Kaylee, her indefatigable cheerfulness fully in place, was grinning as she watched the two men quietly bicker about who knew what. Even after three years of their odd semi-friendship, Mal was still amazed by the change in his merc and the doctor. Even more amazing was that Jayne had instigated the change. On the one year anniversary of River’s disappearance, Simon had gotten more moody that usual and had been snapping at everyone for days. Finally, Jayne had gotten sick of it. He’d grabbed the doc, yelled that they were going out and would be back in the morning, yanked the younger man out the bay doors and had disappeared into the crowd of people on the go-se planet they were parked on before anyone could say a word. Mal still wasn’t entirely sure what all happened that night, but they had stumbled back into the bay late the next morning, grinning, hung-over and disheveled. They were also both sporting some cuts and bruises. Neither had more than hinted as to the events of the night; a bar fight, lots of drinking, a whore or two and some storytelling, but they had evidently started to patch the wide rift that had existed between them since the Tams had first come on board. They still fought, but it was obvious that it was more for fun now, rather than to be deliberately cruel.

As they all sat down, Mal couldn’t help but look at the empty chairs that had been occupied by River, Book and Inara. Inara, refusing to change her earlier decision, had left about 3 months after River. Book, deciding that there were others more in need of his guidance than those onboard Serenity, requested to be dropped on the planet of Haven close to a year after Inara left. The substantially smaller crew had been very subdued for a good while after, Kaylee especially. She had lost her closest friends onboard within a few months of each other. Mal could still remember the way she had sobbed when Inara said goodbye; it damn near broke her heart to watch the Companion leave. Damn near broke his too, but that weren’t something he was admitting to anyone, even
himself most days.

“Cap’n?” Mal started, and looked around in surprise to see his crew all looking at him in curiosity and varying degrees of annoyance. He wondered briefly how long he’d been lost in thought.

“Right, well I just got a wave which affects us all, and our plans on Persephone.” He paused, unsure how to say it, before deciding on bluntness. “The wave was from River…” He wasn’t able to get any further as the mess was filled with loud voices, loudest being the doc’s.

“Where is she? Is she alright? What’s happened?” Simon was nearly beside himself with anxiety at word from his mei mei.

“Bi ziu! Doc, sit down!” Mal nearly shouted at him. When the younger man reluctantly complied, Kaylee tugging on his hand, the Captain continued with what he had been trying to say. “Now, little River is currently on Persephone and has requested a meeting with us all. We are ‘bout 4 hours out from the planet, I’ve told her to meet us in 6. Till then, its business as usual, dong ma? Zoe and I will meet with Badger; see about getting us another job. Jayne, stock us up on ammunition. Wash, get us fueled up. Little Kaylee, you and Simon are doing the shopping. Doc, it appears that the cortex is still clear of new warrants, but keep yer head down anyway. There are still those who might not remember that you’re no longer worth a whole lot of money.”

About 2 years back, the warrants for the fugitives Simon and River Tam had inexplicably disappeared off the cortex. The cortex was always checked before hitting atmo of whatever planet they were headed for, but so far, they kept coming up clean. It appeared that the Alliance had somehow lost interest in the Tam siblings. Mal couldn’t help wondering, and Zoe had shared his suspicions when asked, whether River had had something to do with the warrants being taken off. He still remembered her words from the capture; “they will never stop looking for me.” If that were so, then there were only a few things that could account for the Alliance halting their search. The Captain hadn’t mentioned these options to the doc, not wanting to upset him, though he imagined the other man had already thought of them, top 3 percent and all. He was probably just refusing to acknowledge them.

Finished giving orders, Mal got up and with Kaylee’s assistance, made breakfast for the crew. They ate quickly, before spreading out across the ship. Kaylee went down to the engine room to check on her girl and get her ready to break atmo. Mal, Wash and Zoe disappeared up to the bridge, while Jayne and Simon made their way down to the cargo bay. Not long after the Shepherd had left, Simon had taken his place lifting weights with Jayne. The two men had discussed all manner of things while they were lifting, including Ariel and River’s departure.

“Why do you think she wants to talk to us? It’s been 4 years, why didn’t she come back sooner?” Simon questioned as he took his place by Jayne’s head as the merc settled himself on the weight bench.

“Dunno, doc. Maybe she weren’t able to get away ‘fore now. Or she just found us and wanted to let us know that she ain’t dead. Could be all manner o’ things.”

“Maybe…” The doctor mused, his minds turning over all the possibilities he could think of. They kept mostly silent for the rest of the trip into Persephone. In fact, the whole ship was nearly silent, each person aboard caught up in their own thoughts and memories of the last 4 years. And in thoughts of the erstwhile crew member they had lost, who might now, finally, be coming home.
Reunion and Storytelling

Chapter Summary

The crew and River finally reunite and she tells them a bit about what she's been up to for the last few years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

River watched the achingly familiar Firefly land in the distance from the window of her hotel room. She watched until it had set down, before turning away. ‘What to do now?’ She pondered. She had two hours until the scheduled meeting, and she was not sure how to occupy herself. Sighing, she double-checked that all of her belongings were packed away and nothing had been left out. The one small satchel that she had carried off Serenity had morphed, over the intervening years, into two large duffel bags; all that she owned in the world resided inside them. Seeing that everything was ready, the genius sat on the small bed and went back to her earlier train of thought; how to tell the crew of Serenity what she had been up to in the last 4 years, and just how much to tell. She agonized over that for a good half-hour, stopping only when she was interrupted by someone knocking on her door. Startled, she looked up and reached out with her mind, testing the presence on the other side. When the person was recognized as familiar, River smiled and called, “Qing jin.”

She then stood and embraced the woman who entered. The blonde haired newcomer returned the hug eagerly.

“I was wanting to see you before you left, hoped I’d get the chance to say goodbye.” The taller woman smiled at her dark haired friend. “It’s gonna be weird not having you around anymore, Riv. We all got so used to bein’ together…”

River smiled. “I’m not going away forever, Kaen. We can always meet on some planet, more likely the Rim, than the Core, though. Anyway, it’s not even decided if I’ll be allowed back on Serenity.”

“Of course you will! You told me yourself that they never stopped looking for you…”

“Well yes, but they don’t know yet what I have done. They may not want me on board when they do.” Kaen snorted inelegantly.

“And if’n they don’t, then they’re a bunch a ruttin’ hundans And if that’s the case, which I doubt, then you just wave me and Yuri, and we’ll come a running to get you!” River laughed, she knew that Kaen and Yuri would do exactly that, if she asked them to. It lessened her anxiety some, to know that she had such loyal friends somewhere in the ‘verse.

The two young women continued to chat, enjoying their last moments together. Kaen retold many happy and funny stories, deftly keeping River’s mind from straying back to the impending meeting. When it came time to leave, Kaen walked to the edge of the Docks with River, and bid her friend goodbye there.

“Take care of yourself, and remember, never let them make you feel that you are less than you are, that you’ve done wrong with the choices you have made. You and I both know that ain’t true.”
River nodded, hugged her friend once more and began to walk towards Serenity, her two bags clutched tightly in her hands.

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All had gone well so far; Badger had a new job for them that looked like it might be a good take, there had been no problems with getting the things they needed before retaking to the Black, and so with 30-odd minutes until River was supposed to arrive, the crew found themselves hovering in the bay, somewhat at loose ends.

Jayne was on his weight bench, half-heartedly pumping a few weights to kill the time. He felt restless, ill at ease and he weren’t entirely sure why. It was only the moonbrain coming back, weren’t that important, not to him anyway. The same couldn’t be said for the 2 crewmembers sitting on the walks above him. The doc had been worrying himself almost sick that last few hours, and by the sounds of little Kaylee’s constant soothing murmurs, he was still doing so. Jayne could understand the younger man’s anxiety; he hadn’t seen or heard from his little sister in 4 years and the last any of them saw of her, she was still nuttier than a gorrarn fruit cake. Buddha knew what the moonbrain had gotten herself into in that time. The merc shook his head, that last weren’t entirely fair; she’d handled Early well enough. And she’d seemed reasonably sane on the capture of her leave-taking. He reminded himself to be nice to her when she got there, and if she came back on board. As uptight and Core as her brother still was, the doc had gained Jayne’s respect in the past few years and he liked the other man. So he’d be nice to the moonbr… to River, for Simon’s sake. Plus, little Kaylee always smiled at him when he was actually nice, so he figured it wouldn’t do not harm. Jayne listened to the quiet conversations coming from above him and the stairs at the far end of the bay, where Zoe and Wash sat. Mal stood on the upper catwalks, quietly watching the bay doors, a frown on his face. ‘Likely thinking on Nara,’ Jayne decided. That expression on the captain’s face usually indicated thoughts about the Companion.

A loud, obnoxious male voice could be heard just outside the ship, interrupting the thoughts of the crew. “Piaoliang de xiaojie, ni gu wo he ni xianghao! Wo hui rong ni shengkai ru hua…”

A closer female voice, startling in its familiarity answered the loudmouth. “Wo dui ni bu wen bujian!” River Tam called back, insolent and mildly mocking, as she came into view. “Dirty liumang,” she muttered loudly as she walked up the ramp and paused at the entrance of the bay, setting down her bags. Looking around, she noticed the rather pole-axed expressions on the faces of the crew. She frowned and quirked an eyebrow at her brother, silently asking what the problem was, but he was just as bad as the rest.

‘Gorram, she grew up good.’ Was the first thing that popped into Jayne’s head. He immediately pushed it back; remembering that the girl in question was a reader and her brother was his frie… his liftin’ partner and sittin’ right above him. Unwanted or not, the merc had to acknowledge that the thought was true, though. She had filled out and standing there in clothes that actually fit with that long hair of hers pulled neatly back, instead of hanging in her eyes, she looked all kinds of grown up. The rest of the crew were having similar problems trying to reconcile the 21 year old woman in front of them with the 17 year old girl who’d left them. Simon stared at his little mei mei, he’d never seen her dressed like she was. She looked like a slightly disturbing combination of Zoe and Jayne; a tight leather vest and loose cargo pants, there was even a gun strapped to her thigh! Simon wasn’t sure he wanted to know when and why his little sister had started carrying a gun. He saw her eyes travel upwards towards Mal.
“Permission to come aboard, captain?” There was the little sister he knew; the slightly impish look in her eyes was very familiar to Simon. He heard a snort, which could have been from Jayne, but he wasn’t sure.

“C’mon in, River.” You could hear the slight smile in the captain’s voice. “Everyone in the mess, this’ll be best sorted out there. Jayne, close ‘er up.” Nodding, the big man stood up and crossed the bay. Brushing by River, who was just picking up her bags again, he glanced down.

“D’you need a hand with those?” He asked casually, attempting to make it seem like an indifferent and offhand offer.

She smiled and shook her head. “I have carried them much further than the distance from the cargo bay to the mess. But thank you,” she added hastily, not wanting to be impolite when Jayne was being unexpectedly nice. He shrugged, hit the button to close the bay doors and turned to leave, River trailing behind him. By the time they reached the mess, the rest of the crew were already seated, with the exception of Simon. Mal noted that River’s eyes also swept over the empty chairs, as his own were wont to do. He also noted that there was no shock or confusion as to why there were 2 empty chairs besides her own, but that revelation could wait until later.

“Alright now, River, I do believe you have some story-telling to be doing.” Mal folded his arms across his chest and used his best “captain-y” voice in an attempt to compel her into revealing all. He was, however, ignored. River was staring at her brother, a mixture of joy, love and shy uncertainty on her face. Similar expressions were mirrored in Simon’s face.

“Ni hao, ge ge.” She said formally, patiently awaiting her brother’s reaction. Still too stunned by her reappearance and her altered look to speak, he simply stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug.

“Ni hao, mei mei.” He whispered, a small smile on his face. She was back; she was real and safe and in his arms. It was all he could think about.

To those watching River specifically, it could be seen that she flinched and stiffened slightly when her brother touched her, before she relaxed into him. Jayne, being one of the ones watching her, noticed the reaction with a small frown. Why would the girl flinch away from her own brother? That didn’t make no sense. To him, her relaxing looked more like something she made herself do, rather than something voluntary. He shrugged that thought away, he wasn’t a real good reader of body language, he tended to prefer the more obvious signs of people’s intentions; like a gun being cocked, or a knife drawn. Mal and Zoe, also watching the new arrival carefully, noticed the flinch as well, but were no closer to understanding its origin than Jayne was. Sure she’d always been skittish around people, but wasn’t she s’posed to be past that now; all healed up or some such? Wash and Kaylee, neither very adept at reading body language, didn’t notice a thing, caught up as they were in their happiness that everything was apparently starting to right itself.

Pulling away from Simon, River looked around the room, examining each person carefully. There was a hidden anger, and even more deeply hidden pain, in Mal. Some old, carried from the Valley, some new and she knew the origin of that one as well; Inara. While she would have liked to ease that pain, she did not know how, and with what she had to tell, she would likely only increase it. Zoe and Wash appeared much the same, but there were signs of a new ease, a lessening of tensions between them that told the genius that they had finally worked out some of the kinks and trust issues that had been rampant in their marriage four years ago. She was glad for it. River turned her attention to Kaylee and felt a smile break out over her face. Simon was written everywhere in her; the colors that River associated in her head with individual personalities showing a blending of his cool blues and greys with Kaylee’s bright pinks and yellows. River smiled again, pleased that her
brother had evidently not been as obstinate and pig-headed as she had worried he might be. In him, too, she saw an easing. The Core-bred tightness that Simon had always displayed seemed to have finally been worn away a bit, leaving a happier, easier man in its wake. There was still undo worrying in him, most of it for her, she saw, but that was to be expected; Simon was a worrier by nature! Finally, her gaze rested on Jayne, and here she was surprised. He too had changed; looking carefully, she saw that the bright reds and oranges of his personality seemed to have mellowed somewhat, taking on smoother edges. It appeared that he had finally accepted the crew as family and had even, apparently, struck up a friendship with her brother. Of all the things River had noted since stepping foot back on Serenity, this was the most surprising. It was certainly not something she had expected or predicted, although she had briefly hoped for it.

Pulling away from her thoughts, River nodded a quiet hello to the room at large, a gesture that was returned by most parties. Deciding with a sigh that she couldn’t prolong this anymore, she turned to the captain.

“Where would you like me to start, Captain?”

Looking at her thoughtfully, Mal said, “I reckon the beginning’s as good a place as any.”

She nodded and sat in the empty chair beside her brother, Jayne sitting on her other side. The rest of the crew shifted in their seats; making themselves comfortable to hear her tale.

“It started when Early came,” she began. “It was one of the longest moments of clarity I had had in years. I knew he was there, what he wanted and what I needed to do to stop him.” Here she paused and eyed the captain. “Had you not pushed him out into space, I would have killed him when he came back onboard his ship. It is what my training dictates, to eliminate all threats without hesitation.”

She felt Simon stiffen in shock beside her, but ignored him as she continued on. “His arrival here was a wake-up call for me. I felt alive, aware in ways I hadn’t felt in months. I was finally able to gain some control over my own mind. Enough so to manipulate Early and get rid of him, and then to realize the necessity of leaving.” Here she was interrupted by the crew.

“Now River, there weren’t no reason to leave…”

“River you can’t believe that we would be better off without you, surely mei mei?”

“Why would you think that leaving was best? That doesn’t make sense…”

“You didn’t believe none of what you said to Early, did you? ‘Bout us bein’ better off without you?” Kaylee asked fearfully, guilty at the thought that she might have been part of the reason her friend had left.

River raised a hand, effectively stopping the protests and questions coming from everyone but Zoe and Jayne, who were quietly keeping their council. “Please, try not to react too much, it will slow the story-telling and I cannot push you out when your thoughts and emotions are so loud.” The reminder of her abilities and the implication that they were hurting her quieted the unsettled crew and they quietly waited for her to continue.

“Thank you,” she said, feeling her sudden headache ease a bit. She hadn’t been in such close proximity with so many unguarded minds for so long that she was unused to it now. She felt a brief temptation to dive into Jayne’s mind; it was always so sheltered and calm in there, she had hidden there more than once during her time on Serenity.
“As I said, I felt the need to leave. I saw the danger my presence repeatedly put you all in, the trouble I had caused. And I knew it would not stop. Early was the first of what would have been many bounty hunters, assassins or government operatives who would have tracked me down eventually. So I left.

“At first, I just wandered a bit, tried to sort out the mess in my mind. I ended up on Muir before anything significant happened. There I found some of what I’d been looking for and a few things I never expected…” She smiled ruefully and glanced down at her hands. “I found sanity, at least the start of it, and friends. Old friends, from the Academy.” Stunned silence met this proclamation, and she continued on, unhindered. “I was not the first student to escape, nor, as it turns out, the last. Nicos and Sia were the first to disappear; they were sent on a job together the year before Simon extracted me. Being sent on jobs in pairs was highly unusual and they took full advantage of that. I was the star pupil, but I was certainly not the most experienced. Both of them had dozens jobs and several years of training under their belts when they decided to escape. They disappeared so completely that the Alliance still had never even glimpsed them by the time I found them.” Pride tinged her voice, her friends were smart and had avoided trouble in a way she had been unable to do.

“Finding them was invaluable to me. As you know, the Academy stripped my limbic system, taking away the natural defenses in my mind. This is part of what made me crazy. Sia taught me how to rebuild those defenses, to make them stronger, nearly impenetrable. She taught me how to guard my mind against other psychics and how to control my reading of others. Nicos trained me in fighting. Much of my strength and lessons were worn away by the months of idleness, dementia and drugs here on Serenity. He helped me retrain my body for combat. I don’t know what I would have done without them.” Again she paused, looking at the crew. They were enthralled by her tale, though she noticed that Simon was feeling guilty again.

“You did what you could for me, Simon. There was nothing in your training at the Medicad that prepared you for dealing with a partially crazy psychic. You could not have known.”

Simon shook his head, staring at her. “Did – Did the drugs I gave you, things I did…. Did they help? Or did they just make everything worse.”

River was silent for a moment, weighing her desire to tell the true against the equally strong desire to not hurt her brother more than she already had. “The drugs didn’t help, no, but they didn’t usually hurt either. They couldn’t fix what I am, but they made you feel better, so I didn’t say anything.” She shrugged, there really wasn’t much more to than that.

Apparently it wasn’t enough, because Simon’s face went white and his eyes widened in shock and realization. She cut him off before he could say anything.

“You did what you thought was best, and it didn’t harm me seriously. This was all so long ago; please don’t make out to be bigger than it is, Simon. I got past it all a long gorram time ago.”

“To that there was no answer. As much as he would have liked to deny it, Mal knew that they would have done exactly what she said they would. It was rare that anything River had said was taken into account, foolish now in hindsight, given that she was a genius reader and all. With a short sigh, he
nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“Alright, River, what happened next?”

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Chinese Translations:

Qing jin – “Come in”

Hundan – “Bastard/jerk”

Piaoliang de xiaojie, ni gu wo ni xianghao! Wo hui rong ni shengkai ru hua… – “Pretty lady, hire me for the night and I’ll open you like a flower…”

Wo dui ni bu wen bujian! – “I neither see nor hear you”

Liumang – “Bastard”

Ni hao, ge ge – “Hello, big brother”

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Chapter End Notes

Reviews are love, feedback is bliss, constructive criticism is duly appreciated! -Druid
Chapter Summary

Aaand the rest of River's story!

“Alright, River, what happened next?”

River talked for hours, frequently interrupted by exclamations from her enthralled audience. She told them nearly everything she had seen and done in the past 4 years; nearly, but not all.

She told them of the 6 months spent training with Nicos and Sia, regaining and reshaping her sanity and her fighting abilities. The 9-odd months spent looking for the other escaped students, finding 11 of them in total, her two friends Kaen and Yuri among them; Kaen on Bellerophon and Yuri on Persephone. How they all spent close to a year planning an attack on the Academy. Shuddering in remembrance, the genius spoke of the harrowing journey they had taken during that time, in response to a long-awaited dream of hers. With Sia’s help in mastering precognition, she had unlocked the door to that important knowledge and using it, they had traveled through reaver-space to the forgotten planet of Miranda and retrieved the secret hidden there.

From there, they had made their next forceful move. River and Kaen had arranged a meeting with the Board of Directors of the Academy, telling them in no uncertain terms exactly what would happen if they did not disband the project within 2 weeks. Her voice tightly controlled, River divulged what had happened when the Directors had ignored their warnings; the very deliberate killings that had followed their refusal.

The genius described how, nearly three years after her initial disappearance, they put their plan into action and attacked the Academy. With careful detachment, she spoke of how she and her friends had attacked the Academy, burning it to the ground and killing as many as they could. She also told them of the heavy price they had paid for that victory.

“Fourteen of us went in, 5 came out. Nicos very nearly didn’t survive, neither did I…” Her hand fluttered to her stomach, fingers hovering for a moment before returning to the table. “We knew the dangers going in. We all decided that the end result was worth the price we would, and did, pay. None of us regret our choice.” Here she looked up at the crew, her gaze absolutely fierce, as though challenging them to tell her that she and her friends had done wrong. When no comments were forthcoming, she returned to her story.

The remaining 5 students had then met, barely healed, with some of the most powerful people in the Alliance government and had told them exactly had just happened and how, and what would happen if the program were ever restarted. They also warned of what could happen if the 5 of them, and Simon Tam, continued to be hunted as fugitives. Kaen, gifted with a form of telecoercion, facilitated the government officials with making their decision. Two days later, all warrants for the arrests of River and Simon Tam, Kaen Ling, Nicos Angelove, Yuri Hanyu and Dessia Draco disappeared from the cortex.

“Barely four days later, they retaliated.” She said quietly. “We were so tired, and very nearly
unprepared. We divided up, everyone going in separate directions, but not before we released the Miranda wave. Our own retribution,” she said, a faint smile on her face.

They had each spent nearly all of the next year being chased all over the ‘verse by the Alliance, who had apparently decided to deal with the 5 fugitives in secret this time. They saw each other a few times, meeting up briefly before escaping back to their personal bolt-holes, as the Alliance once again caught up with them.

“They chased us for months, before finally deciding that the continuing damage we were inflicting on them was not worth the effort of trying to catch the carriers of a secret that was already exposed to the universe as a whole. We finally saw each other again about 5 months ago; we stayed together for over two months, taking some much-needed rest and enjoying each others’ company, before I went off on my own again.”

“Where did you go?” Jayne asked, his voice slightly rusty with hours of disuse.

Her own voice nearly hoarse, River had smiled faintly and quietly finished her long tale. “I have spent most of the last 2 months with a dear, trusted friend. Her home is my safe haven and she has hidden and protected me there many times over the years. I owe her a great deal for her loyalty and bravery.

“I spent the last 2 weeks on Persephone, waiting for your arrival. I decided while staying with my friend that I wanted to come home, that I owed it to you all.”

It was Kaylee who first broke the silence following the ending of River’s tale. “Who was the friend ya stayed with?” River looked up at her old friend.

“You can’t guess? Any of you?” The crew shook their heads, collectively. Zoe had an inkling who it might have been, but she wasn’t about to voice it until River confirmed or refuted it. The younger woman’s next words proved her intuition correct.

“It was Inara; I hid at the Training House with her.” That brought on a variety of reactions. Mal’s head came up sharply, his hard eyes fixed on River, a dozen thoughts and emotions running through him at the mention of the beautiful Companion. Zoe merely smiled serenely, though she kept an eye on the captain, just in case. Kaylee squealed loudly and began asking rapid questions about the state of her absent friend. Jayne raised an eyebrow in mild surprise, his emotions carefully controlled and hidden, as they usually were. Wash shared in Kaylee’s excitement, while at the same time trying to emulate his wife’s stoicism, which didn’t really work the way he might have hoped. Simon barely reacted to that bit of news, still too caught up in the other events his suddenly not-so-little sister had shared. It was Jayne, surprisingly, that asked the next pertinent question.

“How is it you weren’t noticed? Ain’t Companions s’posed to be all smart n’ observant? Wouldn’t they have noticed a known fugie, all banged up n’ bloody most like, wandering ‘round their home?” Only River and Simon were not shocked by the merc’s insight. They had both discovered, in their own ways, that the older man was quite a bit smarter than he let on, however he might choose to act.

Smiling mischievously, River asked the table at large if they had heard of the Veiled Ones. Only Simon nodded. She explained who they were for the rest of the group. “The Veiled Ones are a very closed and exclusive religious order, made up entirely of women, who mainly reside on the central planets. Their vows include the wearing of a veil at all times and a peculiar vow of silence which is only in affect when they are out in public or in the presence of strangers.”

“But what does that have to do with you n’ Nara, n’ being at the Training House?” Kaylee asked, confused by the connection.
“I posed as a Veiled One whenever I was at the House. It was a very effective disguise; it prevented me from being recognized by face or voice and hid the wounds I usually had when I was there. Inara and I created an explanation of how we were childhood friends from before she entered House Madrassa and before I, supposedly, took orders. Very few people questioned it. I had a private room connected to Inara’s and I have spent many months there over the last few years, healing and recuperating from my fights with the Alliance. As I said, I owe her a great deal.”

“Mei mei, are you saying you pretended to be a Veiled Priestess, a federal offense, and spent months hiding from the Alliance in a Companion Training House?” Simon wasn’t sure how many more revelations he could take from River. Was there nothing she wouldn’t do?

River smiled sweetly and nodded. “Yes and yes. It was a very useful disguise and a perfect bolt-hole. Who would think to look for a fugitive in a place full of Alliance supporters?” There were some small murmurs of agreement, the crew had to agree that it seemed like a right smart plan, and apparently it had worked well for years.

Thoughts were interrupted when River abruptly stood.

“My purpose in once again revealing myself to you all was simple; I wish to come back on board. In what role, passenger or crew, is at your discretion. The most immediate dangers I posed for you have been eliminated, which was my original intent upon leaving. I will give you time now to decide whether you wish to have me back on board, and in what capacity. I may be found in the cargo bay when you have reached your decision.” Without another word, she gathered up her possessions and glided out the door.

Jayne was the first to move, breaking the stillness she had left in her wake. Moving into the kitchen, he pulled out a large jug of Kaylee’s inter-engine wine, as well as 6 mugs. Carrying them back over to the table he poured himself a healthy dose then slid the jug and the cups over to Simon. The mess was nearly silent as each person poured themselves a stiff drink. Several fortifying sips were taken before Mal decided to break the silence.

“Well, suppose we’d best get to makin’ our decision, since she’s waiting an’ all. Won’t say I’m entirely comfortable with what she told us, and what she ain’t, but I see no reason to keep her off. Zoe, what do you think?” He turned to his first mate and the person he trusted most in the ‘verse. She was silent for a long moment, before making her decision and weighing in.

“We let her back on. Anyone can see how much better she is now, than 4 years ago. She’s done some things might take some getting used to, but no different than I’d do in her place. She won’t harm us.”

The captain nodded, “reckon yer right. Wash?”

The fun-loving pilot looked unwontedly serious. “She’s done things we might not be comfortable with, but I can’t really blame her for them, she had a good reason. I’m in favour of her staying.” Wash turned to look at the mechanic sitting across the table from him. “Kaylee?”

“I missed her, Cap’n, be nice to have her back on board. Everything else will work out shiny.” She beamed her 100-watt smile at the crew, her optimism firmly in place. All eyes turned to the unusually silent doctor sitting beside her.

“I will admit that some of what she said disturbs me greatly, but she’s my sister and I love her. And I’ve missed her.” The crew watched the final member, who was toying idly with his mug of wine, waiting for his decision. What he said surprised those who were still of the opinion that Jayne hated River as much as he used to hate Simon.
“Ain’t no one here can blame her for the things she’s done. She had a right, and they had it comin’. Don’t think anyone here will disagree with that.” That said, he nodded his answer to the captain and drained his mug.

“Alright then, I’ll go tell our little witch that she can stay on board.” Mal pushed away from the table and left the mess, Zoe a few steps behind him. The remaining 4 looked at each other for a moment, before getting up and hurrying after the two soldiers.

Still feeling a slight headache from dealing with the crew’s uncontrolled emotions, River settled herself on the floor in the middle of the bay. Using a conglomerate of meditation techniques learned from Inara and Sia and specifically geared towards dealing with her psychic abilities, she sank down into her own mind, loosening her awareness of the outside world. With the utmost patience, she reorganized the thoughts and memories in her head, separating the ones that were hers from the ones belonging to the crew and to the man who had propositioned her outside the ship. She sifted briefly through the ones from the crew, picked up accidentally from when their emotions ran high, and finding nothing crucial and in need of keeping, she expelled them from her mind. This was a technique she and Sia had spent weeks creating and perfecting, basing it loosely on psychic exercises once used at the Academy. It was hard and had required a great deal of concentration and effort; thankfully she had become quite adept at using it since then.

Once her organizing was done, River focused on calming and centering herself, as she allowed her mind to slowly drift back upwards into awareness. It was at this point that the crew arrived in the cargo bay, watching her as she sat in perfect stillness. Jayne, watching her closer than he had any business doing, knew the moment she sensed them there above her; her shoulders tensed slightly and her head cocked to the side, a gesture he inexplicably recognized from years ago.

Mal motioned for the crew to remain up on the walks as he made his way down to the girl now rising to her feet, alert and patiently awaiting the verdict. He frowned as he caught a glimpse of something on her bared stomach as she raised her arms and stretched lightly. It looked very much like the tail-end of a ruttin’ nasty scar, and he wondered briefly what had caused it and when she had gotten it.

“Crews’ decided you can stay on, little River, though I s’pose you already knew that.”

“Don’t read minds anymore, captain, not unless I need to. I learned control over my abilities.” She reminded him gently. “And thank you. Where will I be staying?”

Mal opened and closed his mouth a few times; he hadn’t really planned that out yet. The doc was all but living in Kaylee’s bunk, so the passenger rooms were all empty. He wasn’t sure, though, if she would want to stay down there by herself. Before he could reach a decision, River made it for him.

“If it is permissible to you captain, I will take over the rental of Inara’s old shuttle.”

“What – mei mei, do you have the money for renting the shuttle? Captain, how much…” Simon was more or less ignored as Mal and River eyed each other.

“Perhaps if you were to lower the rent, I could pay you half out of pocket and work the rest off as a crew member? Would that satisfy?” Mal thought a moment, and then nodded. Really, there weren’t no reason for her to not live in the Companion’s old shuttle; weren’t like he was waiting for the space’s original tenant to come back. Nope, no reason at all.

River watched the captain’s internal struggle with knowing eyes, before deciding to do them all a favor. Really, she was tired of watching Inara pretend that she found life at the Training House
fulfilling, and she could see that she would quickly tire of Mal’s constant denial of his true feelings.

“If you were to ask her, I’m sure she would like to come back.” That said she turned and walked away. Passing the crew on the catwalks, she smiled at them before disappearing inside her new home.
"Ducking and weaving, dancing with her shadow and her imagination, the genius assassin fought an invisible foe, her body moving fluidly, her eyes still closed."

In which Jayne comes across River in the cargo bay, while the rest of the ship sleeps.

Jayne walked quietly through the sleeping ship, towel over his shoulder, intent on having a bit of a workout before going to bed. However, he found when he reached the bay, that he had been preempted in its use. They were a week out of Persephone and he still found himself watching her closer than what was right. The mercenary didn't know what it was about her that he found so distracting, but somehow River Tam had been catching his eye far more than necessary. And now here she was, interrupting his intended workout. He could bring himself to be too annoyed though, not when she was doing what she was doing.

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River had been restless, pacing the confines of the shuttle. She wasn’t use to set sleeping patterns anymore, or so little activity, and even the lingering smells of incense and Inara couldn’t calm her. Finally giving up on sleeping, she had grabbed a few items and gone out into the bay.

Taking up a pose in the middle of the bay, she had closed her eyes, centered herself and begun a dance that was as familiar to her as breathing was to others. First without the sword, and then in a graceful twist away from an imaginary opponent, she had swept the blade up and brought it into play. Ducking and weaving, dancing with her shadow and her imagination, the genius assassin fought an invisible foe, her body moving fluidly, her eyes still closed.

This was how Jayne found her when he came out into the cargo bay and he couldn’t tear his eyes away. This was what he had always sensed, had glimpsed in her back when she was still crazy; the danger and the grace that were as much a part of her then, as they were now. It had made him uneasy back then, he knew that she was dangerous, even if no one else was going to admit it. Now, he just stood and watched her with a fellow fighter’s appreciation for skillful destruction. And a little bit of a different type of appreciation.

He swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry, as she lifted one leg back up behind her head, kicking an invisible adversary in back of her, drawing his attention the long limb. He wondered dimly how he had never noticed her legs before, how long and smoothly muscled they were; dancer’s legs, warrior’s legs.

Utterly mesmerized by her fluid movements, he didn’t move from the catwalks until she finally came to a halt near his weights, the sword held at her side.

River kept her eyes closed for a minute after she finished her workout, feeling the presence standing above her. It was Jayne, she would have known even if she wasn’t a reader. She didn’t know what it was about him that had always fascinated her, had drawn her even when she was crazy. She hadn’t given it much thought the last few years, having been occupied with more important things, but now that she was back, she wondered at it again. She opened her eyes.
“You can come down if you like, I’m finished.” He shifted above her.

“Ya sure, ya ain’t even breathing hard yet.” Jayne protested, a little startled by her invitation. They had never really had much to do with each other, either 4 years ago or in the past week. Nonetheless, he turned and walked slowly down the stairs and joined her by his bench.

“I know, but I have worked out most of the agitation in my body, which was my reason for coming down here. The bay is free for your use now.” That said, River made to turn away, when Jayne’s voice stopped her.

“The inactivity gettin’ to ya? Bugs me too, after I spend awhile outta the Black.” He paused, momentarily unsure. “You’re welcome to use the weights anytime yer feelin’ restless. I know they always help me sleep, might do the same for you.”

Surprised, River turned and stared at the merc. “Thank you Jayne, I might take you up on that.” She rolled her neck and discovered that her muscles were starting to cool and tighten. She had initially planned to stretch in the shuttle, thinking Jayne would not want her presence, but now she decided that it could be done here.

Jayne watched with a bit of wholly male appreciation and a certain amount of shock as she suddenly dropped down into the splits, setting her sword gently on the ground beside her as she did. She then bent forward, touching her forehead to her knee and holding for a moment, before bending all the way backwards over her back leg. From there, she moved into another stretching position, legs in the straddles and arms high above her head.

“I been meaning to ask ya, what’s the scar on yer stomach?” Jayne asked, tearing his eyes away and dropping down on his bench. He noticed out of the corner of his eye, that she suddenly dropped her arms.

“It is a battle injury.” She said quietly, her face closing off. “Nothing more than that.”

Jayne quirked an eyebrow at her reaction. “Seems a bit more’n that,” he said casually, lifting a pair of dumbbells and beginning his own nighttime workout, all the while watching her face. She didn’t disappoint.

A flash pain when through River, reflected in her eyes, as she remembered the cause of the scar on her stomach. And who had dealt the blow. Sometimes she wondered what was more painful, the wound when it happened or the memory after of the circumstances behind it. It was a toss-up, really.

“We all have scars, Jayne Cobb, those on this ship more than most. I do not wish to discuss this, if you wouldn’t mind.” She suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be stretching, so she switched positions and continued to loosen her muscles.

Frowning, Jayne looked at her. “I ain’t gettin’ what the problem is, we all got scars, just like ya said. What’s so different ‘bout that one?”

River closed her eyes and, in a near whisper, pleaded with the merc. “Please Jayne, not right now; do not ask me that tonight.” Seeing what his questioning was doing to her, Jayne decided to back off. Looking around the bay for inspiration for a new topic of conversation, he spied her new accommodations.

“Yer brother’s been wondering why ya chose to stay in the shuttle, ‘nstead of being back in yer old room.” He commented, switching to a different set of weights and beginning a new set of lifts.

She smiled, grateful for the change in topic. Apparently Jayne could be thoughtful and perceptive
when he chose to be. “I find the shuttle comforting; Inara’s essence still lingers there. Also, I enjoy the privacy and occasional seclusion it affords.”
The mercenary nodded, he could understand the urge. “Makes sense, bet you ain’t used to being in such close proximity to so many people anymore. Can make anyone a might twitchy.”

Once again amazed and grateful for his unexpected understanding, River became more gregarious. The two fighters, their workouts and beds long forgotten, stayed up till the small hours of the morning, sitting first in the bay, then moving to the mess, their conversation meandering from topic to topic. It was a unique experience for both of them, as they gained a greater understanding of the person next to them. By the time they parted company, not long before the rest of the crew started to rise, the rift between them, wider even than the one between Jayne and Simon, had begun to close. Sharing a final smile, they had headed towards opposite ends of the ship, intent on sleeping, even for a few hours.
Pride and Memories

Chapter Summary

Mal's pride gets stung and he's very lucky River doesn't just rearrange his face for him.

Chapter Notes

Side note: Anyone know how to get rid of the Author's note about ages that keeps moving from the end of each chapter to the next?

“Ni hao?” Inara’s flawless face was the picture of polite inquiry as to who could possibly be waving her from Serenity; she thought perhaps Kaylee, hoped against hope that is was Mal.

“Inara,” River started, her eyes shining with affection for her old friend.

“River!” Inara exclaimed with as much excitement as a lifetime of Companion training would allow. “How are you, mei mei? You’re on Serenity now, so I take it your explanations were adequately received?”

The genius nodded and smiled. “They were hesitant and slightly nervous at first, but have since allowed their guards to lower once again. I apologize for not contacting you sooner; I wanted to wait a little to ensure that I was actually welcome on board.”

“Oh, River, they love you! Of course you would be welcome on the ship.”

River fixed the Companion with a direct, knowing look. “They love you as well, so why are you still at the House?” Inara blushed, mildly flustered, as she sometimes was, by the younger woman’s directness.

“That’s different, as you know perfectly well.” The words came out slightly stiff, as she tried to mask her discomfort at all the thoughts the line of conversation stirred up.

River rolled her eyes. “When are you going to stop pretending that you are happy and fulfilled living and working at the Training House? I know you, Nara, and you love this ship and its crew as much as I do!”

“It’s different,” Inara insisted. “Don’t roll your eyes, it is! Besides, I am quite content where I am, mei mei.”

“Tell that to someone who doesn’t know you so well and can’t read your mind! When are you and Mal going to stop behaving like children? I’m going to die of old age before you two figure your go se out!” River was beyond exasperated with the two of them. A blind man could see that Inara loved Mal and Mal loved Inara, but they were both so stubborn to let go of their pride and actually admit that to each other.

The reader sighed, and rubbed her right temple. She was still getting headaches from the crew’s
constant unfiltered thoughts, and this frustration was only adding to the pain.

She looked up when Inara, uncharacteristically hesitant, replied to her tirade. “I know you’re frustrated and you mean well, River, but let this be. Please, sweetie, just let this be for now. I’ll figure it out in my own time.”

River sighed again, but nodded. “Alright, I’ll let it alone.” Then she grinned impishly. “However, if you take too long, I’m taking matters into my own hands. Fair warning.”

Inara smiled as well, the momentary tension between the two of them forgotten. “Fair warning,” she agreed.

The ex-fugitive reader assassin and the Companion continued to talk awhile longer before saying their farewells. Ending the wave with a touch to the screen, River leaned back in her chair and stared blankly at the shuttle wall for a minute before rousing herself and leaving her new home. She knew that the crew were still confused as to why she had spent so much time alone since she came back on board; with the exception of that night-long talk with Jayne the day before, she hadn’t had much contact with any of the crew, and she wanted to make up for it.

River had nearly reached the mess, where she sensed Kaylee and most of the crew to be, when Mal apprehended her.

“So what did Inara have to say?” He wasted no time with niceties and gave no thought to the fact that he was trespassing on things not his business. He was edgy, feeling uncharacteristically cooped up on his beloved ship and still sore over the Companion’s leaving. She’d barely given him warning, gorrainit! And she’d never come back; she’d been s’posed to go off in a huff, but then come back.

Needless to say, Mal had worked himself into quite a snit in the time between hearing that River was waving Inara and the genius coming back out into the main part of the ship.

River looked at the fractious captain coolly, wondering briefly how both of them could say that there was nothing between them, and yet spend so expend so much energy and time agonizing over each other. It was beyond even her tremendous comprehension.

“Inara is well, is happy that I was accepted back on Serenity and gives her best wishes to the crew.” The ex-assassin told him, pointedly. If he wanted to know what Inara had said, the stubborn ox could damn well ask her himself! Brushing past the irritated browncoat, River entered the mess, rolling her eyes as she felt Mal come in hard on her heels.

“So did she service you while you were bein’ her guest? Since you weren’t a passenger ‘n all at that point, I guess her old rule don’t apply.” He couldn’t have said just why he was being such an ass, and he did know he was acting like one, but all that talk of Nara a week ago and again today, after months of nobody mentioning her in his hearing, was damaging his tenuous calm.

Mal was entirely unprepared for the smack River gave him, or for the force behind it that sent him sprawling to the floor. He heard the gasps of his crew as he rolled over and stared at the 100-pound warrior woman standing over him and nearly shaking with fury.

“How dare you!” She cried. “You ignorant, prideful, stubborn, sanctimonious liu koushui de biaozhi he houzi de ben erzi! Did you never question why she is at a Training House, rather than hauling out with a luxury liner or taking up residence on a Core world like Osiris or Sihnon? You didn’t, did you?”
River glared at the man who had finally hauled himself to his feet and was now eyeing her just as furiously as she was him. She briefly gave thought to Nara not wanting her to tell Mal this, but god knew if the older woman was ever going to do it herself!

“She’s trying to change, for you! Because you’re unable or unwilling to accept her as she is. Do you have any idea how hard this has been for her? She’s had to go against everything she has been taught since childhood. And every time you denigrate her or call her a whore, she questions her reasons for doing so!”

She very nearly smacked him again, but managed to restrain herself. Instead she pushed past him and flung herself into the seat beside Kaylee. The mechanic reached over and squeezed River’s hand sympathetically as she too scowled at her captain. Mal, noticing the look, pointed a finger at her.

“Don’t you start with me too, little Kaylee. I ain’t got the patience for it. And what the hell do ya mean ‘she’s tryin’ to change’? She’s still a whor- Companion, ain’t she?”

Her voice very close to icy, River answered him as calmly as she could manage. “She is no longer active. Inara is now a teacher and a counsellor; she trains young girls at the House, as well as acting in the capacity of a counsellor for those in need. She is, for all intents and purposes, retired. And had I known what a fei fei de piyan you’d turned into, I would have told her not to make the effort. Mind what you say about her in my hearing, Captain, she has been a very good friend to me and I will not tolerate you slandering her out of pettiness.” Turning to Kaylee, she said, “Do you want to go talk?”

The mechanic nodded enthusiastically, and after one final reproachful look at the captain, she skipped out of the mess beside River.

“Did Nara really quit?” The crew could hear Kaylee’s voice float back to the mess from down the corridor.

“Well she sure told you.” Jayne smirked with immense satisfaction, as he leaned back in his chair. They had all been tiptoeing around the subject of Inara for ages, and he felt it was high time someone had set Mal straight. He didn’t think anyone could have done it better than the xiao xiongcan. “Bout time, too”

“Jayne.” Zoe warned, an eye on her captain as usual. He wasn’t stable enough for Jayne’s needling right now, no matter how much she might agree with the merc. Said merc shrugged, utterly unconcerned.

River and Kaylee settled themselves on the mechanic’s bed. Simon’s too, River reminded herself as she looked around, taking note of the little touches her brother had added to the bunk he now lived in.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come see you sooner,” River began. Kaylee waved the apology away.

“You was gettin’ used to being back here, that takes time. It don’t matter none.” River nodded in assent, relieved by the other woman’s unfailing forgiveness and acceptance.

Then, in an utterly Kaylee way, the mechanic said, “So any of them boys you was with worth the looking? Didja have a sweetie out there?”

River grinned, feeling the tension ease out of her body. “I didn’t have a boyfriend, no time for one really, with all the running we did. But, there was Nicos…” She trailed off, unsure just how to describe her relationship with the black haired reader. “He was- well I suppose you could say that he
liked me…”

“He had a crush on you?” Kaylee clarified, her face lighting with excitement over this new detail.

“Yes, although I tried to dissuade him from it several times. He was far more interested in me than I was in him, and our lifestyle was not really conducive to any sort of relationship.”

Kaylee nodded in understanding, thinking about a boy back home that she’d had to discourage at one point. “Did you ever, you know, with him?” She asked, grinning mischievously.

River blushed slightly. “Only once, which was probably a mistake in hindsight. It made him much more attached from that point on.”

“Was there anyone else, besides him?”

“No, I spent too much time on the run or hiding, to establish such a connection with anyone.”

Kaylee nodded in understanding, even as she thought that was awfully sad that the last four years had been so lonely for her friend.

“Not so lonely.” River said, without thinking. Kaylee was mildly startled by River answering her thoughts, but shrugged it off as something that didn’t matter none; weren’t like she had anything to hide anyway.

“So how did you and Simon finally get together? Was he a boob for too long?” River changed the subject abruptly, hoping to dispel the small bit of discomfort they both felt at her unconscious reading of Kaylee’s mind.

Kaylee gave a little squeal of excitement and proceeded to tell her everything from the start of Jayne and Simon’s unlikely friendship and how the merc had loosened the doctor up enough to pull his head out of his pigu and finally ask her on a date. River sat back, content to listen to Kaylee chatter about all the things that had happened to her first family while she’s been gone. Her thoughts, however, also strayed to her second family, the one she had left behind.

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Chinese Translations:

Liu koushui de biaozi he houzi de ben erzi – “Stupid son of a drooling whore and a monkey”

Fei fei de piyan – “Baboon's ass-crack”

Xiao xiongcan – “Little ass-kicker” (probably not an entirely correct translation, but it’s the closest I could get!)

Pigu - butt
Some talking, some kissing, some major avoidance! The plot begins to move forward!

After her talk with Kaylee, River had felt more confident about her reception from the crew, but she still found herself delaying the talk she knew she should have with Simon. She was worried about how he would react to her once they were away from the eyes of the crew. As it was, it was another week before River went in search of her brother. During that time, she talked with Jayne nearly every night, sometimes they sat in the bay or the mess, sometimes she danced or he lifted weights. It was Jayne that mentioned casually to her that Simon was confused by her avoidance of him. River knew he had been hurt by her distance and resolved to fix it. She just didn’t know how to explain to him that she was aware that, out of the whole crew, he was the one that would be and was the most un-accepting of her past. River figured it was a combination of being her older brother, a doctor and the inherently moral and Core-moulded person that he was. Either way, she hadn’t wanted to get into any sort of real conversation with him until after he had had time to fully digest and sort through the information she had given them about the past four years of her life.

She found Simon one evening after dinner working out with Jayne in the bay. She paused for a minute just enjoying the sight of the two of them getting along and working together. Jayne sensed her arrival first and looked up and nodded in acknowledgement. Simon caught sight of her and smiled. River returned both gestures and glided down onto the bay floor.

“Can I talk to you?” She asked her brother, asking Jayne with her eyes if he minded her stealing his workout partner. The big man just shrugged and nodded. He knew how much Simon had been wanting and waiting for this moment. Simon’s eyes lit up at the chance to finally talk to his little sister. Almost stumbling in his eagerness, Simon followed the young woman up the stairs to her shuttle. Looking back, she gave Jayne a small, almost shy smile before leading the way into her home.

Simon looked around as he stepped inside; this was his first chance to be inside the shuttle since River had moved into it. He could see little touches of her in places, but for the most part it was still very bare.

“You should put some rugs out or perhaps some coloured scarves. I’m sure Inara would lend some to you. It’s feels so empty in here.” He remarked, still looking around. River looked over from where she had been pushing the sheets back into place on her bed.

“I do not need frills or decoration, Simon.” She smiled. “I enjoy the pure functionality of the space; it was Nara who made it a sanctuary of beauty and comfort. I don’t need such things.”

“River, I didn’t mean –.”

“We were born to wealth, Simon. It does not mean it is what we are suited for. This life, this ship, they suit me far better than the fancy parties and expensive, wasted life I would have had on Osiris.” She noted that Simon’s expression was now bordering on confusion and just another hint of his ever-ready guilt and she smiled indulgently. He was such a boob; vastly intelligent, sweet when he managed it, but still such a boob. She explained her feelings in the simplest terms she could, so that
he would truly understand. “This is home, Simon. This ship is my sanctuary.”

“I never knew you felt that strongly about Serenity.” He said after a moment. “I knew you liked the ship, but I didn’t realize how deep it went.”

“I wasn’t able to tell you. It’s not that important anyway.” With a shrug, she waved that line of conversation away. “I know I’ve been avoiding… well everybody, but you especially, and I’m sorry.”

“You wanted to give me time to adjust.” He stated, and then grinned boyishly when she stared at him, startled. “I do occasionally take my head out of my pigu and take a look at the world around me.” He explained grandly, a smug grin at outwitting his genius little sister sitting firmly on his face.

River rolled her eyes. “So who explained it to you, Kaylee or Jayne?” she returned with a smirk of her own.

“Brat,” he scowled, beaten once again. River just laughed and indulged him by sticking out her tongue. He started to laugh, and after a pause, she joined in; the simple emotional release healing some of the distance between the once close siblings.

“So what did happen the night Jayne took you out?” River laughed at his startled expression. “Kaylee told me all she knew about it.” She explained.

Simon blushed and mumbled something his sister couldn’t hear. When she asked for him to repeat it, he just glared. “I refused to tell Kaylee, Wash, Mal or Zoe when they asked. I’m not going to tell you, either!” He smiled to soften his statement. “Jayne and I decided that it was something we didn’t need to share with the crew. And before you say it, neither Jayne nor I are sly!”

River schooled the smirk off of her face and said with practiced innocence, “well that’s good. Else Kaylee could be in for a bit of a shock.” She ruined her façade by giggling as she said it.

“Jayne’s whores, too.” Simon agreed, with a Jayne-like smirk of his own. River felt a slither of something unidentifiable go through her at the mention of the women Jayne associated with on a regular basis. Not really knowing what it was, she ignored the something and pushed it out of her mind.

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me about that night… When are you going to ask Kaylee to marry you?”

River’s laughter filled the shuttle as Simon sputtered incoherently.

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River bolted upright, sweat sliding down her spine, her eyes large and unseeing. Clutching her stomach, she gave a wordless cry of denial and anguish as the memories that had woken her washed through her now conscious mind. River slumped back against her pillows. When were the memories and nightmares going to end? She wiped the sweat off her forehead and sighed. Another advantage to living in the shuttle, and one of her main reasons for doing so, was that no one knew about her nightmares. Even when she woke up screaming, none of the crew knew of it; the soundproofing Inara had had added to the shuttle walls insured that.

River checked the time and groaned when she saw that it was still the middle of the night. She and Simon had talked for hours before finally parting. Knowing that she wouldn’t sleep again for at least a few hours, River left the shuttle, heading in the direction of the mess. Idly, she wondered if Jayne was still awake and couldn’t help the flash of heat that spread through her body at the thought of the
mercenary. He was so different than he was four years ago and yet still the same. There were so many more layers to him than most people knew. River knew that he preferred it that way. He’d told her once that people often underestimated him because of it. Which, of course, was usually to his advantage.

As she came down the hallway, she began to make out the sounds coming from within and smiled again. Jayne was humming, likely while he cleaned his girls, though she couldn’t make out the tune. He stopped when he felt her enter the room, and looked up from Vera.

“Couldn’t sleep, xiao xiongcan?”

Shaking her head, both in answer to his question and the nickname he seemed to have adopted for her, River moved through the room to the kitchen area. Digging out some of the tea Inara had left behind, she made enough for the both of them, knowing that Jayne sometimes liked tea with a spot of whisky in it. Both occupants were silent as River made their tea and Jayne cleaned his favourite gun. It was a comfortable silence, however; the kind of silence made by people totally at ease with each other.

River moved over to the table carrying the mugs of hot tea. She settled into the seat beside Jayne and handed him his mug. He took it with a grunt of appreciation, most of his energy focused on the part he was polishing.

“She’s so beautiful; I’ve always thought so.” River reached out and trailed light fingers down a piece of Vera’s barrel. Jayne, catching the movement out of the corner of his, had to bite back a groan at the sight. There was something so gorram hot about River touching his gun like that. Made him think all manner of inappropriate thoughts about the young assassin. Pulling his mind back to safer territory he tried think of a response.

“She is, at that,” he agreed. “I ever tell you how I got ‘er?”

River smiled contentedly as she listened to Jayne. He had moved from the story of how he acquired Vera, which she had known, though she didn’t mention that, to the woman his gun was named for; his mother. In Jayne’s opinion, Vera Cobb was the best of women; no one could match the only woman he’d ever actually loved. He’d named his favourite gun after her; on account of her being the one to teach him how to shoot straight in the first place, he informed River.

Legs curled under her as she sat beside him at the table, she listened in enjoyment. Drawn in by the cadence of his voice and the enthusiasm and emotion that lit his rugged face, she lost herself in him.

“An’ how bout you, wu po, any good stories from your life before gettin’ on this ship?” Jayne was genuinely interested; River rarely spoke of her life at the Academy or of growing up on Osiris. She occasionally told him stories of the last few years, but usually managed to steer conversations away from herself. Now she squirmed a little in her seat, sensing his earnest interest in her life. She briefly debated with herself before deciding to trust Jayne with a part of her self that no one on Serenity knew existed. Taking a deep breath, she began to tell him about the training and a few of the missions she had been sent on.

Jayne struggled to push down his growing anger at what the hundans had done to an innocent young girl. The depth of his anger, his emotions, for her surprised him somewhat, but not too much. He’d accepted sometime in the last few weeks that he was attracted to the younger Tam, and cared about her. To some extent. Rising with his anger was a growing fascination in what she told him; the things she’d done, the places she had gone, both physically and mentally. And again he sensed something in her, the same thing he’d felt the first night he found her dancing in the cargo bay. There was a darkness in her, a danger that called to him, called to the darkness inside himself. River’s head shot
You see my darkness,” she stated, looking at him in surprise and trepidation. She had begun to relax again as she spoke and without realizing it; her mind had reached out for his, just in time to catch his last thoughts. He nodded, not really surprised or uncomfortable with her reading of him. “It doesn’t bother you?” She asked, almost fearful of his answer.

Jayne contemplated her for a moment; he could see how important his answer was to her, before shrugging. “Hell girl, after all ya been through, imagine even Kaylee would have a bit o darkness to ‘er. Don’t mean nothin’,”

River was silent a moment, reflecting on what he said and weighing options. She had already trusted him this far, what was a little further? “Not all of my darkness is from the Academy and the killing.” She began, her head down. Jayne’s shot up from the knife he had idly been examining while he listened to her. “Some was always there, not developed, but present.”

She closed her eyes, waiting for his condemnation or his understanding. She almost cried out with relief when Jayne spoke again.

“I reckon we all got a bit o darkness in us; some just got more’n others. Don’t be worrying too much bout being a bit darker than most. Imagine it probably helped you a bit, out here in the Black and back at that place; maybe helped you cope a bit better.” Jayne shrugged again, a touch embarrassed by waxin philosophical at the girl. But she was smiling brightly at him, so he figured he didn’t do too bad.

River was touched beyond words by Jayne’s easy acceptance and understanding of a part of her she was afraid to show the world. Without thinking, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Jayne stiffened at the unexpected feel of River’s soft lips pressed against his. Her lips were just as lush, as firm as he had sometimes imagined them to be, and they moulded to his own mouth perfectly. Was this what he’d been missing all those years of not kissin’ on the mouth, Jayne wondered. Then he rejected that thought; he already had a notion that it felt like this simply because it was her. And if he was going to be completely honest with himself, he’d had more than one fantasy involving River’s lips. Well, her lips ‘n other things. Not that he was going to admit that to no one but himself.

Just as he was getting into it and responding to her unexpected advances, River pulled back with a gasp. Eyes wide, she stared at him. She hadn’t meant to kiss him and she hadn’t expected to enjoy it so much. And she certainly hadn’t expected him to respond as avidly as he had.

“I– I’m sorry,” she stammered, scooting backwards.

“Riv–,” he started, reaching for her. But with another gasp, she leapt to her feet and fled the room, her face flaming.

“Go se,” Jayne muttered as he slumped back against the cushions. Staring into nothing, he unconsciously touched his fingers to his lips. Gorram, but her lips had been sweet. Exactly as he’d imagined.

Dashing back into the shuttle and engaging the lock on the door behind her, River dropped onto her bed, head in her hands. Jayne was going to be so angry with her, she realized. He doesn’t kiss on the mouth, River reminded herself harshly.

Getting up, too agitated to sit still, she wandered over to the mirror Inara had left attached to the curved hull of the shuttle. Glaring at her reflection, she firmly reminded herself that just because she had been fascinated by the mercenary for years and was finding herself more and more attracted to
him the more they spent time together, didn’t mean that he felt the same. River reminded herself ruthlessly that she looked nothing like Jayne’s preferred women of choice.

With a sigh, she wished for the first time in many years that she still had no control over her reading of other people; she longed to know what was going on inside his head, but her own ethics wouldn’t let her peek. Not that it mattered much; she remembered that she had always had trouble reading Jayne since he kept his thoughts and mind so carefully organized and controlled. He’d had very little but surface thoughts that she’d been able to catch, like the ones about her darkness.

River paced the length of her shuttle for several hours, alternating between berating herself and marvelling at how it had felt. Several times, her fingers went to her lips, still feeling the imprint of the kiss. Buddha, but he kissed well!

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Early morning found River sitting on the bridge staring at the stars. Sometime during the night, she had come to a realization and then a plan. She had wished, more than once, that Kaen or Sia was on Serenity with her. She could have talked to them about this. They both knew a little about the interest she had had in Jayne before she left. That thought had led to her current position on the bridge. She was waiting for Mal and Wash to wake up and also trying to avoid Jayne, should he be wandering the ship. She didn’t think he’d come up on the bridge. She smiled in relief as she heard a hatch open behind her; Wash, she sensed, then another a minute later, Mal.

An hour later, after a brief conversation with the two men and the carrying out of the idea she’d had, River returned to her shuttle and relaxed on her bed. Already she felt better and nothing had even happened yet.

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Jayne stomped onto the bridge. “How long till we land on Teyrnon?” he growled. Wash just eyed him for a moment before answering.

“A little over 2 hours.” The pilot turned back to the controls, ignoring the large man behind him. Along with everyone else on the ship, Wash had become used to Jayne’s dark mood of the last three days. No one was totally sure what the reason behind it was, but if pressed to take a guess, Wash would say it had something to do with their youngest crew member. Everyone knew by now how often River and Jayne had spent time together since she had come back, just as everyone noticed that she now seemed to be avoiding the merc. And her avoidance had started at about the same time as his foul mood. Wash wondered briefly what exactly Jayne had done to incur the wrath or at least the anger of their own little government-trained assassin, but he couldn’t think of anything that he had heard or seen.

Jayne stomped back off the bridge and headed to the cargo bay. He desperately needed to work off some of the anger in his system before they went on the job, otherwise he was liable to get jumpy and screw something up by not paying attention to his surroundings. Gorram girl was still screwing with his head. Once he’d gotten over his shock that night in the mess, he had gone in search of River the next day. He’d gotten his first inkling that she was hiding from him when he realized that every person he questioned said that he had just missed her. It had been going on for three ruttin’ days now and he was getting all manner of angry and confused. Why was the fa kuang wu po avoiding him? If anything, he should be the one doin’ the avoiding, not her. But here he was, seeking out the not-so crazy girl with dancer’s legs and soft lips he’d been thinkin’ on more than he was sure was right.

River poked her head out the passageway she had ducked into when she’d heard Jayne come thundering off the bridge. She knew she was behaving like a child, but she couldn’t help it. She had
very little experience with this sort of thing, and the mess with Nicos had confirmed for her that she really had no idea what she was doing when it came to men and relationships.

Almost as soon as Serenity touched down, Mal, Zoe and Jayne were off on the bank heist Badger had given them. The rest of the crew went through their usual regimen for when the three were on jobs. Simon organized his infirmary, making sure it was ready for any and all injuries; Kaylee prepped the engine, getting her girl ready for dangerous or quick flying; Wash sat on the bridge, monitoring the radio and the cortex and trying not to worry about his wife. River meditated in the cargo bay, dividing her time between thinking about what she could feel coming closer and worrying about Jayne. She had seen that he wasn’t going to get shot this time, but the future was such a tricky thing; one little deviation from the norm could alter everything.

Within 2 hours, the mule could be heard coming back toward Serenity. The job, for a change, had gone smooth and there was no need to do any dangerous flying or perform some sort of medical procedure under pressure. Mal glanced at River as he climbed out of the mule, and the reader nodded in return.

“Soon,” was all she said and the captain nodded in response. Whatever ill feelings the browncoat had had for the genius after her rather public reaming of him, had disappeared in the wake of his realization that he had been in the wrong, not her. Now he was waiting on her; what was to happen, soon apparently, was River’s doing and he figured he owed it to her to let her make the next couple of moves.

Jayne too looked at River as he jumped out of the mule. It was the first time he’d seen her in days, since their kiss and he wasn’t at all surprised to realize he’d missed her, as well as wanting to shake her in frustration for avoiding him. As she was now. River had glanced away, blushing slightly, when Jayne looked at her. She wanted to leave the bay, but knew she couldn’t. So instead, she steeled herself and stood up. Jayne, thinking she was about to leave, opened his mouth. Whatever he had been about to say was lost in what happened just then.

River turned away from Jayne and the rest of the crew as her inner senses began to sing. She looked towards the bay door just in time to be attacked.

Jayne had looked towards the doors when he saw River turn in that direction. So he saw perfectly everything that happened next. He saw the tall dark haired man practically run onto Serenity, he watched him grab River by the waist and his mouth dropped open as the man kissed her soundly on the lips.

What the gorram hell?

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Xiao xiongcan – Little ass-kicker
Wu po – witch
Fa kuang wu po – crazy witch
Reavers and Seeing Red

Chapter Summary

The crew meets River's Academy friends, but Reavers crash the party.

What the gorram hell?

“Oh, for Buddha’s sake,” came a new voice from the ramp, exasperated and more than a little irritated. “Nicos, we talked about this! I distinctly recall it.” There was a small silence, during which the stranger, Nicos, continued kissing River, apparently missing the fact that she wasn’t responding or reciprocating in any way.

“NICOS!” A new voice, more annoyed than the first, was loud enough to make everyone in the bay, including the man in question, jump.

The crew turned to look briefly at the three people standing on the ramp; two women, both with their arms crossed, wearing identical expressions of displeasure and a large man standing just behind them, an amused half-grin on his face, before turning back to the scene being played out on the bay floor.

Startled by Kaen’s loud voice, Nicos pulled back from River’s mouth and finally noticed how cold her eyes were as she stared back at him. He winced.

“Hello Nicos.” He winced again, visibly; her voice was even colder than her eyes.

“H- hello River,” he stuttered. “I uh, I’m sorry, I just…” He trailed off, unsure what to say to escape her wrath. He attempted a warm smile, hoping that would help.

“You just what?” Damn, he thought, that didn’t work. “You just became so overwhelmed at seeing me again, that you completely forgot that we are no longer together and haven’t been for years?” River swore she heard a low growl coming from where Jayne was, but she didn’t take the time to exam that. Her entire focus was on the tall, black haired man standing uncomfortably in front of her. Seeing the way Nicos was starting to shift nervously from foot to foot, a habit his parents had tried to have broken in childhood, she finally relented and looked away.

The crew watched as a large smile covered River’s face as she finally spotted the three people standing on the ramp. Dismissing Nicos from her mind, she ran over to greet her fellow readers.

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What the gorram hell?

Only the fact that she weren’t responding kept Jayne from running over and beating the little shit pawing River to a bloody pulp. And that fact held him back by a thread. Fists clenched at his side, Jayne breathed as slowly as he could and tried not to growl. He hadn’t realized he was capable of this type of jealousy; he wasn’t much happy with the discovery.

He jumped like everyone else when the blonde woman yelled. He recognized her as Kaen from the descriptions River had once given him of her four reader friends. The woman with the red hair was
Sia, the one who had spoken first, and the blonde man behind them must have been Yuri. Which just left the other one. Barely suppressing another growl, Jayne swung his head back towards River and the little shit; Nicos. From where he stood, Jayne couldn’t see River’s face, but what he could see of Nicos’ expression made him smirk.

“You just what?” The smirk widened as River verbally beat the younger man down. The smirk vanished when she mentioned their past history. She sure as ruttin’ hell hadn’t mentioned that part when they’d been talkin’. The growl escaped before he could stop it. He was back to wanting to pummel the smaller man. Though truth be told, he’d never moved all that far away from that impulse.

Much to his extreme dissatisfaction, she laid off the little hundan when he started shiftin around all nervous and guilty-like. Ruttin bugger should look guilty, touchin what weren’t his to be touchin. When she turned and ran to the other three readers, Jayne smirked and took a few steps closer to Nicos, drawing himself up to his full height and flexing the large muscles in his arms.

River threw her arms around Sia, Kaen and Yuri in turn, absolutely thrilled to see her old friends. This was the welcome she’d been looking forward to, rather than the one that Nicos had given her.

“Umm, Riv?” Yuri murmured in her ear as he hugged her tightly. “Ya might want to do something, ‘cause it looks like yer new lover is about to kill yer old one. And by the look of him, he might even stand a chance.”

River whirled out of Yuri’s arms in time to see Jayne take another deliberately menacing step closer to Nicos, the smirk planted firmly on his face one that she was willing to bet he had also been wearing when the captain had sent him to interrogate Dobson after the fed had shot Kaylee. It was a look that promised worlds of pain awaiting the person being held by that stare.

Mal, perhaps sensing Jayne’s murderous intentions, or maybe simply wanting to reaffirm his position as captain, stepped forward and drew all attention to himself by requesting introductions. River went through them quickly, torn between her desire to spend time with the new arrivals and pulling Jayne aside to explain a few things. As it happened, neither of those wishes came true.

Kaylee had just stepped forward to greet Kaen, her usual bright smile welcoming the other woman aboard her best girl, when Sia gasped. Yuri, River, Kaen and Nicos all spun to where she was sinking to the ground, a hand pressed to her temple, pulled by the sudden distress in her mind. They were all at her side in an instant, Serenity’s crew forgotten.

“What did you see, bao bei?” River asked as she knelt at Sia’s side. She gently stroked the silky red hair, knowing from past experience that ‘seeing’ always gave Sia a headache.

“Death,” she whispered. “They come… Now!” The four kneeling beside her exchanged grim, determined glances. They knew what Sia had meant and they were ready. Yuri stared at River, and then flicked a glance at the crew behind her. River nodded in understanding. Rising to her feet, she turned to deal with the crew, even as she felt the others stand up behind her. Kaen ran past her, up the stairs to the catwalks, and unerringly found River’s shuttle. Barely pausing, the reader punched in the code only River knew and disappeared inside. She was back a moment later, one of River’s black bags in her hand. She dashed back down the stairs, across the bay and dropped it with the other bags lying there, before moving over to sit with Sia. She closed her eyes, a look of intense concentration coming over her face.

Mal frowned at the girl and her odd actions. Funny that she knew his ship so well, what with her never having been on it before. He looked to River for an explanation as to what was going on, the
rest of the crew following his example.

“Captain, I need you to take the crew and go to the bridge. Be ready to take off immediately.” She paused. “Sia, how long do we have?”

“Five minutes, six at the most.” She said.

“I’m trying to stall the pilot, but he’s resisting me. And his mind is so bloody feng kuang that it’s hard to control him.” Kaen’s voice echoed the strain she was under and her face was pinched with the effort.

Wash glanced over at the two women who were both now sitting on the ground, intense concentration and pain on their faces. He moved his gaze to their male companions. Nicos and Yuri were crouched among the pile of bags River’s duffel had been added to and were rapidly digging through them. Wash saw a flash of something metallic that, after years married to Zoe and living on Serenity, he was very sure was gun metal. He frowned; he had a very bad feeling about all this.

“Now just a ruttin’ minute. Who’s coming? What do you mean you’re ‘stalling the pilot’? ‘N why in the gorram hell are ya giving orders on my ship, little witch?”

“Captain Reynolds,” came Nicos’ firm voice. Faced with a crisis, he had fallen back on years of training and pushed aside the embarrassing incident that had just occurred. “We don’t have the time to explain things to you. Do as she says and get your rutting bloody crew up on the bridge and prepared to leave!”

“Now you listen here, you little-”

“Mal!” Everyone looked Jayne. “Jus’ shut up, would ya? What’s comin’, River?”

She shot Jayne a look of gratitude at his calm acceptance of the situation. She knew that that calm was about to disappear as sure as she knew the name of every weapon he owned. “Reavers. A reaver ship just entered atmo a minute ago and they know we are here.” She held up a hand to still the frightened noises being made by the crew. “Bi zui. Kaen is inside the mind of their pilot, attempting to slow their approach. Sia is monitoring their progress and trying to shield the presence of the crew, so that you will be able to get away.”

“Why just us?” Unsurprisingly, it was Simon who latched onto that pertinent little bit of information.

“Because we aren’t going with you,” River said, her head high, showing her confidence in her, their, decision and also her stubborn resolve.

Both Simon and Mal shrieked at that statement, while Jayne growled low in his throat and took a step towards River. Before he could take a second one, something came whirling through the air, over River’s shoulder and struck him hard in the temple. The mercenary dropped like a felled tree. River turned and glared behind her.

“What the ruttin’ hell?” Mal rounded on the man who’d just dropped his mercenary. He didn’t think Jayne was dead, there was no blood, but that didn’t make the attack any more tolerable. Something he intended to make mighty clear. He might need the gorram mercenary, if there were reavers comin’. River beat him to the punch, however.

“Yuri!”

“What? He was gonna to waste time arguing and our window of opportunity is closing very rapidly.” The blonde man almost growled in frustration before returning to his task of sorting through
the weapons they were going to need. River muttered a Chinese curse under her breath and twisted her mouth in annoyance at all men before she nodded and let it go.

“Captain, please don’t argue. Just go.” Mal opened his mouth to protest, but again she beat him to it. “If you don’t, I’ll have either Yuri knock you out as well or Kaen mentally force you to obey.” The look on the faces of the five young assassins told the crew that they were deadly serious about all of this.

“Sir?” Zoe looked at Mal, awaiting an order. She had no desire to face reavers, but even less to let these children do it in her stead. Until she actually looked at them. Aside from the pain on Sia and Kaen’s faces and the impatience on Yuri’s, none of the five Academy students looked terribly anxious about what was coming. They were all calm and collected, while the crew of Serenity were nearly shaking in fear of the bogeymen bearing down on their ship. Zoe turned back to her captain; she would follow his lead either way.

With a sigh, knowing when he was outnumbered and needing to look to his crew, Mal conceded the fight.

“Alright River, we’ll do it your way.”

“Xie xie, Cap’n.”

Kaen raised her head from where she sat and looked directly at Wash. “Get her up off the ground about 20 feet, then hover there and wait for my signal. When I tell you, take off and go for hard burn as soon as you can. Got it?” Wash nodded, his face intent and still uncharacteristically serious. Just looking at that expression put Mal on edge; Wash only ever looked like that when they were neck-deep in trouble more serious than their usual kind.

Simon was already kneeling beside him when River walked over to Jayne and, with a sigh, bent and picked up the knife Yuri had thrown at him. She winced at the goose egg already appearing on the big man’s head. Yuri had thrown so that the butt of the knife had struck Jayne, rather than the blade. Skill and aim like that was why he was their weapon’s expert, just as he had been the Academy’s weapons darling. Simon looked up at her with dark, serious eyes.

“Not that it will make any difference, I imagine, but I don’t agree with any of this. I’m only going along with it because I don’t think unconscious is a look that really suits me.” River stared at her brother. Simon just grinned crookedly and tugged at his right ear. She couldn’t believe it; Simon had just made a very Wash-esque offbeat joke. She really had been gone a long time!

She felt Mal and Zoe come up behind her and turned, pulling her mind away from her brother’s newfound strangeness. She gestured at Jayne.

“Take him with you to the bridge. He’ll wake up soon and you’ll probably need to stop him trying to do something man gan.” Zoe raised an eyebrow at that; it was a well-known fact that Jayne was terrified of Reavers. She couldn’t picture him trying to go out and fight them if he didn’t have to. Especially if he didn’t have to. It seemed too out of character for him.

Mal, Zoe and Simon, who shot one last look at his sister, picked up Jayne and carried him through the ship towards the bridge, Wash and Kaylee already ahead of them. Since the ship was already primed to fly, Kaylee wasn’t needed in the engine room and Mal didn’t want her in there by herself if there were reavers about.

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Standing outside, River watched Serenity lift to hover above the ground, Wash keeping her low as Kaen had directed. Dismissing Serenity and her crew from her mind, River turned to her brothers and sisters in arms. They weaponed up quickly and silently, each grimly prepared for what was coming. Straightening almost in unison, the five looked silently at each other and smiled. Hearing the reaver vehicle come to rest behind them and open its doors, they turned as one to meet the oncoming flow of Alliance-made monsters. Kaen and Nicos had forsaken their long-range bows in favour of the close-up fighting the other three were using. Screaming and howling, the reavers raced towards them. The warriors drew their weapons and formed a semi-circle that closed as they allowed the reavers to surround them, each facing out away from the centre of the circle.

The five fighters looked so small from the bridge of the Firefly-class transport hovering above them. The crew watched fearfully as the readers armed themselves, all seemingly calm and unconcerned with what was coming. Within a matter of seconds, each was fairly bristling with weaponry. Mal, casting a professional eye over their weapons, thought it was strange that none of them carried more than one gun. And River, not even one! That was just kuang-zhe de, not to mention suicidal. Course, Mal reflected, weren’t a whole lot ‘bout this plan of theirs that weren’t at least a bit suicidal.

Zoe, standing behind Wash’s chair, mentally catalogued each weapon the five were carrying with the unconscious mind of a born soldier. River carried two swords strapped to her back, a long knife fastened to her right thigh, and an assortment of smaller throwing knives clipped to her belt. Yuri, standing to River’s left, carried a large double-edged axe in one hand while the other rested on the butt of the large gun strapped to his left thigh. More throwing knives rested at his belt. Zoe found it odd that both Kaen and Nicos, whom she’d seen fingering longbows, carried only swords and guns. Sia, like River, carried two swords; one in her hand, one on her hip, while she carried a rifle strapped to her back. Seeing the five young people stand and prepare to face the reavers, Zoe put a hand on her husband’s shoulder, giving strength to both of them. She wasn’t entirely sure she could watch what was to come, a weakness that would have surprised some of those who knew her.

Glancing over a Simon, Kaylee saw that he was reflexively clenching his hands into fists, his face white and set as he stared down at his little sister. The mechanic quickly moved over to her lover’s side and gripped both of his hands in hers as she followed his gaze out the window and down. He squeezed her hands tightly, but never looked away from River. Oh god, oh god, oh god, was all that was going through Simon’s head. He couldn’t believe he was up here in the dubious safety of Serenity’s bridge, while his mei mei was down there preparing to fight off a ship full of reavers, with only four people at her back. Logically, he knew he wouldn’t have been much use to her, even though Jayne had been teaching him how to shoot and throw a few punches, but rational thought was hardly comforting as he saw the reaver ship coming soaring in and hit the ground with a shudder. He hoped for a brief moment that the hard landing might have damaged the ship or killed a few of the monsters, but then the doors opened and they came swarming out, screaming like the banshees from Earth-that-was folk tales.

‘Go NOW!’ Wash jumped a mile and slammed forward on the controls as Kaen yelled, loud and unexpected, inside his mind.

“Aiya tian a, Wash! What are you doin’, gorramit? A little warning would be good!” Mal yelled from his new seat on the floor.

“She yelled in my head, Mal! In my head! I’m sorry if it made me a might jumpy!” Wash continued to steer up and away from the Reaver ship as he tried to calm his wildly-beating heart. “Remind me
to never again agree to a conversation with a psychic, without specifying the type of conversation first!” Wash remarked randomly to Zoe, who had picked herself up off the floor and placed herself back in her customary position behind her man.

“Will do, husband,” was Zoe’s dry, unflappable response.

Everyone climbed back to their feet from their impromptu dumping on the floor, Jayne included. Wash’s wild take off had woken him from his unwanted sleep and he was sore, groggy and highly pissed off.

“Mind tellin me what in the da-xiang ba-zha shi de la du-zi is going on?” Everyone jumped at the unexpected sound of his loud, angry roar in very close proximity. Jayne looked round the bridge, seeing who was there and who weren’t and caught onto the situation very quickly. Mal opened his mouth to answer, when he saw his mercenaries eyes get dark and narrow in anger, and if Mal didn’t know better, a hint of worry.

“Stop! Gorramit Wash, stop the damn ship!” They all stared at him, even Wash, who risked turning his head away from the window for a second. Though he was as curious as the rest as to why Jayne suddenly seemed so eager to go face reavers, Mal agreed with his demand. Indeed, he’d been just about to say the same thing. Though possibly more quietly.

“Wash, slow us down and turn around.”

“Cap’n –”

“Mal…”

“Sir?”

The browncoat raised his hand to silence them. “Runnin’ away and leavin ‘em there to fight by themselves don’t sit right with me. I ain’t ever left a man behind and I don’t plan to start now.” He looked at each member of his crew and was relieved and proud to see agreement, albeit mixed with fear, on most every face. “Wash; head on back down to where we started and circle round.”

“What do you plan to do sir?” Zoe took a step towards her captain, dark eyes intent on his face as she tried to ascertain whether he was going to come up with a good plan or one that could get them all killed.

“Not too sure how much use we’ll be on the ground, but what say Wash tilts the engines and singes those hundans a bit while we provide a little cover-fire from the ground?”

Zoe nodded. The crew were a little shocked by Jayne’s lack of argument and the fact that he headed for his bunk and weapons immediately. Pleased with the plan, Jayne stalked off the bridge and dropped into his bunk to weapon up, all the while trying not to think of deep brown eyes and long brown hair belonging to the small woman facing down reavers on the ground below him. Jayne straightened up, then growled and pressed a hand to his head as it throbbed with the sudden motion. Whoever had knocked him out had some ruttin’ explainin’ to do. Later though, after he got River back safe and whole. The mercenary tried not to think about how protective and worried he was about the young woman, as he climbed back out of his bunk and stalked down to the bay to wait for Mal and Zoe.

Gorram reavers better not have hurt her.

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River forgot all else as she sunk into her training, her swords flashing and whistling as she cut down reaver after reaver. There was a comforting hum in her mind that belonged to the four people at her back. Years ago, when they were preparing to destroy the Academy, they had learned something their trainers and doctors would have killed to obtain. They learned how to link their minds and fight as a single, cohesive unit. It didn’t seem to matter how many of them were fighting; they were able to read each other’s minds and know how, when and where they were going to move. That discovery had made their success against the Academy possible.

Dimly, River heard Serenity take off, just as she heard Sia send the mental command, but kept her mind focused on the fight. Back to back, they continued to fend the reavers off, keeping them distracted until Serenity was safely away and then, by an unspoken agreement, the five readers broke formation and moved away from each other, allowing the reavers to separate and encircle each of them. Now able to move freely, they became even more dangerous to their enemies. Still linked mentally, but now able to widen their movements and lengthen their swings, they were truly formidable. River kicked a reaver across the face, then planting both swords in the ground, reached behind her and flipped another over her shoulder. Grabbing her swords again, she dropped to the ground underneath the swing of a reaver axe, straddling the reaver’s head and snapping its neck with a twist of her thighs, even as she continued to kill the ones attacking her from above. Using the dead reaver beneath her a springboard, River launched herself upwards into a backflip, landing behind a reaver that had been intending to take her head off, and removing his instead.

With one stroke, Kaen bisected two of the reavers screaming in her face, then keeping her momentum going, swung around and dropped to the ground just as one of River’s throwing knives went flying over her head to embedded itself in the forehead of another reaver that had been about to grab her. Thanks little sister, Kaen sent along the link as she rose and resumed the fight.

Sia’s body jerked as one reaver managed to grab hold of the holstered rifle on her back. With a growl that would have impressed Jayne, she pressed the toe of her left boot into the ground in a certain way, then brought her left leg swinging upwards and kicked the reaver over her shoulder. The ravaged one-time man dropped, dead from the blade that had gone through his eye. Sia retracted the blade in the toe of her boot as she brought her leg back down and continued to fight.

Yuri was in his element, swinging his huge axe with both hands; reavers dropping like flies all around him. He felt one come up behind him and bent over, sending the reaver flipping over his back. Drawing one of his throwing knives he stabbed the downed reaver in the throat and then sent the same blade flying into the heart of another, even as he was straightening back up and picking another target.

Nicos was a sight to behold as he took the reavers on, his short sword and his gun both tucked safely away. The best of the five readers at hand to hand combat, he had decided to forego weapons for the time being and was instead taking down reavers with well-placed kicks and punches; he’d long ago learned how to kill someone with a single kick or well-aimed punch. As much as he loathed the Academy that had trained him, Nicos had learned to embrace and assimilate everything they had taught him about fighting; it had save his life on more than one occasion.

All five readers jerked and growled nearly in unison as they heard the telltale roar of Serenity’s engines as she came circling back around them. A moment later, the shrieking of the reavers reached a new pitch as Mal, Zoe and Jayne joined the fray. Staying to the edges of the conflict, they methodically began picking off reavers, while trying to make sure they didn’t hit one of the five they were trying to help. They were also still trying to not gape at the sight that had met them since Wash had brought them back down. None of them, soldiers or mercenary, had ever seen anyone fight the way River and her friends did. The captain and his crewmates had been so shocked they’d almost forgotten what they were down there to do.
Between the two groups of fighters, they made short work of the reaver party, and it wasn’t long until the last one fell and the screaming finally stopped. Wash, seeing that the fighting was over, brought the ship in to land just behind his captain. A few minutes later, he, Kaylee and Simon joined the three on the ground, who were simply standing and watching the five readers as they picked their way among the bodies, gathering up their dropped or used weapons. Occasionally, one of them would lift a reaver weapon and examine it carefully before either putting it back down or setting it aside with their own weapons. Once all their weapons had been piled to the side, they began to gather the bodies together.

“What are they doing? Cap’n, what’s going on?” Kaylee asked from behind Mal, still clutching Simon’s hand.

“Not too sure, little Kaylee.” Mal’s frown deepened when Yuri retrieved one of the bags they had left on the ground before the fight and pulled a small container out of one it. He placed it on top of the pile of dead reavers, and then the five of them grabbed their bags and weapons and moved closer to Serenity’s crew. Stopping close to the ship, Sia drew her gun and with a nod from Yuri, fired at the cylinder atop the grisly pile. The crew jumped as the container exploded and drenched the entire pile in flames. The five readers stood and watched the fire for a minute before turning and walking the rest of the way back to Serenity.

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Jayne clenched and unclenched his hands as he sat and watched River and her four friends sit on the bay floor and tend each other’s wounds. They had all gone back onboard when the smell of burning reaver had started to get real bad and then the five of ‘em had sat down all nonchalant and begun cleaning themselves up. They had refused Simon’s offers of doctorin’; ‘apparently the big one Simon had told him was the one that had knocked him unconscious was the healer of their group. Jayne glared, his temper just barely reigned in, as River sat calmly cleaning the bite wound on Sia’s shoulder, while that hundan Nicos cleaned and bandaged the long cut on her side. He’d damn near seen red when the little shit had lifted River’s shirt to expose the wound and she hadn’t done nothing ‘bout it. Jayne had decided he really didn’t like this gorram jealousy thing that seemed to be plaguing him where River was concerned.

Simon glanced over when he heard another low growl, and taking one look at Jayne’s face, left Kaylee’s side to stand by his friend. Reaching down tentatively, it wasn’t smart to touch Jayne in a way that would startle him; he squeezed the older man’s shoulder, hoping to help relieve some of the tension radiating from the merc. Noticing the way Jayne tensed every time Nicos, or even Yuri, touched River, Simon acknowledged that the possibility that he and Kaylee had discussed several nights earlier was likely about to become reality. He was slightly surprised at how at ease he was with the idea that Jayne was attracted to his little sister, and that she appeared to return the feeling. Four years ago, Simon would have been appalled and furious by the thought of the “ape-man gone wrong” lusting after his little mei mei, but now it didn’t seem like such a bad idea. Provided Jayne could manage to not kill one of her friends first.

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Bao bei – sweetheart
Feng kuang – messed up, insane, crazy
Bi zui – shut up
Man gan – foolhardy, reckless
Xie xie – thank you
Kuang-zhe de - nuts
Aiya tian a – merciless hell
Da-xiang ba-zha shi de la-du-zi – “The explosive diarrhea of an elephant”
Aftermath of a Good Day's Work

Chapter Summary

Jayne is none too pleased to have been knocked out, or that River went off to fight Reavers without him.

The crew and the five readers sat or stood all around the mess, silently looking at each other. Mal had ordered everyone up to the mess once all wounds had been attended to. He, Zoe and Jayne had come out without a scratch as they hadn’t been all that close to the reavers they had shot. Jayne was still fuming over the events of the last few hours and as he sat clenching and unclenching his fists under the table, he knew that he would only be able to hold out a little while longer before he would have to hit something. Or someone.

“Captain Reynolds,” Nicos drawled, breaking the uneasy silence. “Would ya mind telling us what it was exactly that you were thinkin’, bringing your people back down into a fight you was told specifically to stay out of?” His friends winced a little at his bluntness, though they too wanted to ask the same question.

“Well boy, here I was thinkin’ that lending you folks a hand would be looked at with a might more gratitude than you’re showing.” Mal’s drawl put Nicos’ own to shame, as he leaned back against the counter, all nonchalance and authority. “And seein’ as how this is my ship and my crew, I’m the only one with the authority to be givin’ orders on it. Dong ma?”

“Captain, I would like to–”

“Bi zui.” The low command silenced both the browncoat and the assassin and everyone turned to look at River. “Captain, do not make the mistake of thinking that we are children or innocent and helpless.” She paused and looked around at her friends. “We have seen, done and experienced far more than any of you could imagine. We were perfectly able to handle that reaver party.” She put up a hand to stall the protests coming from Mal, Jayne and her brother. “However, your help was appreciated and certainly made things go faster.”

“Riv, c’mon. We didn’t need ‘em for that. That fight was a joke. Them reavers was dead before they landed their ship; just too crazy to know it.”

“Be that as it may,” Sia spoke up, quelling Yuri and Nicos with a glare. “It is polite to appreciate aid when given, however unnecessary.”

Kaen piped up, adding her two cents. “Now if you two don’t stop posturing, I’m gonna take you outside and kick both your pigu’s. And you know as well as I do that I can. We have more important things to discuss than which one of you has the most testosterone.”

Jayne smirked as the two younger men nodded, suitably chastised by the bitty little women. Then he scowled again, remembering what happened. He turned his attention to the one responsible.

“Moving on, ya wanna explain why ya thought knocking me out ‘fore a fight with gorram reavers was a good idea?” He growled at Yuri. Several of the crew members shifted nervously, well aware of the mercenary’s bad temper. Looking at his friend, Simon began mentally cataloguing the
equipment he was going to need, to put Yuri back together after Jayne got done with him. It was possible that Yuri would beat him, but given Jayne’s mood at the moment, Simon doubted it.

“Uh, Jayne?”

“Yeah, Mal?”

“Ya know I’m gonna have to stop you from killing him, right?”

“Yeah, Mal.”

“Well alrighty,” Mal clapped his hands together. “Just makin’ sure we’re clear.”

Jayne glared hard at Yuri, his blue eyes dark and narrowed. The blonde reader just smiled ruefully, braced himself and spread his arms wide.

“’Spect you’re deservin’ a fair shot; even things out.”

Jayne smirked, considered his opponent for a moment, then took a step forward and hammered one large fist into Yuri’s abdomen with … half his usual strength. Even so, the smaller man stumbled back a bit, wheezing loudly. When he looked up, his eyes reflected his surprise and confusion.

“You ever do somethin’ like that again; I’ll make sure it hurts.” Jayne stated evenly, the threat in his eyes and voice. Yuri just grinned and nodded, respect for the mercenary blossoming in him.

“Fair enough.”

Jayne nodded back, then feeling a resurging of the anger and jealousy he’d been carrying lately, he whirled around to face Nicos.

“And as for you…” Nicos – a dangerous, government-trained reader assassin – actually gulped and nearly stepped backwards at the feral look in the mercenary’s eyes.

Before anyone could react, Jayne punched Nicos in the face, not holding back this time. At all. The younger man went flying across the mess, before landing on his back with a loud thud.

“You ever touch her again, I’ll kill you. **Dong ma?**”

Everyone in the room froze in stunned silence as Jayne growled out the threat, then stomped over to River, grabbed her by her upper arms and kissed her with all the pent-up emotions he had collected in the last few days, letting them all pour into her mouth; frustration, affection, anger, lust, jealousy, fear, arousal, relief. River nearly buckled under the double onslaught of Jayne’s mouth and emotions. When he finally released her mouth and took a small step back, she looked up at him with dark, surprised eyes and full, kiss-swollen lips.

“How we talk?” He asked in a low voice. Utterly unable to speak at that moment, she nodded and went willingly when he grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the mess and off toward her shuttle. Leaving a very shocked crew and four readers; two smug, one bleeding and one chastised, in their wake.

“Well,” Mal said, first to break the silence, grinning widely as he watched Nicos scrape himself up off the floor with a moan. “How ‘bout that.”

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Jayne slid the shuttle door shut with more force than necessary, still riding his anger from the confrontation, and turned to look at River. The reader had taken a seat on her bed and was watching him silently with dark, solemn eyes. He suddenly felt a little nervous, which shocked him, as he couldn’t actually remember ever being nervous round a woman, sceptin’ his ma, but that woman could scare the devil himself if she had a mind to. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, unable to decide what to say or where to start, now that they were finally alone together for the first time in days. With a sigh, he decided to start near the beginning.

“Why ya been avoiding me for?

Nervous and still a little dazed from his kiss, River blushed and looked down at her hands.

“I apologize for kissing you, it wasn’t what I meant–” Jayne cut her off with a growl.

“If I’d’a wanted an apology for that, you woulda known. Surely you could tell I was enjoying it just as much as you, genius reader an’ all.”

“After Nicos, I am unsure of my reception around men and their possible reactions to my advances,” she started again cautiously, still looking at her hands.

“Don’t even get me started on that hundan!” Jayne barked angrily. That got her attention. River’s head came flying up, eyes blazing.

“You asked and I’m telling. If you do not wish to know the answer to a question, then do not ask it!” She took a breath to settle herself down. He made a noise that might have been apology or consent to continue. “Nicos and I had a relationship, sort of, about a year ago, for a brief amount of time.”

Jayne sat down on the couch across from the bed, elbows resting on his knees, his blue eyes dark and intent on her face, as he listened. He tried really hard not to interrupt when she said the words relationship and Nicos in the same sentence.

“I hoped that after, he wouldn’t be so focused on me, but he was worse. Nothing dangerous,” River rushed to assure Jayne when he shifted dangerously and his eyes darkened more. “I wasn’t sure how to handle his continued attention, so I finally told him that I didn’t want him around and I left to stay with Inara for a few months.”

They were both silent for a minute, staring at each other. Finally Jayne took a deep breath and broke the silence.

“So when you kissed me, you thought I was going to be like that tiansheng de yi dui rou and go all bat-shit crazy on ya?” He wasn’t sure if he was more insulted or annoyed.

She sighed. “Intellectually, I knew you wouldn’t, but the mind and body cannot always work in harmony, as I have learned over the years.” Her face twisted at some old memory, but only for a second before she pushed it back. Jayne watched her for a minute, and then came to a decision; one he was sure would change his life, but he knew he wouldn’t regret it.

He got up from the couch and knelt on the floor in front of her. Taking both of her hands in his, Jayne looked up at her, bright blue eyes intense and shining.

“Riv, I ain’t afraid of admitin’ that I like you, yer a powerfully attractive woman and that ain’t even just yer looks. But I ain’t going to be like that gorram idiot in the mess. You don’t want me, you say
so and I let you go. But if you do, I wanna see where this could go. I never done nothing like this before, and I think you know that, but hell, I’m game if you are.”

Throughout his speech, River’s eyes had become brighter and brighter; by the end they were nearly glowing. She wasn’t sure she could speak with her heart lodged in her throat (unusual place for an internal organ to be located), so she decided to show him, without words, how much he had come to mean to her. She learned forward and pressed her lips to his, snaking her arms around his shoulders to hold him close.

Unprepared for her sudden assault, Jayne went still against River for a minute, before responding. He wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her as he stood. Her response was to wrap her legs around his waist. Jayne pulled back to look at her.

“You sure?” He asked. He couldn’t believe how important it was to him that she not regret anything of what they were about to do. When she just smiled and nodded, tightening her long legs, he crushed her against him.

River, for one of the very few times in her highly eventful life, found herself unable to form a complete thought as Jayne lowered her gently onto the bed and covered her small body with his own much larger one.

As they lay panting in the afterglow, Jayne began to trace the nasty scar that marred her stomach. She tensed instantly, the content disappearing from her face.

“You ever gonna tell me what made this?” He asked, uncharacteristically hesitant. The last time he’d asked her, he’d been pretty sure she was about to take his head off with that sword of hers, or cry. He wasn’t sure which was worse.

River closed her eyes, not wanting to relive that time. But after everything they had shared, she knew he at least deserved to know that.

“It’s from when we attacked the Academy. I told you about the fighting?” She looked over at him. Jayne shifted so he was lying on his side facing her, his head being held up by one arm. He nodded slowly. “Did I tell you that some of the people we fought were other students?”

He shook his head. “Always sorta figured that were the case, but since you didn’t say nothing, I didn’t want to bring it up.”

“There were a lot of students, former friends of ours, who answered our call when we broke into the Academy. But there were some who were too far gone…” River closed her eyes again as she remembered that day.

River slipped down the empty hallway as quietly as she could, stumbling occasionally over the bodies left there from earlier skirmishes. She was trying to move quickly, she was meant to rendezvous with the others on the other side of the facility in less that 10 minutes, and the wounds she had so far sustained were slowing her down too much for her own comfort. She was halfway to the meeting point when she turned a corner and came face to face with the beginning of a nightmare
that would haunt her for years after.

Blank-faced, Kate Ching ruthlessly thrust her sword through the heart of one of the scum who had dared to invade the facility. Former students and comrades, they had betrayed the Academy and so deserved to die. As she pulled her sword free, Kate sensed someone coming up behind her and spun to meet her next combatant. Her brilliant, broken mind automatically processed the new arrival and identified her as River Tam, subject #8436-494, Room Block 3C, Training Group 1A. Another betrayer, then; so be it. The Academy Operative, so called now that her training was finally complete, levelled her sword at her opponent and waited for the wounded woman to make the first move.

River didn’t say a word as she looked down the blade of a sword and into the blank, dead eyes of a girl who had once been her best friend. Although inside she was screaming at what life and the bastards that ran the Academy had brought them to, externally River Tam was as blank as the Operative she faced. Kate would not be the first ex-friend and comrade she had killed that night. She noted that Kate was waiting for her to make the first move. So be it.

“…We must’ve fought for more than 10 minutes before I finally managed to knock the sword out of her hand. I went to kill her, but she looked up at me and I hesitated.” River sat up and turned away from Jayne, not wanting him to see her like this, as she tried to wipe away the tears trickling down her cheeks. “She tried to gut me with a knife she had hidden in her boot. I pulled back just in time, so she mostly missed the vital organs. Then I killed her, put my sword through her heart.”

Jayne stared up at the naked back of the beautiful woman sitting above him. He knew she was crying, even if he hadn’t been able to hear the sobs in her voice or the hitching of her breath. He could smell the salt in the air and knew, somehow, just by the way she was holding herself. He sat up and wrapped his arms around and buried his face in her hair, offering what comfort he could.

She stirred but didn’t pull away when his arms went around her. “I still don’t know how I got out of the facility and back to the others. Yuri told me after that had I been even a few minutes later getting to them, I wouldn’t have lived.” Jayne tightened his arms around her as he realised how close he came to losing her before he even had her.

“There wasn’t anything ya coulda done,” he whispered against her skin. “She was too far gone for ya ta save. She woulda killed you instead, Riv”

“Doesn’t make it any easier,” she whispered back, letting herself draw comfort from the strong arms holding her and the warm mind unknowingly caressing her own.

He nodded slightly. “Don’t suppose it do, but it’s still the truth. You ain’t got nothin’ to be blamin’ yerself for, ya hear me?” Jayne gave her a gentle shake to emphasize his point.

“I know, I do.” She whispered and finally let the tears come freely. Her lover drew her back down onto the bed and held her close as she cried for the friends she had lost and the things they had seen and done.
Hello, Goodbye

Chapter Summary

One last reunion and a goodbye to our merry band of psychics.

Mal was scared. No, not scared… He was– nervous, unsettled. Damned uncomfortable on his own gorram ship. All the women on Serenity, and there were an uncommonly large number of them now, were conspiring against him. He was sure of it. Even Zoe, which was just downright unsettling.

They were always whispering when he was about, doing his captain-y duties. Conversations stopped when he entered a room, or when one of the readers felt him about to enter a room. And they all kept watching him with this assessing, knowing look in their eyes. It was downright creepifying. And it went on for over a week before he decided he’d figured out what was going on.

“You’re conspiring against me,” Mal stated with self-righteous indignation (and minor terror). He crossed his arms over his chest, in an attempt to intimidate the women he was staring down.

“And how is it you came to this conclusion, captain?” River questioned, one eyebrow raised and her head tilted to one side as she looked at him in a way that made him feel like an insect under inspection. It was a sensation that disconcerted him somethin’ fierce, no doubt her intention.

“Y’all been havin’ conversations behind my back, all sneaky-like.” He was the captain, secrets were not meant to be kept from the captain; it was his gorram ship!

“So naturally, you decided we must be talking about you?” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement and Zoe was looking at him as though she thought his brain was missing again. Withering slightly under her dry, mildly scornful tone, Mal first tasted doubt. He tasted more as he took in the fact that he was being stared down by five women, all wearing similar expressions of scorn and amused disbelief. Taking into consideration that three of the women were psychic assassins, one was a warrior that could kill him with her pinky finger and one could blow up his ship or lock off the environmental controls in his bunk if she was of a mind to do so, and he was beginning to feel downright intimidated. The thought that an orderly, dignified retreat might be the smart thing to do entered his mind and he decided to go with it. Thankfully for the captain’s ego, he was out of earshot before the aforementioned women burst into gales of laughter.

After the laughter died down, the women returned to the discussion they had been having before Mal’s interruption.

“Were you able to get hold of her, River?” Serenity’s second in command asked, noting as she did so, that the shadows that had lurked in River’s eyes for a few days after the Reaver fight had finally disappeared completely; something she attributed, with some disbelief, to Jayne.

“Yes, she will meet us on Persephone in 4 days. I have already had Wash reroute us from our original course heading for Boros.”

“Cap’n ain’t gonna be happy that we changed course ‘n whatnot behind his back.” Kaylee pointed out, slightly worried about the Browncoat’s volatile temper.
“You just leave the Captain and his temper to me,” Zoe assured her, a wicked smile on her usually unreadable face.

Four days later, Mal had reason to know he’d been right to fear conspiracy among the increasing number of women aboard Serenity.

“What in an feifei de piyan is going on? Ain’t my ship s’posed to be heading to Boros?” Furious, Mal looked away from the control panel long enough to punch the comm. “This is the captain speaking, Wash, I need you on the bridge, now.” He tapped the comm unit again, ending the transmission and went back to cursing, as he stared disbelieving between what the controls were telling him, and the very hard-to-deny planetary bulk of Persephone looming outside the window.

Mal’s eyes narrowed and he spun as he heard boots clomping up the stairs, and then promptly lost his composure as he realized that Wash was not alone in entering the bridge; part of the crew and half the passengers were right behind him.

“I said ‘Wash,’” Mal stated weakly, eyeing the large group of women with trepidation and suddenly recalling his fears from earlier in the week. Looked like he’d been right, after all. Not that it was likely to do him much good.

“We decided it would be better if we were all here, sir.” Zoe explained, the ‘sir’ an obvious afterthought in her statement. Mal frowned suspiciously at his second-in-command; there was something in her eyes that was beginning to set him even more on edge; it looked like a cross between mocking and triumph, an unusual combination for his normally stoic right-hand. Unsure if he should be going for his gun, Mal raised an eyebrow, hoping to convince one of his assembled crew to explain what in the gorram hell was going on on his ship. River was the first to start.

“I am afraid, Captain, that there are certain aspects as to how this ship is run that we thought should be fixed.” Those large brown eyes stared fixedly at him, remindin’ him of that creepifying stare she used to have.

“I see… Y’all just thought you’d start goin around and fixing things to yer liking on my gorram ship? What part o’ ‘Captain’ were you havin’ trouble with?” He was almost yelling by the end, hard as he was trying to control his temper with so many readers and assorted dangerous folk on the bridge.

Looking for all the worlds like the core-bred snob she shoulda grown up to be, River glanced around the bridge, making a face of feigned displeasure. “Well for one thing, if you had a crew member or passenger with a higher quality of connections than the ones presently aboard this vessel, you would likely have better luck in finding well-paying jobs.” She ended her survey and gave him a pointed look.

“Well lil assassin, I sure hope you ain’t volunteering yourself for that position. What with being wanted by the Alliance more’n any member of my crew.” Mal countered cautiously, firmly pushing the unwanted memory of his previous ‘Ambassador’ out of his head.

River shook her head, dropped the faked look of snobbishness and brightly told him that they had all gotten together and already found him the perfect person, and wouldn’t ya know it, but she was
waiting on Persephone for them right now! Wash sat quietly in his flying chair and grinned at the scene, although he managed to wipe the look off his face just in time when Mal glared at him, silently asking if he had been a part of this mutiny. Wash just pointed at his gorgeous, could-kill-him-with-her-pinky wife. A bad feeling waltzed its way into Mal’s body and planted itself down firmly in his gut. He was gonna get shot again, he just knew it.

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River, and Zoe and Kaylee below her, huffed out a long breath as she watched the scene playing out below her on hold floor. They were already yelling at each other. The two hours that they had had as Wash had safely landed them at the Eavesdown Docks and then prepared for the new arrival had been filled with yelling (from Mal) and calm, as well as not-so-calm, explaining from herself and her co-conspirators. The Captain had spent the last thirty minutes sulking on the bridge after being sent running when he managed to succeed in making Zoe almost lose her temper. No doubt he had called it a strategic retreat.

A small smile flickered over the dark haired reader’s lips as she remembered what she had done with those thirty minutes of peace and her eyes moved to where Jayne was leaning against a crate, watching the excitement at the bay doors. Feeling her eyes, he looked up and sent her a smile, which changed to a leer as he caught the lingering heat in her eyes. River was surprised to feel heat rising in her cheeks and had to check the impulse to duck her head and try to hide behind her hair, impossibly anyway, as it was firmly pulled back in a braid.

“Yes, you… blushing?” Yuri asked incredulously, green eyes wide with disbelief. Sia, standing on the other side of him, saw the exchange and dutifully smacked Yuri on the back of the head.

“Mind your own business, ge ge.” She said sternly, a small grin on her face at her ‘brother’s’ affronted look.

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Inara paused on the busy docking station when she caught sight of the achingly familiar Firefly sitting in one of the bays. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and reminded herself not to rise to the Captain’s bait, again. She also reminded herself to kill River for ever suggesting this. Again…

The neutral expression she had long ago perfected plastered firmly on her lovely face, Inara resumed her path towards the ship she had once left with no intentions of ever seeing again, the smooth sky-blue silk of her Counsellor’s robes swirling gently around her legs.

Mal was pretty sure he stopped breathing when he saw the woman gliding up the ramp towards him. The sun was shining off the bright blue of her outfit, making it difficult to look at her, which felt mildly appropriate; as he’d been more than confident he never wanted to clap eyes on her again. Now though, he weren’t too sure about that. He was pretty sure he was gonna kiss the lil assassin for arranging this, provided Inara didn’t kill him first.

For one of the many times in her life, Inara was grateful for the rigorous training that allowed her to
look confident and serene while, internally, she was shaking and near to panic as she caught sight of the tall brown-clad man waiting just inside the cargo bay. She fought the irrational urge to place a hand to her chest to make sure her heart didn’t beat out of her breast.

“Think of it as a clean slate. A chance to start things over again, but better than last time.” When she said it like that, sounding supremely confident, Inara had to admit she was almost convinced by River’s argument. But then common sense, and a healthy dose of self-preservation, reasserted control.

“No. Mei-mei, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but we’ve already done this. And it failed rather spectacularly the first time. The results would still be the same, and – and I don’t think I can go through this a second time.” A very revealing omission from a profoundly private and self-contained woman, it showed River exactly how scared Inara was of what she was suggesting.

River looked at the image in front of her, solemn and earnest. She spoke carefully. “I understand that you’re uncertain that this is a wise course of action, but sometimes the only way to find out is to walk the path anyway.” She paused briefly, looking for any sort of reaction to her words. “You told me once that you wanted to put the past fully behind you, to make a completely new start. Nara, I don’t think that you’ll ever be able to do that, unless you face everything that happened on Serenity, and unless you face Mal.”

All River could do was watch and wait patiently as Inara stared at her lap and debated the younger woman’s words. After an eternity of moments, she looked up and gave River the best smile she could muster. Neither woman acknowledged the fact that it trembled a bit. “Alright mei mei, you win.”

Remembering that conversation and the endless support River had given her before and since, Inara squared her shoulders, raised her chin and met Mal’s eye straight on as she glided into the cargo bay.

“Captain Reynolds, I was told that you were advertising an available position on your crew. One for a Guild-trained Counsellor, perhaps?”

Mal had to fight not to close his eyes and savour the sound of her melodic voice after so long without it. Finally understanding what the lil assassin and her co-conspirators had been up to, he forgave them almost immediately.

“I was indeed advertising such,” he said with a sidelong glance up at the catwalks. He received a cheeky grin in return. “You qualified for that position then, are ya?”

“I am, although I am willing to show you my qualifications and a list of recommendations if they are needed.” She replied, feeling a slight easing of the tightness in her chest.

“No no, that won’t be necessary. I’m sure you got ‘em, just as ye say.” He paused, and then he
allowed the smile he was fighting to show on his face, just a little, as he strode forward to meet her in
the middle of the bay. “Welcome back, Inara. I know Kaylee’s been missing you like crazy.” He
added, as he extended a hand.

She looked at his hand for a moment, before hesitantly reaching out and shaking it with her own.
Mal found himself staring at their joined hands as well, a sudden feeling of disquiet welling up inside
him. Her hand was soft, pampered and smooth; the hand of someone unused to hard, physical
work. His own hand was calloused, rough and had dirt that seemed to be permanently ingrained in
it. And that, right there, were all the differences between them, he thought. Why they had never
worked before, ‘n why they probably wouldn’t work out this time. They were just too gorram
different.

All three female readers sucked in a simultaneous breathe of dismay as that thought filtered across
Mal’s mind, accompanied by a wave of despair. “He’s going to screw this up.” River muttered,
knowing that Kaen and Sia were attuned to her enough at the moment to hear her. Below her, on the
bay floor, Zoe’s eyes narrowed as she took in the scene. Attuned to him in her own way, after so
many years and so many shared trials, she knew that he was about to do something that would shoot
this whole thing straight to hell.

Mal pulled his hand from Inara’s abruptly, his smile and the happiness he had just been feeling long
gone. Inara frowned as she sensed a change come over the Captain and she felt the tightness in her
chest return. Her hand dropped back to her side as she searched his face for some indication of what
had just changed between them.

Trying to ignore the heavy feeling that had settled into the pit of his stomach, Mal turned away from
the ex-Companion and gestured further into the ship.

“I suppose you’ll be wantin’ to see your quarters.” He glanced back at her over his shoulder, his
eyes flat and slightly hard. “Just how much room will you be needing anyways, for servicin’ your
clients?” The way he drawled the word left Inara, and everyone else watching, with absolutely no
misconceptions as to what it was he was implying.

Her hand was up and across his cheek before she could even think to check the gesture.

“Ben tian shen de yi dui rou!” She cried. “How dare you!” Rubbing his sore cheek, the same on
River had slapped some days ago, Mal noticed that her eyes, normally so serene, were bright with
anger and, was that hurt? She didn’t give him time to figure it out as she spun away from to grab the
bag she had left near the entrance.

Inara could feel her already precarious control slipping, so without another word or even a glance at
the obstinant, rude houzi de pigu, she sailed across the bay and up the stairs to where River was
waiting for her, understanding in the younger woman’s dark eyes. Without a word, the two women
disappeared into River’s shuttle, one that had once housed a Companion.

The slamming of the shuttle door broke the spell that had been holding everyone else captive. With
near-identical looks of disgust at Mal, Kaylee and Wash left the bay, each heading for their favourite
section of Serenity. With a long-suffering sigh, Zoe shook her head at her captain and oldest friend
and followed after her husband. Jayne and Simon shared a look, glared at Mal in annoyance, and
overt disapproval in Simon’s case, and headed for the mess. The four readers simply went back to
the passenger births, although there was a fair bit of eye-rolling and head-shaking from Sia and
Kaen.

Mal stood alone in the middle of the cargo bay, his head down, not entirely sure what had just
happened, but knowing with the kind of certainty that could only come at such a time, that he had
just screwed things up rather fantastically. With a deep sigh of his own, and still rubbing his reddened cheek, he trudged off to his bunk. Only place on the whole gorram ship that wasn’t likely to be occupied.

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Inara flopped gracelessly onto River’s bed and put her head in her hands. The bed dipped slightly as the reader herself sat down beside her.

“I don’t know what I was expecting of him, really.” She sighed. “Mal is far too set in his ways to learn how to yield on something now. Especially anything that makes him feel even remotely out of his depth.” River was silent for a minute, before heaving a sigh of her own. It ended suddenly on a giggle.

“Do you want me to have another ‘talk’ with him?” She asked, grinning. It widened when she got the answering smile and half-hearted snort of amusement she had been hoping for. They both sat silently for a moment, imagining all the things they would like to do to the stubborn ox masquerading as a ship captain.

“I doubt that would do any good, although it might make me feel better, however briefly. But thank you, mei mei.” Inara slapped her thighs lightly, before straightening her back and recomposing herself, the mask of a Companion falling automatically across her face. “I’ll talk to him myself this evening, try and sort this mess out. I imagine Zoe would be a little upset with me, if I killed him out of annoyance, so soon after coming back.”

River smirked at that thought. “She might be,” she agreed. “Then again, she might just hold him down for you.”

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True to her word, Inara sought out and cornered Mal as he was entering the bridge. Wash glanced up from the controls, took in the sight of Mal with an angry ex-Companion right on his heels and immediately decided he could be more useful elsewhere.

“Yeah, um— I think Kaylee might need— I’m just gonna…” Gesturing vaguely, Wash slipped quickly past the pair and headed for his bunk. He knew Zoe was down there right now, he should probably warn her about the possibility of Captain-y bloodshed up on the bridge.

As soon as Wash was gone, Mal took over his chair, speaking over his shoulder so he didn’t have to look at the woman who’d cornered him while he pretended to be doing something very important. Steering or whatnot. “Don’t know what ya need, but I got Captain-y things to be doin’.”

“Oh no doubt,” Inara replied sarcastically. “However, I’m going to talk and you’re going to listen.”

At that, Mal came up out of the chair and spun to face her, his face dark and closed. “I don’t take orders on my own ship.” He started. She didn’t let him finish.
“Yes, yes, you’re the Captain and you give the orders, and the rest of us must do as we are told. I’ve heard it before.”

“Good, so then—”

“Bi zui. I’m talking now.” She paused for a minute, but when Mal simply glared at her, she continued. “We’ve had a conversation similar to this before, but it seems we need to have it again.

“I was a Companion, yes. However, I have not been one for months now. I am a Counsellor, registered with the Guild, and I provide my services as you called them to anyone in need of someone to turn to for advice or a friendly ear. My clients have included any who can pay, and I assure you that, as my rates are far lower now than as a Companion, that list includes a much wider variety of people. It might interest you to know that I’ve even had some former Browncoats come speak to me.” That last earned her a look from Mal, but she ignored it. “I was, and am, a respected professional in all social circles I have encountered, your self-righteous company excluded of course, and I like to pride myself on self-control and a certain level of decorum. So please listen carefully to my next words.” She paused again to make sure he was listening. He was, although that sardonic expression she loathed was back on his face. Her voice hardened and became ice cold.

“Malcolm Reynolds, I am not a whore, nor have I ever been. And if you ever call me one again, I will take one of River’s guns and shoot you between the eyes. Am I perfectly clear on that?” Mal just stared at her, eyes wide. She took that as confirmation and nodded. Her professional smile appeared again, and her voice took on its usual even tone. “Have a pleasant evening, Captain.” Then she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Mal to collapse back into the pilot chair, dumbfounded.

She’d actually just threatened to kill him.

Huh.

Wash looked away from the ceiling of the bunk and grinned at his wife. “So, no gunshots. Think Mal’s still alive, then?” Zoe smiled at her husband, happy once again that they had sorted out their own issues ages ago. Instead of answering him, she just took his hand and pulled him to their bed. Wash’s smiled got larger. Afternoon sex with his warrior woman. Shiny!

River smiled into Jayne’s shoulder as they lay curled on his bunk. The waves of happiness emanating from Zoe and Wash’s bunk twined nicely with the ones she could feel from Simon and Kaylee’s quarters. The harmony that now existed between the 2 couples made her glad. She wasn’t sure Simon and Kaylee ever would have gotten together if she had stayed. Simon would have focused all his attention and energy on her, and shut out Kaylee and the rest of the world out of misdirected guilt.

She reached out to feel Inara, and the smile faded slightly. While the older woman was pleased with
how her confrontation with Mal on the bridge had gone, underneath that was a miasma of hurt and uncertainty that had welled up after he distanced himself from her in the cargo bay. Sighing, River nudged Jayne out of the doze he was in.

“I must go to Inara, the Captain has wounded her and she shouldn’t be alone.” Jayne nodded sleepily.

“Mazes me that some woman hasn’t killed him yet. Ruttin’ idiot.” He mumbled into the pillow. River smiled fondly down at him.

“Well Saffron and Patience did give it their best shot.” She pointed out, though she privately agreed with Jayne. She slipped her clothes back on, planted a kiss on the already slumbering merc’s head and climbed out of the bunk to go soothe Inara.

The next few weeks proved to be something of a trial for the crew and passengers of Serenity. The tension and regular emotional flare-ups between Mal and Inara, and Mal and nearly everyone else began to wear on everyone, especially the resident readers. Indeed, just less than 2 weeks after they left Persephone, River’s friends took their leave from the ship. They had never meant to stay forever, and the emotions on the ship were taking a toll on them.

River was sad to see her friends go, they were so much a part of the history that had made her who she was now, and it was hard to let them go. The night after they made the decision to leave, she invited all four of them into her shuttle, and they spent the entire night reminiscing and just enjoying each other’s company. Kaen told her that they had decided to stay together for now, see if they could make it work. River had nodded, thinking to herself that it probably wouldn’t last long. She and Kaen had quietly laid odds with Kaylee and Inara about how long it would take Sia and Yuri to realize their feelings for each other. She knew that once they did, they would likely head off on their own path. Nicos had always been more of a loner than the other three, and would probably disappear off on his own sooner rather than later. River caught Kaen’s eyes across her bed and silently told her that she was welcome back on Serenity if she ended up on her own and wanted company. The other girl nodded her thanks with a small smile.

It was a good night. Kaylee had donated a jug of her inter-engine moonshine to the group and they were all feeling quite happy and relaxed as they just enjoyed each other’s company. Late into the night, just as they all began to bed down, Nicos drew River aside. Noting her tense and slightly defensive posture, he sighed and cursed himself, not for the first time. He blushed slightly; feeling like the awkward teenager he never had the chance to be under her hard, even stare.

“Look,” he started, a hand coming up to rub the back of his neck. “I really am sorry for what I did here, and how I acted before, after we – well, you know. I wasn’t thinking, was a stupid thing to do, I know it. Ya can hit me, if yeh still want to, although I gotta say, yer boyfriend has a hell of a right hook.” He grinned ruefully, rubbing his jaw in recollection. River smirked at him.

“Thank you for the apology, Nicos. And I won’t hit you, I think Jayne did a good enough job of that for the both of us.” She grinned suddenly, looking impish. “I’ll never forget the way you went flying across the room and landed on your pigu.”

To his credit, Nicos laughed at the memory, and when he stuck out his hand with a tentative
“friends?” she smiled and shook it without hesitation.

The next morning, the five of them stumbled out of the shuttle and into the mess, slightly hungover but content. They left four days later, when the Serenity made a supply stop on Persephone.

The goodbyes were briefer than some might have expected, but the readers all felt that they had said their true goodbyes that night in River’s shuttle. All that was left were hugs and good-natured farewells with the rest of the crew.

The four travellers stood on the open ramp, bags over their shoulders, and smiled one last time at River and the crew behind her. Yuri was the first to speak.

“Be safe, mei mei.”

“You too, all of you. And try to keep in touch this time.” River admonished, with a specific glance at Sia. They all nodded, and with one last round of hugs, turned and headed down the ramp, disappearing into the crowd like wraiths. River stared after them, strange feelings battling for dominance inside her. She felt come move up behind her and slip a brawny arm about her waist.

“You alright, bao bei?” She could hear the concern in his quiet voice and a rush of affection for the large man surged through her, quieting the other emotions. She leaned her head against his arm and sighed.

“I am now.”
Chapter Notes

Just a small vignette written for my 100th reviewer over on ff.net, who requested a dancing/fighting scene between River and Jayne. I hope this lived up to her request!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The crew of Serenity was having a blissfully quiet night out in the black. The course was set and the ship was on autopilot. Her engine was humming along happily, no attention needed. The mess was clean; there were no chores to be done. As a result, the crew was happily gathered on the lower catwalk, watching their two deadliest members spar.

“Almost looks like dancin’, don’t it?” Kaylee nudged Simon as she swung her legs back and forth in empty air. Sitting easily beside her, one arm around the mechanic’s shoulders, the doctor smiled down at her before his gaze returned to the combatants. He nodded.

“It does.” He watched them with a clinical eye that categorized the fight from several different realms of experience. The doctor in him analyzed the blows, noting that they were aiming for areas that could withstand the hits most easily. The fugitive who’d spent years in the black, living and working with criminals, observed the easy way they moved, relaxed and comfortable in their sparring. The brother in him was quietly pleased to watch how River fought. Her movements were as fluid as they had been when she was a dancer; never a movement wasted, one action blending seamlessly into the next. He was surprised to find that the visible undercurrent of violence in her sparring no longer bothered him. His sister, against all odds, had grown into a strong, capable, deadly woman, and he found that he couldn’t possibly be more proud. A wide smile broke across his face before he could stop it, causing Kaylee to look at him questioningly. He just shook his head, still smiling, and hugged his beloved mechanic closer. Oh, if only their parents could see them now!

Inara was the first to notice when the fight changed, her keenly trained eyes picking out the differences. Jayne and River’s movements slowed, they stopped dodging each other’s fists and throwing their own. The first time Jayne grasped River’s hand for a brief moment, she realized what was happening. She smiled to herself and raised her eyes to glance at Zoe. She wasn’t surprised to find the other woman looking back at her, having reached the same conclusion. As quietly as possibly, they herded the crew out of the cargo bay, everyone casting lingering glances over their shoulders at the two warriors who were now slowly turning in each other’s arms, swaying to music only they could hear.
They glided across the floor in each other’s arms, silent music filling their heads. River was distantly aware of the crew leaving, and mentally thanked Inara and Zoe for giving them some privacy. If asked, she wouldn’t have been able to say how long they danced in the cargo bay; if could have been hours or minutes. Time didn’t seem to matter as she swayed back and forth, lost to the sensation of Jayne’s arms around her, swimming in the deep blue of his eyes. The eyes that had always seen her for what she was, even when he didn’t understand.

By unspoken accord, their dance stopped in the middle of the bay. They stood in silence, staring into one another’s eyes, seeing, for the first time, a path stretching forward that was not one walked alone. River saw it more clearly, such was her gift, but they both knew what they were seeing. Jayne was the first to smile, emotion lighting his face, but River was close behind. And as Serenity, the beloved home of this motley crew, settled quietly into artificial night, the two warriors continued to stand silently facing each other, and new and bright future shared between their eyes. There were so many possibilities ahead of them, so many things to come, but one thing was always constant: River and Jayne side by side, every day, for all the days ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Just the epilogue left to go! -Druid
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Aaaannnndddd we're done!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue:

Mal dodged the projectile sailing towards him. It flew over his head and shattered against the galley wall. He risked a glance backwards and sighed internally; another plate gone. Gorramit, those ain’t cheap! Turning his attention back to the plate-thrower, he attempted what he thought, he hoped, was a half charming, half placating smile.

“Now bao bei,” he started, and then broke off suddenly as he dove out of the way of a chair that had inexplicably taken flight.

“Oh, you arrogant, pompous ben tiansheng de yi dui rou!” Inara nearly shrieked as she watched with no little amount of satisfaction as the Captain dove unceremoniously out of the way of the chair she’d sent flying at him.

One of the first things that the crew of Serenity had learned about ex-Companion Inara Serra, when she had returned, was that she could have a vicious temper now that she was not required to control it, and as in the past, her usual target of choice was Serenity’s oft-times completely deserving captain.

Inara paused in the middle of her assault to appreciate that last view of her husband, which caused her to think of what had precipitated this latest fight and she realised that she couldn’t quite recall what exactly had set her off this time. She knew that the freedom of actually being allowed to visibly and publicly lose her temper, after a lifetime of constant control, was intoxicating and very nearly overwhelming at times, however some sense of decorum should still be maintained. With that in mind, she reluctantly quelled the urge to throw something else at the dark head just now appearing from its hiding spot. She also quelled the sudden giggle that tried to lodge itself in her throat as she really took in the scene.

Her husband, sensing her possibly momentary distraction, crawled out from under the dinner table where he’d taken refuge from the well-aimed chair. He moved towards his beautiful, dangerous wife with all the care of a man approaching a large, rabid wolf, ready to duck and cover again if she picked anything else up. He gradually straightened out of his half-crouch when Inara didn’t appear ready to launch something else at his head. Instead she straightened to her full height, crossed her arms over her chest and pinned him with a look that she had perfected as a Companion. Mal damn near groaned at the sight of it; he just knew he was gonna be sleepin’ on the bridge tonight. Again…

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Jayne stopped dead in the entryway leading to the mess and sighed in frustration. Mal and Nara were neckin’ on top of the dinner table and strangely enough there were broken bits of pottery and what appeared to have once been a chair spread all over the room. Grimacing at the dual realizations that they would all be eating on that table come morning, and that he wouldn’t be able to get what he’d come for, Jayne turned back the way he came. Standing at the hatch to his bunk, he glanced up towards the bridge and rolled his eyes. Zoe was sittin’ in Wash’s lap and it looked as though flying the ship weren’t what was on the little man’s mind. ‘Gorrarn ship’s turnin into a rut tin Love Cruiser’, he muttered to himself, since he knew for a fact that the Doc and lil Kaylee were similarly occupied down in the lounge area by the infirmary. He’d seen them when he’d gone rooting through Simon’s supplies. Thankfully, the Doc hadn’t seen him to ask about the item he now gripped as he kicked open his hatch and climbed, one-handed, down into his bunk. At the bottom, he engaged the lock and turned around, growling at the vision lying naked and smiling on their bed.

“Sorry baby, couldn’t get the honey, but I did get the ice,” he leered, brandishing his prize. River Cobb just smiled back, her eyes full of lust, promises and the future.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading!! Let me know what you thought. Reviews/kudos are love and I enjoy concrit. Thanks again! -Druid

End Notes

A/N: for the purposes of this story, crew ages at the time of OIS are as follows: River-17, Jayne-32, Mal-36, Zoe-35, Wash-33, Simon-27, Inara-28 and Kaylee-22. I know Adam Baldwin is actually in his forties, but Jayne just seems younger to me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!